

DETERMINANTS OF BUSINESS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE FOR VIETNAM’S DRAGON FRUIT EXPORT

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ABSTRACT

In response to the intensifying globalization of agricultural markets and stringent international quality standards, this study analyzes the multidimensional factors influencing the competitiveness of cooperatives and enterprises involved in dragon fruit production and trade. To achieve a comprehensive assessment, the study integrates Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) and External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrices to construct a unified Internal-External (IE) matrix, thereby determining the current strategic positioning of these competitiveness capacities. This matrix-based method is complemented by Thompson and Strickland’s internal factor assessment model, enabling a detailed analysis and comparison of core competencies and competitive advantages among industry players. These findings aim to provide business managers, cooperative leaders and policymakers with a fresh, holistic perspective on sustainable industry development. Finally, strategic recommendations are proposed to help enterprises optimize resource allocation, refine business strategies and enhance overall adaptability, thereby significantly boosting their capacity to penetrate high value as well as potential export markets.

Keywords: Export, agricultural market, dragon fruit (Pitaya), Vietnam, competitiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today’s globalization, agricultural trade is becoming more fiercely competitive. All countries are trying to boost exports to increase market share and added value in the international market. Among them, dragon fruits have emerged as one of Vietnam’s main export fruits, not only contributing significantly to agricultural export turnover but also playing an important role in creating jobs and income in rural areas. However, dragon fruit in Vietnam is exported through border trade. While the market share of production and export by official trade countries such as Thailand, the Netherlands, China and Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Colombia, etc.

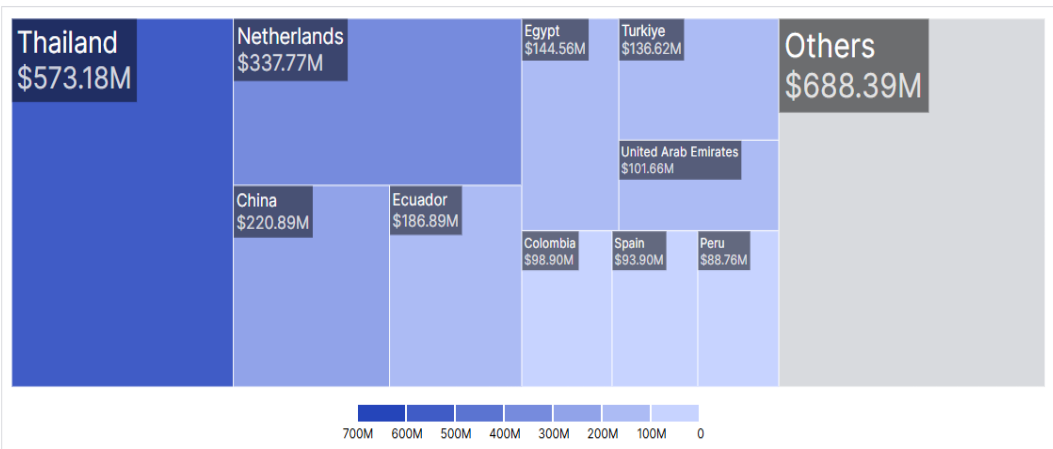


Figure 1. The export share of top Fresh Dragon Fruit exporting countries in 2023 [1]

Along with the import markets imposing increasingly strict standards of food safety, traceability and sustainable development, creating great pressure on the ability to maintain and expand the competitive advantage of Vietnamese businesses. This shows that the dragon fruit industry is facing many great challenges, thus the research question is: How can the export enterprise of Vietnam's dragon fruit strengthen and improve competitiveness in the era of extensive international integration? This is both an urgent and academic practical issue in researching the competitiveness of agricultural products for Vietnam.

Previous research on competitiveness in the export of dragon fruits mainly focused on the production, selling and distribution of the dragon fruit market in Vietnam and some foreign competitors [2] or an overview of the production of Vietnam's dragon fruits in the country and export markets, along with the challenges of quality, price and the impact of strong competitors in the international market [3]. Most of these studies have been conducted in the historical timeframe of the 2010s and there have been few reports on research in the export market of Vietnam's dragon fruit in the new period after 2020. In addition, there is a lack of a comprehensive analytical framework to evaluate the system of internal capabilities of enterprises or cooperatives, thereby identifying the strengths and weaknesses in competitive capacity when engaging in the international export market.

