

Utilising new-generation FTA commitments:

The role of knowledge sharing practices

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Purpose - Good knowledge management practices play a critical role in leveraging firm competitiveness in the knowledge economy. Organisational knowledge sharing is an essential aspect of business operation and is particularly crucial for circulating important knowledge and improving organisational learning. Given the context of rising free trade agreements in Vietnam, it is expected to generate enormous benefits for businesses by utilising such ambitious commitments. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the linkage between organisational knowledge sharing and the utilisation of FTA commitments of Vietnamese export firms.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on extensive review, the research develops the questionnaire to assess business knowledge sharing practices, market knowledge and FTA utilization. A sample of 532 Vietnamese exporters was chosen for analysis using the PLS–SEM model.

Finding – The study reveals that both knowledge sharing and market knowledge positively influence FTA utilisation. Knowledge sharing also indirectly enhances FTA utilisation by improving market knowledge. The increased market knowledge helps firms qualify for preferential trade terms, leading to a higher likelihood of successfully utilise FTA.

Practical implications – The result implies that effective knowledge storing and circulating within organisations can further deepen the utilisation of FTA commitments through direct channel and indirect channel by enhancing market knowledge.

Originality – Research on aspects of FTA utilisation with regard to knowledge sharing practices is still limited, especially in Vietnam. This study pioneered in exploring the linkage between knowledge sharing and FTA utilisation.

Keywords: Knowledge sharing, Market knowledge, FTA utilisation, Free trade agreements

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1 Introduction

In the current knowledge-based economy, knowledge has become an inevitably important resource that brings comparative advantage to organisations (Harlow, 2008). Sharing knowledge is a crucial aspect and widespread practice to accelerate knowledge utilisation. Knowledge sharing enables organisations to capture, identify, and accumulate knowledge stocks in order to facilitate effective decision-making (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002). However, practical knowledge sharing encounters many pitfalls in organisations.

Many scholars have attempted to understand the relationship between knowledge sharing and business performance. Knowledge sharing has been found to be significantly related to all these three aspects of performance, such as leveraging financial performance, improving HRM practices, introducing innovations (Liu *et al.*, 2021; Vij and Farooq, 2014a; Soniewicki, 2022). In the context of increasing economic integration, firms tend to seek opportunities to expand their market presence beyond the domestic market. This process requires sources of new, complex, and huge knowledge, and businesses are required to implement best practices to harness such knowledge effectively. However, limited research has been carried out to investigate the linkage between knowledge sharing and the internationalisation process, especially considering the utilisation of preferential commitments related to free trade agreements (FTAs). Through the extensive review, Anand *et al.* (2020) highlighted that lack of understanding remains the major culprit hindering knowledge sharing in small-and-medium enterprises.

From the perspective of developing countries, actively participating in new-generation FTAs is not only a sign of determination to integrate deeply into the global economy but also implies the willingness to reform the economy. Vietnam is a telling example of a vibrant economy that benefits from radical changes in socio-economic status after 15 years of joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The process of implementing new generation FTAs is a valuable opportunity for Vietnam to re-evaluate the problems faced when enforcing previous FTAs and find overall solutions in the future. New-generation FTAs include traditional trade discussions such as preferential tariffs and market access and extend to non-traditional issues such as sustainable developments, intellectual property rights, etc. The advanced knowledge of new-generation FTAs requires exhaustive knowledge practices in businesses. However, new-generation FTAs have not been utilised effectively by enterprises. According to the Ministry of Industry and Trade, in 2022, the total export turnover enjoying preferential tariffs was valued at

73.8 billion USD, equivalent to 33.61% of the total export turnovers in FTA-signed markets. Table I shows the statistics on Vietnam's utilisation rate of major FTAs. Obviously, businesses were more familiar with traditional trade schemes under FTA with Asia partners in which the utilisation rate mostly surpassed 30%, even reached 50% (VKFTA), over 60% (FVFTA and AIFTA). Regarding new-generation FTAs, the utilisation rate is shallow, with CPTPP at only 4.9% in 2022, EVFTA at 25.9% and UKVFTA at 23.5%. One plausible explanation is that businesses are less likely to comprehend new generation FTAs, and they had already established commercial relationships in other markets. The reluctance to harness new-generation FTA preferential schemes can be problematic amidst government effort to integrate such new regulations derived from new generation FTAs. Although signing new -generation FTA markets are crucial for the diversity strategy of Vietnam's exports; they constitute a modest share of total trade volume. For instance, in 2022, Vietnam's trade surplus with EU countries 2022 reached 31.4 billion USD, an increase of 35.1% compared to 2021 (Vietnam Customs, 2023). However, despite having the second largest trade surplus after the US, the proportion of the EU market in Vietnam's total export and import turnover is not high, 12.6% and 4.3%, respectively. Likewise, Vietnam's trade surplus with the UK in 2022 reached 5.6 billion USD, an increase of 7.8% compared to 2021. However, the UK represented a minor share in the total export and import turnover of Vietnam's, only 1.6% and 0.2%, respectively (Vietnam Customs, 2023). It depicts that despite new-generation FTAs being ambitious, businesses have not yet sensed many opportunities from such markets. Through the in-depth interviews with public and private sectors within the WTO Chairs Program (WCP) project phase III from 2022-2026 (Foreign Trade University – WCP) about FTA utilisation, businesses respond that lack of market knowledge remains the highest barrier to leveraging benefits from FTAs.