Competitiveness has long been one of the central concepts of strategic management science. Thus far, research on competitiveness is extensively grounded on the model of 5 Competitive Forces [4] includes: (1) Threat of new entrants; (2) Industry rivalry; (3) Bargaining power of suppliers; (4) Bargaining power of buyers and (5) Threat of substitutes. This framework suggests business to comprehensively analyze and navigate the complex competitive environment within the industry, thereby developing effective strategies to maintain and develop competitive advantages. Along with that, resource-based view (RBV) [5] implied that sustainable competitive advantage originated from internal resources, especially when those resources meet VRIN criteria (including valuable, rareness, imperfect imitability and non-substitutability). Along with RBV, Prahalad & Hamel's core concept (1990) [6] emphasized the role of a unique combination of an organization's unique resources and skills to create superior value to the opponent. In addition, the competitiveness of commodities is understood as all the characteristics, factors and potential that the product can maintain and develop further in the long-term competitive market for consumers. To assess whether a product is potential or not, it is necessary to rely on factors such as price, cost advantage (the ability to reduce costs to the maximum level), product quality and the ability to ensure improving product quality as well as other services with products and unique points of the product.

From the competitive advantage perspective, competition can be understood as the pursuit of economic benefits among market participants, driven by their ambition to maximize profits. Therefore, competition is considered as a method of mobilization of the market and is one of the most important rules to dominate the entire operation of the market economy. Other approaches also show that business competitiveness, according to M. Porter's Five Forces theory, depends not only on competitive strategies such as prices or differentiation but also on the ability to manage and exploit internal resources in a sustainable direction in reality. According to M. Porter, *"the five forces determine industry profitability because they influence the prices, costs and required investment of firms in an industry: the elements of return on investment"* [7]. Therefore, competitiveness reflects the relative position of economic entities within the market. This position serves as the conditions for their participation in competitive activities. Competitiveness is typically assessed through a set of criteria: from a "static perspective", indicators include the market share, the profit margin per unit of product, production costs ... Besides, from a "dynamic perspective", the competitiveness is reflected in factors such as the degree of science and technology application in production, the product life cycle, the ability to provide complementary products and services, etc.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the field of agricultural products, especially export products, many studies have shown that competitiveness depends on both external factors (including market structure, trade barriers, consumer demand) and internal factors (including administration, technology, human resources). One study of the Brazilian food industry [8] showed that internal resources, such as skilled human resources, flexible organizational structure, creative processes, close relationships with suppliers, and the unique difference

of the product, play a decisive role in maintaining international competitive advantages. This is especially suitable when considering the Vietnam's dragon fruit industry [9], which faces global competitive pressure and needs to maximize the internal specific resources of enterprises. The overview of Viet Nam's dragon fruit products and its export market showed both of potential as well as challenges in the next decade [3]. According to the Vietnam Fruit and Vegetable Association, in the first 2 months of 2025, dragon fruit has risen to the top in export turnover in the fruit group, estimated reaching 93.8 million USD, accounting for 14.3% of the country's total fruit and vegetable export value [10]. This achievement marks the spectacular return of Vietnam's dragon fruit after many years of losing its position due to durian. From the 1.3 billion USD mark in 2018, dragon fruit revenue has continuously declined, especially after durian rose and led exports from 2022 to 2024. However, 2025 witnessed a surprising reversal. In addition, the competitive factors of agricultural products can be evaluated through many dimensions, including production costs, agricultural product quality, planting & harvesting schedules, geographical distance, land quality, the application of science and technology in cultivation, cultural gap among markets, market size, and trade barriers.

To address the research gap, the study adopted a more structured approach in analyzing the competitiveness of Vietnam's dragon fruit export enterprises. Specifically, the research integrates a quantitative survey by evaluating the Internal-External factors (IE matrix) along with the Internal Factor matrix [11]. In this study, the Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) and External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrices were used to assess the competitiveness of Vietnam's dragon fruit industry. These tools are strategic analysis methods proposed within the strategic management framework of Fred R. David [12], which enabled the identification and quantification of internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) that influence the competitiveness of an organization or an industry. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on external factors or commodity-level analysis, this research emphasizes the intrinsic capabilities of the business, including management efficiency, technology adoption, product differentiation and marketing strategies, which are the determinants directly shaping competitive advantages. Therefore, the contribution of the study was shown in 03 aspects. Firstly, research and expansion of the theoretical basis for competitiveness in agricultural product exports by providing experimental evidence for dragon fruit, a commercial industry that has a special position but is rarely exploited in academic work. Secondly, the methodology, through the application of the IE matrix combined with survey data, supported assessing a comprehensive comparison of strengths and weaknesses between export enterprises. Thirdly, research brought practical value to policy makers and corporate administrators in developing strategies, support trading mechanisms and solutions to improve the competitiveness of the Vietnam's dragon fruit industry in the international market. The combination of these methods was appropriate for this research because the dragon fruit industry has a complex value chain structure. Therefore, the method allowed the quantification of expert-based qualitative data, thereby determining the relative weights of each factor and providing a scientific foundation for strategic recommendations to enhance competitiveness.

The study integrated both theoretical foundations and empirical insights in the production and business practices of Vietnamese enterprises and cooperatives. The study drew on M. Porter's Diamond Model [13] for competitive capability and the Resource-Based View (RBV) [5], emphasizing unique resources and capabilities, together with the use of the IFE and EFE matrices as analytical tools to identify and quantify internal and external factors affecting the dragon fruit industry's competitiveness. Based on this integration and experts from the interview, the research identified 15 key elements that constituted the competitive capacity of the dragon fruit export industry, including:

- 1/ Production capacity: The ability to create products that adapt to the competitive standards of each market.
- 2/ Purchasing capacity: The ability to find stable materials and support tools for production inputs.
- 3/ Management capacity: Organizational operating methods, risk management, adaptability, and change management.
- 4/ Human resources capacity: Labor with qualifications and skills, a team of product design experts, ability to develop and renovate products, ...
- 5/ Financial capacity: Cash, banking finance, loans, or international solvency ...
- 6/ Marketing capacity: Analysis and market forecasting capacity to offer marketing strategies.

7/ Price competitiveness: Product cost, production cost control to maintain price advantage.

8/ Brand capacity: Creating and protecting prestigious images for the product, etc.

9/ Research & development (R&D) capacity: Applying technology to improve quality and product costs and to increase competitiveness.

10/ Technology capacity: The ability to research modern technology, production techniques and supply chain management.

11/ Networking capacity: Establish and maintain long-term relations with customers and partners.

12/ Export capacity: Managing the entire process from contract signing to international export.

13/ Market connecting capacity: Maintain continuous linkages within domestic and international trade chains, ensuring smooth flows of products without disruption.

14/ Logistics capacity: How to transport and distribute products effectively.

15/ Trade dispute capacity: Enable quick and effective responses to legal and commercial risks.

The figure below shows 15 factors that constitute the competitiveness of Vietnam's dragon fruit business