Table I. Utilisation of agreements of Vietnam. Reproduced from VCCI and Vietnam Customs (2023)

Agreement	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
ATIGA	24.2	30	30	34	35.17	38.8	40	39.2
ACFTA	32.2	31	26	29	31.57	31.7	33.9	29.3
VKFTA	59.6	56	51	35	49.78	52.1	50.9	50.9
AANZFTA	28.1	34	33	34	38.16	40.2	39.2	39.3

VJEPA	34	35	35	30	38.11	37.9	34.7	34.7
VCFTA	56.9	64	69	67	67.72	65.5	61.8	64.6
AIFTA	32	43	48	72	65.13	70	68.7	66.9
VN – EAEU FTA		6	22	28	31	29.6	39	59.4
CPTPP					1.67	4	6.3	4.9
EVFTA						14.8	20.2	25.9
UKVFTA							17.2	23.5
RCEP								0.67

Given the practical setting of the utmost significance of new-generation FTAs to Vietnam's exports, this research fulfils this gap in understanding the determinants of FTA utilisation in the Vietnam context. Grasping the importance of knowledge sharing to business performance, especially with FTA knowledge which is less representative in the large strand of literature, our research elaborates a model to examine the triangular relationship between firms' knowledge sharing, market knowledge and FTA utilisation. The hypotheses are empirically tested by survey data from 532 firms in 3 exporting sectors of Vietnam, including manufacturing, agriculture, and construction. Obtaining C/O is pivotal to leveraging the playing field of Vietnamese exporters where preferential tariffs for such key products are exceptionally low compared to most-favoured nation (MFN) tariffs, which grants cost savings substantially for businesses.

Our paper is structured in 6 sections. After the overview in Section 1, a literature review of recent studies related to knowledge sharing, business performance, internationalisation, determinants of FTA utilisation are presented in Section 2. From the systematic review, we elaborate on our research model, hypotheses and data collection methods in Section 3, followed by the in-depth analysis of results from PSL-SEM method in Section 4. Section 5 provides the discussion and conclusions from our analysis, stipulating the managerial and theoretical contribution. Section 6 justifies the limitation of current research and opens future research directions.

2 Literature review

2.1 Knowledge sharing and business performance

The knowledge-based view is extended from the resource-based view, in which the former stresses the role of knowledge assets as the ultimate and imperative sources to sustain comparative advantages (Curado and Bontis, 2006; Grant, 1996). This view is highly relevant in the current era of the proliferation of knowledge products. Therefore, organisations significantly emphasise effective management and articulation of their knowledge to sustain competitiveness (Alavi *et al.*, 2005; Hansen *et al.*, 2005; Osterloh and Frey, 2000).

Knowledge management is the ongoing process of capturing, sharing, utilising and storing knowledge (Cyril Eze *et al.*, 2013). More specifically, knowledge management deals with approaches, tools, and techniques to elicit knowledge in order to encourage knowledge generation and maximise utilisation (Marouf, 2016; Nooshinfard and Nemati-Anaraki, 2014). According to Haas and Hansen (2007), knowledge sharing refers to the process of interaction, information exchange and coordination of knowledge or expertise. Knowledge sharing serves the purpose of creating new knowledge from existing knowledge stocks as well as effectively exploiting them (Holdt Christensen, 2007). Intuitively, knowledge sharing is a broader concept encompassing knowledge transfer, knowledge absorption and knowledge creation.

Knowledge sharing can be classified into two main categories: explicit knowledge sharing and tacit knowledge sharing. Explicit knowledge refers to knowledge that is in documented or written form (Law and Ngai, 2008; Lawson *et al.*, 2009). ICT infrastructure can substantially assist in transferring and circulating explicit knowledge across organisational units. Therefore, practising explicit knowledge sharing is much more common than tacit knowledge sharing since the former can be easily captured, stored and transmitted (Ritala *et al.*, 2015; Rutten *et al.*, 2016; Taminiau *et al.*, 2009; Z. Wang *et al.*, 2014). Tacit or implicit knowledge is much more challenging to conceptualise. Generally, it refers to all information embedded in human minds and not yet verbally expressed, difficult to formalise and susceptible to change (I.-C. Hsu, 2008; Kumar and Sharma, 2018; Ngah and Jusoff, 2009). The transfer of tacit knowledge does not rely purely on the use of ICT infrastructure, but scholars emphasise the role of social

interaction among individuals to transfer or share such tacit knowledge (Harlow, 2008; Tahir *et al.*, 2021). Tacit knowledge practices are shared via learning by doing, learning by watching, and informal sharing. It should be noted that tacit knowledge is pointed out as the competitive source of many firms, especially small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs) (Cyril Eze *et al.*, 2013). Due to the relatively ad-hoc and less formalised organisational structure of SMEs, tacit knowledge plays a more prominent role. As a result, employees would need to be able to handle a wide range of tasks requiring a variety of skills and experience, which are inherently tacit. The role of tacit knowledge is most evident in its contribution to organisational innovation.

A key goal for the organization is to find new ways to improve their performance and sustain the competitive edge, and one major hinderance is the improper practice of knowledge management (Raziq *et al.*, 2024). Researchers have examined the relationship between knowledge sharing and business performance, finding that good knowledge sharing practices play a role in business performance. Knowledge sharing can strengthen an organization's knowledge-based resources and capabilities, contributing to improved work outcomes by facilitating the exchange and application of diverse information, experiences, practices, insights, and unique perspectives. The study by Liu *et al.* (2021) assesses the effect of a knowledge-friendly culture in three aspects: financial performance, non-financial performance and overall performance, finding that knowledge sharing is found to be significantly related to all these three aspects of performance. Other studies have discovered a positive relationship between knowledge sharing and operational performance. Operational performance refers to personal development and stakeholder satisfaction since the sharing activities are more closely related to operational levels (Wang *et al.*, 2009). Wang *et al.* (2009), using a sample of 1500 firms in the UK, suggest that knowledge sharing does not directly link to performance but is moderated via market orientation. This result aligns with the results of studies by Hsu (2008) on 256 companies in Taiwan. Soniewicki (2022) in medium-high-tech manufacturing sector in Poland. Business performance is assessed through various indicators, including sales growth, productivity, and customer satisfaction.

Firms in developed countries can have a better knowledge management practice, which transfer to better organizational performance. Recent students also attempt to shed light on the linkage between knowledge sharing and firm performance in emerging countries. Zhou and Li (2012) investigate the effect of knowledge on radical innovation

based on a survey of 117 high-tech firms in China, demonstrating that knowledge sharing bridges the functional gaps across units and facilitates new product developments. Sintaasiha *et al.* (2020) study on the export-oriented handicraft industry in Bali found that knowledge sharing significantly mediates the relationship between entrepreneurship and innovation ability. Ahmed *et al.* (2020) find evidence that knowledge sharing has a significant and positive impact on organizational performance, and knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance in Pakistan. A modest number of studies conducted in Chinese firms reveal the positive relationship between knowledge sharing and firm performance, evidenced in increasing sales, productivity, market access (Rao *et al.*, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2016, 2014).

The effect of knowledge sharing on business performance across sectors is not investigated intensively by scholars. Literature on knowledge sharing is primarily concerned with one specific sector, such as high-tech and consulting services, manufacturing sector, educational service. The services industry is suggested to enjoy the generous benefit from knowledge sharing (Farooq, 2018; Vij and Farooq, 2014). Vij and Farooq (2014a) also point out that the manufacturing sector also has a high correlation between business performance and knowledge sharing. The authors argue that explicit knowledge sharing is crucial for the manufacturing sector, while tacit knowledge sharing is essential and decisive for the services sector. Understandably, the nature of the services sector requires much human interaction among employees, and such interaction shapes the knowledge sharing practices across industries. Therefore, the diffusion of effects of knowledge sharing is distinctive among industries, making comparing them sometimes intriguing and less practical.

2.2 Knowledge management in internationalization process of firms

Since knowledge management is a prevalent factor for success in the market, it has lots of implications for the internationalisation of firms. In the context of increasing economic integration, firms tend to seek opportunities to expand their market presence. This process requires not only the acquisition of relevant processes but also the effective management and circulation of new knowledge inside firms (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013).

Distinct types of knowledge have been emphasised throughout the literature on a firm's internationalisation process. Costa *et al.* (2016) categorise market knowledge,

experiential knowledge, and technological knowledge into three types. Market knowledge is conceptualised as explicit or objective information about foreign markets, such as demand, consumer preferences, and norms, which enable businesses to assess market potential (Mejri et al., 2018). Market knowledge has been found to have a positive correlation with the variations in a firm's experiences with different entry modes (Mogos Descotes and Walliser, 2011). Experiential knowledge is built from personal experience, which is accumulated from the direct involvement in firm internationalisation processes when working with trade partners, customs officials, etc. Technological knowledge is more firm-specific as this knowledge is derived from firm innovation, cross-border knowledge transfer, etc. Literature identifying obstacles to the internationalisation process of firms points out that lack of information and insufficient knowledge are the most burdensome to internationalise (W.-T. Hsu *et al.*, 2013; Sommer and Haug, 2011).

Mejri and Umemoto (2010) develop a knowledge-based model of SME internationalisation, stressing the importance of market knowledge in the initial internationalisation phase. According to Brennan and Garvey (2009), market-specific knowledge increases the exploitation of opportunities, enhancing market commitment. It is supported by the finding of Åkerman (2015), in which market knowledge is significantly related to local business opportunities identification, with an increasing marginal rate.