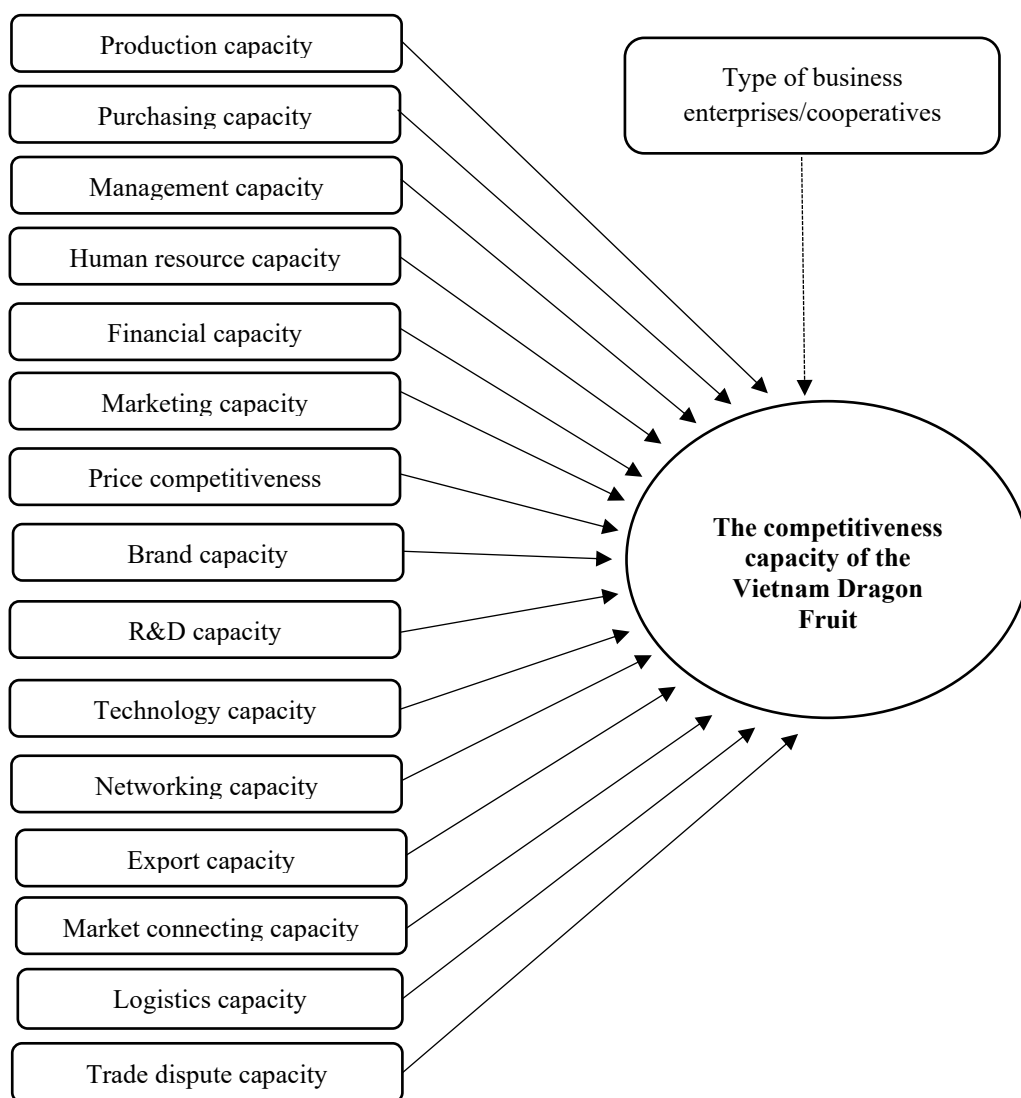


Figure 2. Model of factors that constitute the competitiveness of Vietnam dragon fruit businesses.
(Source: Author, 2025)

This study used descriptive and quantitative statistical methods to evaluate the decisive factors of competitiveness of Vietnam's dragon fruit export enterprises. Primary data was collected through a structural questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale to the directors, business managers of enterprises and cooperatives, along with in-depth interviews of 12 experts in the field of agricultural economic and trade policies to adjust the model and supplement professional opinions.

The research samples included 20 big enterprises and cooperatives in key provinces producing dragon fruits such as Binh Thuan, Long An and Tien Giang provinces, ... chosen by the method of purposive sampling, ensuring representatives of the scale and experience of international trade. The reason for this model is because the surveyed enterprises and cooperatives have the scale of production and business associated with large raw material areas, purchased directly from farmers and small or medium establishments production thus playing the hub in the dragon fruit value chain. Their selection is based on professional background, academic credentials and practical engagement in the subject area. Therefore, although the number of samples was not much, these large-scale enterprises were considered to represent the main production - export area, reflecting the characteristics and core competitiveness of the whole industry when participating in the international market. This approach was consistent with the characteristics of researching agricultural products, in which enterprises and cooperatives are the units that determine the ability to export and integrate in the global market. The data were processed and analyzed using descriptive statistics, testing the reliability of the scale (Cronbach's alpha) and applying the matrix evaluating the internal elements (IFE) and the external elements (EFE) to create a combination matrix (IE) and combine the method of appreciating the internal elements of Thompson-Strickland to evaluate the competitiveness dragon fruit industry.

The research process consisted of 04 steps: (1) Overview of theoretical and modeling framework, (2) Expert consultation, (3) Survey and data collection, then (4) Analysis and synthesis of results. All participants were guaranteed to be confidential and voluntary in accordance with the research standards. Competition was reflected in the subjective and objective factors of the business environment. Therefore, the matrix evaluates the competitiveness factors of Vietnamese dragon fruit exporting enterprises as follows:

Table 1. Capacity of Competitive Factors

Factors	Weight numbers (from 0.0 to 1.0)	Rank (from 1 to n)	Factor score
	A	B	$K = A \times B$
1. Factor 1	a_1	b_1	$k_1 = a_1 \times b_1$
2. Factor 2	a_2	b_2	$k_2 = a_2 \times b_2$
.....			
n. Factor n	a_n	b_n	$k_n = a_n \times b_n$
Total	1.0	-	$T = \sum_{i=1}^n k_i$

(Source: Authors, 2025)

T: Results of evaluating the competitiveness of the business

a_n : Weight number for evaluating the impact level of capacity

b_n : Number of ranking scores

The survey results of businesses after collection were put into quantitative analysis through SPSS software [14]. The scales after being evaluated through statistical analysis will be assessed to be reliable through testing the Cronbach's Alpha reliable ratio.

3. RESULTS AND EVALUATION

3.1. Research results

After conducting discussions, interviews and consultations with experts regarding the importance of the 15 factors that constituted the competitiveness of the Vietnamese dragon fruit, the result identified these elements as the core dimensions of competitive capacity.

Table 2. The results of the weighted number survey (importance) of the factors of competitiveness for the Vietnamese dragon fruit industry by experts

Factors of competitiveness	Average score	Total factor score	Weight number
1. Production capacity	4.333	52	0.068
2. Purchasing capacity	3.917	47	0.062
3. Management capacity	4.083	49	0.064
4. Human resource capacity	4.167	50	0.066
5. Financial capacity	3.917	47	0.062
6. Marketing capacity	4.583	55	0.072
7. Price competitiveness	4.333	52	0.068
8. Brand capacity	4.583	55	0.072
9. R&D capacity	4.167	50	0.066
10. Technology capacity	4.500	54	0.071
11. Networking capacity	4.417	53	0.069
12. Export capacity	4.333	52	0.068
13. Market connecting capacity	4.333	52	0.068
14. Logistics capacity	4.417	53	0.069
15. Trade dispute capacity	3.500	42	0.055
Total		763	1.000

(Source: Authors, 2025)

From the survey results in the table above, it was possible to divide the elements into 03 groups: (1) The group of the most important factors for the competitiveness of the export industry of Vietnam dragon fruit, including 3 factors: Marketing, Brand competitiveness and Technology capacity (weight number of 0.07 or more); Group (2): groups of impact factors with an important scored weight number such as Production, Purchasing, Management, Human resource, Price competitiveness, R&D, Networking, Exporting, Market connecting and Logistics capacity (weight number from 0.06 to under 0.07), to the last factor: group (3) is the capacity to handle trade disputes (the lowest weight number is only 0.055) because most domestic export enterprises can self-negotiate and discuss with foreign trading partners.

The next part of the study was to use the factors affecting the competitiveness integrated along with the calculations from the survey results, creating a correlation matrix that showed the competitiveness of the dragon fruit export enterprise in Vietnam as below:

Table 3. The competitive capacity matrix of Vietnam dragon fruit business enterprises

Factors of competitiveness	Score	Weight number of capacity	Competitive capacity factor score
1. Production capacity	3.90	0.068	0.2658
2. Business capacity	3.50	0.069	0.2431
3. Market connecting capacity	3.50	0.068	0.2385
4. Export capacity	3.45	0.068	0.2351
5. Logistics capacity	3.30	0.069	0.2292
6. Price competitiveness	3.30	0.068	0.2249
7. Purchasing capacity	3.65	0.062	0.2248
8. Brand capacity	3.10	0.072	0.2235
9. Technology capacity	3.15	0.071	0.2229
10. Management capacity	3.35	0.064	0.2151
11. Human resource capacity	3.25	0.066	0.2130
12. Marketing capacity	2.80	0.072	0.2018
13. R&D capacity	2.75	0.066	0.1802
14. Trade dispute capacity	3.20	0.055	0.1761
15. Financial capacity	2.65	0.062	0.1632
Total		1.000	3.2575

(Source: Authors, 2025)

The data was processed by Cronbach's Alpha: The test results show that the observed variables have the appropriate correlation coefficient (Corrected item - Total Correlation > 0.3). Cronbach's alpha coefficient = 0.953 (greater than 0.8), so the scales of the study were considered reliable and appropriate.