Meanwhile, the relationship between knowledge practices, such as knowledge sharing, and the internationalization process of firms remains relatively underexplored.. The study by Sintaasiha *et al.* (2020) focuses on the export sector in Bali Island, but the significant discussion falls on conventional aspects of innovation. A more relevant aspect of the relationship between knowledge sharing and internationalisation, especially the utilisation of preferential commitments in international trade, has not yet been mentioned in the research. It is even pointed out as a significant research gap in the current literature on knowledge sharing (Arsawan *et al.*, 2020; Tahir *et al.*, 2021).

2.3 FTA utilisation and its determination

Free trade agreements (FTAs) play an imperative role in shaping countries' trade patterns. By signing FTAs, countries form trade blocs and grant preferential treatments regarding tariff reduction, harmonisation of non-tariff measures, and investment opportunities. The

procedures of employing FTA schemes include fulfilling the rules of origin (ROO) of each FTA to acquire the certificate of origin (C/O) (Hayakawa *et al.*, 2016, 2017; Hayakawa and Laksanapanyakul, 2017; J. Song, 2022). It is an important document to determine whether goods are from FTA partners or not. Hayakawa (2015) suggests that FTA utilisation does show impacts on firm performance by reducing the market price of exporters' products in the importing FTA partners, which stipulates the demand for traded products. The authors also point out that FTAs do not increase the export and import volume but improve the local content of products. By lowering trade barriers, FTAs can bring cost savings benefits for firms, potentially increasing exports to FTA partners.

Despite its benefits, many firms are still reluctant to utilise FTA preferential tariffs due to high compliance costs such as administrative costs, documentation costs, and time delays (Song and Moon, 2019; Wignaraja, 2014). In an early study by Takahashi and Urata (2010) about the utilisation rate of two FTAs – Japan – Mexico FTA and Japan – Malaysia FTA, authors argue that lack of knowledge of FTAs and small tariff margin between MFN and FTA tariff rates are two obstacles for low utilisation rate of Japanese firms. Demidova and Krishna (2008) theoretically demonstrate the self-selection effect of FTA utilisation, in which less productive firms tend to apply general tariffs due to the high compliance costs of FTAs.

The compliance cost of ROO is identified as a critical barrier for businesses to utilise FTA schemes. High production costs from sourcing originating materials can make products unable to fulfil the ROO, but it is not the decisive factor. Harris (2021) argues that other factors boil down to information management, which requires collecting information along the supply chain to prove the fulfilment of criteria. Besides the compliance cost of ROO, Song (2022) explains the fixed costs of utilising FTAs, including setting up an information system to manage information related to ROO to comply with this rule. Hence, it is understandable that large firms are more likely to adopt preferential schemes thanks to sufficient resources in terms of human resources, finance, etc.

Understanding the determinants of FTA utilisation is crucial for both negotiation and implementation of FTAs. However, limited studies using firm-level data have been conducted, especially regarding internal factors such as knowledge practices and organisational structure. Meanwhile, in the context of the knowledge economy,

leveraging competitiveness through effective knowledge practices is particularly beneficial for businesses. Besides, the deficient use of FTA utilisation primarily stems from the lack of knowledge about the FTA itself (Hayakawa, 2015). Knowledge sharing practice is a potential mechanism to circulate and retain FTA knowledge, enabling better ability to utilise such scheme later. As businesses are the final beneficiaries of FTAs, understanding how they can enjoy the benefits is crucial for policymakers to design appropriate policies to leverage the competitiveness of exports. Especially for an export-driven economy such as Vietnam, which has signed 16 FTAs, delving into the FTA utilisation of businesses is of paramount important. However, we are aware that no effort has been made in Vietnam to disentangle the FTA utilisation by examining business factors. Our study attempts to fill this knowledge gap from theoretical and practical standpoints by examining the relationship between knowledge sharing practice and FTA utilization, a proxy for internationalization process of firms. Given the context of globalization and regional integration through ambitious agreements, our study pioneers in bridging the gap using microdata at firm-level, which is scant in knowledge management research.

3 Hypotheses development and research model

3.1 Hypotheses development

Our research focuses on a specific aspect of business performance, which is the internationalisation process of businesses. We develop the following hypotheses.

Most current studies conclude the positive effect of knowledge sharing on business performance. FTA utilisation can be viewed as an aspect of business performance, proxied for internationalization process. It is an aspect of strategic operation performance of firms. Trade agreements help to facilitate trade between countries and the internationalisation process of business. Based on our review, we hypothesise:.

H1: Knowledge-sharing practice is positively associated with FTA utilisation.

As justified in the literature review, market knowledge and firm internationalisation have a positive relationship. As a part of the internationalisation process, FTA utilisation links to market knowledge. When firms have gained sufficient knowledge, they can make better use of FTA commitment, such as granting more

certificates of origin (C/O) to enjoy preferential tariffs, etc. Firms with a deep understanding of foreign markets can better identify opportunities created by FTAs, such as preferential access to new markets, expanded customer bases, and the ability to source materials or components at lower costs. This knowledge enables firms to make strategic decisions on how to best use FTAs to their advantage. Market knowledge helps firms anticipate potential risks associated with FTA utilization, such as changes in trade policies, shifts in demand, or competition from other FTA members. This allows firms to develop strategies to mitigate risks and adapt to changing market conditions. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Market knowledge has positive effects on FTA utilisation.

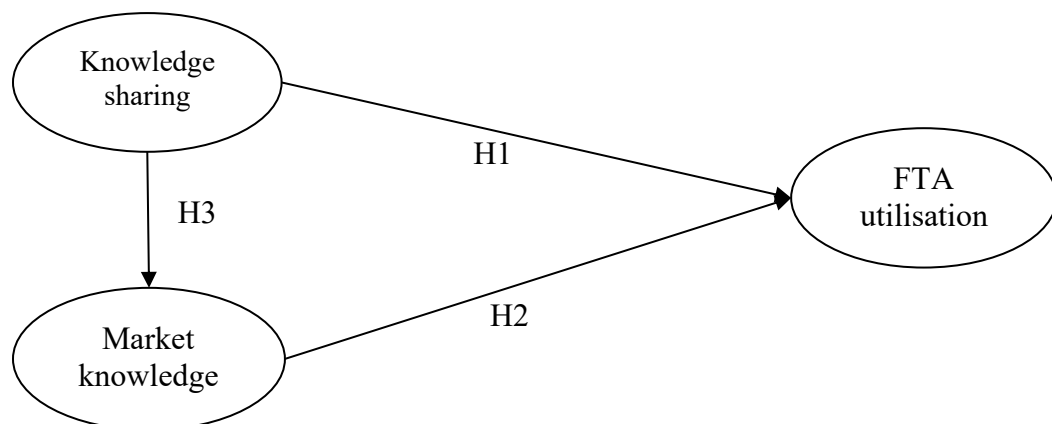
Knowledge sharing practices are essential to facilitate market knowledge accumulation. Ouakouak and Ouedraogo (2019) argue that when knowledge is shared, people are more willing to use it. Knowledge sharing affects the accumulation of knowledge stock, including market knowledge, technological knowledge, international knowledge (Hughes et al., 2008; Mejri et al., 2018). Hence, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H3: Knowledge sharing practices positively affect market knowledge.

3.2 Research model

Error! Reference source not found. shows our conceptual framework to investigate the relationship between knowledge sharing and FTA utilisation and the mediating effect of market knowledge.

Figure I. The conceptual framework



4 Research method

4.1 Data collection

The survey method was used for data collection. The target sample was import-export enterprises operating in the largest cities in Vietnam, including Ho Chi Minh, Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Da Nang, and Quang Ninh. To increase widespread access, we surveyed these enterprises under the WTO Chair Programme, which aims to enhance knowledge and understanding of the trading system among academics and policymakers in developing countries. Therefore, the sample may be considered as representatives of the business population in the industrial and commercial hubs of Vietnam.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managing directors from three companies to test the survey questions. The behaviour coding method, which focuses on interviewer and respondent behaviour in interaction, was used during the interview. Any need to repeat the question and request for clarification was recorded. After these interviews, the survey content was amended by questionnaire design experts and a following pre-test was conducted. About 20 sample managers were directly invited to answer the questionnaire to ensure the survey's validity. The final survey was sent out to enterprises under the lists of Business Associations in the five cities. The managers or managing directors of surveyed enterprises who understand the operational activities as well as the situation of new generation FTA utilisation in their business were personally contacted via face-to-face meetings or indirectly communicated via email or phone call to explain the aim of the study, guarantee the anonymity of respondents, as well as request the respondents to return the completed and signed surveys in an attached envelope to the research team. With the involvement and support of the WTO Chair Programme (WCP) in Vietnam, the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), Business Associations in five surveyed cities, Customs branches, import-export training units, administrators of social networking sites specialising in import and export, of the questionnaires that were distributed, 551 were returned. Of these, a total of 532 responses could be used for analysis. Responses which chose the same option in over 70% of the items and with missing data were removed.

Table II provides an overview of our sample. Regarding firm size, 76.3% of the enterprises are micro, small-and-medium enterprises with less than 200 employees. When it comes to years of operation, the majority of firms (81%) have more than 3

years in operation. By ownership, 84.8% of the firms in the sample are private-owned and 12.2% are foreign – owned. The sample characteristics are consistent to firm distribution in Vietnam, so the sample ensures the representativeness for Vietnam’s export sector.

Table II. Sample description

Dimensions	Classification	No. of firms	Percentage
Firm size (number of employees)	< 10	60	11.3%
	10 – 200	346	65%
	200 – 500	55	10.3%
	> 500	71	13.3%
Firm age (years)	<3	101	19%
	3 – 6	85	16%
	6 – 9	102	19.2%
	> 9	244	45.9%
Ownership	State-owned	11	2.1%
	FDI	65	12.2%
	Private	451	84.8%
	Others	5	0.9%

FTU Utilisation. FTU Utilisation was measured using the item “Our import and export goods often get preferential C/O”. The response option for the item ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Knowledge sharing. The dimensions of knowledge sharing showed good validity and reliability and thus reflected the overall sharing of knowledge. Knowledge sharing behaviour was measured using two items, including “KS1” and “KS2” detailed in Table 3. The response option for each item again ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Market knowledge. The dimensions of market knowledge showed good validity and reliability and thus were able to grasp important aspects of market knowledge. Market knowledge was measured using two items, including “MK1” and “MK2” detailed in Table III. The response option for each item again ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Table III. Description of variable scales of research models

Latent variables	Content	Symbol	The source
FTA Utilisation	Our import and export goods often get preferential C/O ⁵	FTAUTI	In-depth interview
Knowledge sharing	Within the company, information and knowledge about taking advantage of preferential mechanisms from FTAs is always widely shared.	KS1	Song and Moon (2019), Huber (1991)
	Information and knowledge about taking advantage of preferential mechanisms from FTAs are always stored by the company	KS2	Song and Moon (2019), Huber (1991)
Market knowledge	Our businesses are well aware of the incentives that FTAs will provide in their import and export markets.	MK1	In-depth interview
	Our import and export goods meet the conditions to enjoy preferential treatment from FTAs	MK2	In-depth interview

5 Result and data analysis

A Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) methodology was employed to analyse the research model constructed in Figure I. The conceptual framework. We adopt PLS–SEM using SmartPLS 4.0 to condense the research variables and examine the internal consistency. The rationale behind adopting PLS–SEM is the nature of the study, i.e., developing theories in explanatory research. PLS–SEM refers to the causal–predictive approach to SEM, focusing on predicting statistical models (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Table IV. Correlation structure

Dimensions	Knowledge sharing	Market knowledge
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⁵ C/O (Certificate of origin) is a gateway to unlock benefits from any trade agreements. Many researchers attempt to use the share of goods getting C/O as a precise measure for FTA utilisation. However, enterprises are often not able to report interim their share of goods getting C/O. Our questionnaire tries to vest the FTA utilization by having a qualitative estimation for respondents.

FTA Utilisation	0.520	0.630
Knowledge sharing	-	0.627

Table IV shows the pairwise correlation between the three constructs. There are strong correlations between knowledge sharing and FTA utilisation ($r = 0.52$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$), market knowledge and FTA utilisation ($r = 0.630$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$), market knowledge and knowledge sharing ($r = 0.627$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$).

5.1 *The measurement model*

To assess the reliability and validity of the reflective measurement mode, we evaluate the internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measurement model.

5.1.1 *Internal consistency reliability and convergent validity*

Internal consistency reliability refers to how selected indicators measure the latent construct. It was estimated by two primary indicators: Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Cronbach's alpha is sensitive to the number of items in the scale, underestimating the internal consistency reliability. To overcome its weakness, composite reliability is suggested to incorporate the different outer loadings of the indicator variables. These two indicators are technically interpreted in the same manner. Hair *et al.* (2011) suggested that for exploratory research, a composite reliability/Cronbach's alpha between 0.6 and 0.7 is acceptable, and even between 0.7 and 0.9 is applied for advanced stages of research.

Table V. Result of internal consistency reliability and convergent validity

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Knowledge sharing	KS1	0.775	0.622	0.835	0.718
	KS2	0.914	-	-	-
Market knowledge	MK1	0.892	0.639	0.845	0.732
	MK2	0.818	-	-	-
FTA Utilisation	FTAUTI	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

As shown in Table V, factor loadings of items are between 0.775 and 0.914, except for single-item measures for FTA utilisation. Cronbach's alpha is considered the lower bound of internal consistency reliability, while composite reliability is the upper bound. Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0.622 to 0.639, except for single-item FTA utilisation. Composite reliability ranges from 0.835 to 0.845, except for single-item FTA utilisation. It means that our model satisfies the internal consistency reliability criteria. Average variance extracted (AVE) is employed to assess the convergent validity of the measurement model. AVE measures the extent of the positive correlation between a measure and alternative measures of the same latent variable (Hair *et al.*, 2017). AVE higher than 0.5 is considered sufficient, meaning that latent variables account for more than 50% of the variance of its items. The AVE of our measurement model is 0.718 and 0.732, except for single-item of FTA utilisation. It fulfils the requirement for convergent validity.

5.1.2 Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity refers to the empirical distinctiveness of the construct, in which it assesses whether a construct empirically reflects phenomena not captured by other constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2017). We adopt Fornell and Larcker's criterion to evaluate the discriminant validity.

Table VI. Fornell-Larcker Criterion Analysis

	FTA Utilisation	Knowledge sharing	Market knowledge
FTA Utilisation	1.000	-	-
Knowledge sharing	0.520	0.847	-
Market knowledge	0.630	0.627	0.856

Table VI provides the results of the Fornell-Larcker Criterion Analysis. The condition to establish the Fornell-Larcker Criterion is that the diagonal element is more prominent than off-diagonal elements. Intuitively, it means that the square root of AVE should be larger than the correlation between latent variables. Our model satisfies this condition, meaning that latent constructs are empirically distinct.

5.2 The structural model

Table VII. Standardised path estimates and p-value

Effects	Path coefficients (%)	Sample means	Standard error	t-value	p-value	Results
Knowledge sharing - > FTA Utilisation	0.520	0.519	0.034	15.444	0.000	Supported H1
Knowledge sharing - > Market knowledge	0.627	0.628	0.029	21.331	0.000	Supported H3
Market knowledge -> FTA Utilisation	0.501	0.500	0.041	12.112	0.000	Supported H2

Figure II. Hypothesis testing result

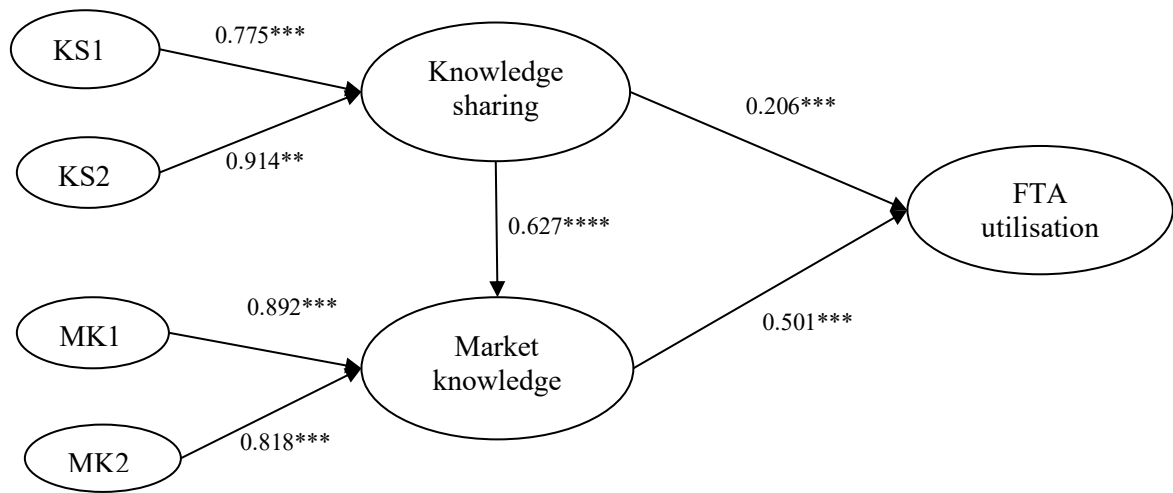


Table VII and Figure II provide the estimated result for the structural relationship between latent variables. All three hypotheses are supported. In particular, there is a significant positive and direct effect of market knowledge on FTA utilisation (path coefficient = 0.501, p-value = 0.000), confirming H2. Meanwhile, the effect of knowledge sharing practices on FTA utilisation is also positive and statistically significant (path coefficient = 0.206, p-value = 0.000) but at a lower degree, supporting H1. The indirect effect of knowledge sharing, and market knowledge is considerably high and statistically significant (path coefficient = 0.627, p-value = 0.000), approving H3. Notably, the direct effect of knowledge sharing on FTA utilisation and the indirect effect of knowledge sharing on FTA utilisation are significant and follow the same direction. It implies the complementary mediation role of knowledge sharing.

6 Discussions

Our research interest is to examine the relationship between organisational knowledge sharing and FTA utilisation. Empirical results showed that knowledge sharing and market knowledge have a positive direct effect on FTA utilisation. Notably, knowledge sharing indirectly affects FTA utilisation via the enhancement of market knowledge. When knowledge about FTA commitments is stored and shared widely within the organisation, employees are more well-informed about their target market. In particular, understanding target markets enables firms to make their products eligible for preferential treatment. Therefore, firms are more likely to receive certificates of origin, a proxy for FTA utilisation. In fact, certificates of origin are the backbone of FTA negotiation, and they are the basis for granting preferential treatment for exporting and importing products.

6.1 *The theoretical implication of the research*

This study represents one of the pioneering efforts to examine knowledge sharing practices in relation to the FTA utilisation. In the absence of publicly available data on preference utilisation in newly industrializing economies với imperfect market and institutions, micro-level information gathered from firm interviews and large-scale enterprise surveys proves valuable. We are among the first efforts to integrate the knowledge sharing concept into the FTA utilisation assessment and evaluate the role of knowledge sharing practices in firm internationalization process. Good knowledge is particularly beneficial for firm internationalisation as it deepens the knowledge base and encourages knowledge circulation within firms.

Previous micro-level studies of FTAs have often focused on barriers to successful implementation such as non-tariff barriers (such as standards, testing procedures, and customs procedures), domestic investment regulations, and a lack of information. Moreover, studies analyzing the factors influencing FTA utilisation at the firm level typically examine characteristics such as firm size, industry membership, and trade relationships with FTA partners. While these studies offer valuable insights into the determinants of FTA usage, they primarily focus on countries with developed industrial economies and well-functioning market institutions (Takahashi, K., & Urata, S., 2008; Hiratsuka, D., Hayakawa, K., Shiino, K., & Sukegawa, S., 2008). As a result, their applicability to newly industrializing economies with imperfect markets and institutions

remains limited.

There is a notable scarcity of studies examining factors influencing FTA utilisation in countries with imperfect market structures. Wignaraja, G. (2014) highlighted that the primary reason for not using FTAs is a lack of information. This finding corroborates Kumar, S. (1992) earlier prediction, which suggested that information shortages, alongside non-tariff barriers and domestic investment regulations, were key impediments to FTA implementation. Previous studies pointed out the causes of this information gap include the complexity of FTAs as legal texts, drafted by experts in international trade law and the lack the in-house expertise or the financial means of SMEs to engage specialized consultants to interpret these provisions.

However, recent developments have altered this landscape. In-depth interviews with Vietnamese SMEs, conducted as part of the WTO Chair Programme (WCP) extensive survey, reveal that the issue is no longer the inefficiency of government support or expert networks. While previous studies highlighted that the outreach services provided were insufficient in both quantity and quality to meet the needs of the vast SME population (Wignaraja, G., 2014), today's SMEs acknowledge substantial improvements in government support. The challenge now lies in how enterprises utilize the available support.

Our study delves deeper into this issue by providing evidence to uncover the reasons behind firms' persistent lack of market knowledge, despite concerted efforts by the government and enterprises to disseminate information to corporate staff. Our findings align with previous research, such as that by Wignaraja, G. (2014) and Kumar, S. (1992), confirming that the non-use of FTAs is largely due to a lack of knowledge about FTAs and market conditions. Acquiring knowledge about FTAs and market at the firm level positively influences the likelihood of FTA utilisation, given the complexity and specialized expertise required to interpret these legal documents.

6.2 Managerial implication of the research

Our study is practically relevant for knowledge management in organisations as well as for policymakers.

Our study supports previous findings by emphasizing the critical link between learning capabilities, acquiring FTA knowledge, and the probability of FTA utilisation. Notably,

knowledge plays a decisive role in determining whether firms capitalize on FTA provisions. Sharing knowledge effectively within organisations is crucial for developing concrete market knowledge. Besides, by executing knowledge sharing practices effectively, firms can leverage competitiveness from good knowledge practices. Moreover, a good perception of FTA schemes and an understanding of products can also unlock the potential of FTAs.

Our research advances this understanding by identifying the primary reason for the persistent knowledge gap, despite the government's extensive outreach efforts through printed materials, websites, and seminars. While firms may receive support from the government and international trade institutions, many have not fully exploited these resources. Our findings from in-depth interview and large scale survey underscore the importance of internal knowledge-sharing practices within firms. Employees tasked with attending FTA-related training must possess specialized knowledge of international trade and share this expertise with their colleagues to ensure that all relevant staff understand FTA preferences and provisions. Besides, there is an existing issue of irrelevant staff having been chosen to attend the courses. Thus, setting up criteria for choosing the right person to attend the courses is crucial for the FTA utilisation purpose.

From a policymaker's standpoint, understanding the nexus of knowledge sharing to FTA utilisation is crucial for policy designs. The limited effectiveness of knowledge sharing at the firm level can often be attributed to firm size. Firm heterogeneity plays a crucial role in FTA utilisation, with larger firms or those with more advanced technological capabilities (e.g., through R&D expenditure and learning by doing) being more likely to acquire and utilize FTA-related knowledge through internal initiatives. Thus, beyond providing knowledge on FTAs purely, policymakers can provide support to encourage best practices of knowledge sharing, such as supporting ICT systems, exemplifying best practices, and establishing a common market knowledge.

7 Conclusion

The primary reason for the underutilization of new-generation FTAs identified in this study diverges from the traditionally highlighted factors, such as low preference margins and the costs associated with complying with rules of origin documentation. Instead, the

most significant barrier remains the lack of information about both the market and FTAs. This is especially true for newly industrializing economies with imperfect markets and institutions, as well as SMEs that have limited financial and human resources, of which Vietnam is merely a typical case. Crucially, this knowledge gap stems from insufficient knowledge sharing within firms, rather than a lack of support services from government or international trade institutions.

Several key policy recommendations emerge from this research. In addition to offering integrated information services to help firms understand FTAs, providing comprehensive technical advisory services, university courses on FTAs and business practices, and encouraging greater involvement of business associations in FTA negotiations and training programs, it is critical to promote the circulation of knowledge among employees at the firm level. Furthermore, a systematic effort is required to establish an online database containing official information on the utilization of preferences in individual new-generation FTAs. However, these government initiatives will only be truly effective if businesses select the right individuals to engage with these services and ensure that information and expertise are shared with other relevant staff members. Moreover, businesses that focus on facilitating easy knowledge-sharing processes within their organizations will further enhance the effectiveness of internal knowledge dissemination.

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