3.2. Discussion of research results

The research results, derived from the matrix evaluation of the competitiveness factors of dragon fruit enterprises and cooperatives, show that there was a certain difference between factors. Overall, the findings indicated that the competitiveness of Vietnam's dragon fruit export sector remains at an above-average level compared to competitors, which was relatively consistent with the strength of tropical fruit production. Some factors of the competitiveness of Vietnam dragon fruit were assessed with high scores, particularly the following capacity:

Production capacity (3.90 points; weight number 0.068; factor of 0.2658) was the most valuable factor, reflecting the ability to organize the production of businesses in ensuring quality, stable production and adapting consumer market standards. This is due to climatic and soil conditions accompanied by a concentrated farming area with high yield and output combined with farming techniques and cultivation experience. From there, this fruit can provide large quantities year-round and remain quality products. However, it is also important to pay attention to the regulation of production quantity to suit the supply source on the market depending on the time of trading and chemical control used in accordance with the standards of each importing country.

The capacity to develop business relations ranked in second place (3.50 points; factor of 0.2431 points) due to the signing of many trade partnership agreements that helped the import duties into foreign markets for the dragon fruit industry in Vietnam to be minimized. The Vietnamese side also joined many economic cooperation alliances, which has created an advantage for suitable price in foreign markets. However, the linkages among the agents participating in the dragon fruit production chain remain fragmented, lacking strict enforcement though legal contracts. Besides, the sector has yet to achieve the sufficient scale required to establish large value chains that can generate high commercial returns, as well as there are not many attractive policies to encourage large-scale investors to invest in the field of dragon fruit production and processing, further constraining the industry's development.

The capacity to connect the consumer market was rated at the third highest level (3.50 points; factor of 0.2385 points) because the dragon fruit has been produced and marketed through the cooperation of stakeholders, including producers, agricultural organizations, cooperatives, enterprises, mass organizations, international shipping partners and marketing agents. The combination of parties has helped improve the efficiency of production, transportation and product marketing. There should be a system of connections to update information on production demand, product standards, time of purchase and goods prices according to market fluctuations.

In addition, there were also some points that need to be concerned and paid attention to enhance more such as financial capacity (0.1632 points), processing trade disputes (0.1761 points) and research & development capacity (R&D) (0.1802 points). These competitive scores were still low, not achieving high growth potential, if businesses want to develop global export directions in a sustainable market. The limitations of these factors had strongly affected the absolute competitiveness of Vietnam's dragon fruit in the international market.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Conclusions

In general, dragon fruit businesses have good production platforms, market connection and export organization. Research results reflected the typical picture of the export industry of Vietnam's dragon fruit. The high scores for production and purchasing capacity were reasonable because dragon fruit is a traditional agricultural product, in which the advantage of large scale production and supply from farmers enables businesses to be more proactive in securing inputs. However, enterprises or cooperatives mainly focus on production-purchasing-raw exports, while other important competencies such as R&D, marketing, brand and finance capability are not developed adequately. This sets the risk when the dragon fruit industry is increasingly facing technical barriers, food safety standards and requirements for traceability from the international market. Moreover, research showed that the lack of

financial capacity and technological innovation, which made it more difficult for businesses to invest in long-term investment, post-harvest storage and expansion of modern distribution channels.

Compared to M. Porter's competitive advantage theory [4], basic factors such as input costs and production capacity has been dominating, while long-term strategic factors such as brands, R&D, marketing and export organizational capacity have been limited. Thus, to improve competitiveness, the Vietnam's dragon fruit industry needs to shift from relying on large scale production advantages to a value-added model, with a stronger focus on technological investment, R&D and the development of internationally recognized brands.

4.2. Recommendations

From the research results, the dragon fruit industry still relies on natural advantages and produce on a large scale but has not really shifted to the development model based on innovation and added value. Therefore, the study proposes some solutions and management implications for Vietnam's dragon fruit export enterprises according to the empirical research and training program such as Co-operative for Directors, New Rural Development Program, Agriculture Cadre training program, ... from the Ministry of Agriculture & Environment.

Firstly, following the standards and requirements of the international market. Enterprises need to ensure that dragon fruit products qualify all standards of requirements, food safety and hygiene, packaging, transportation, as well as legal regulations and customs procedures of the import countries. Specifically, it is important to note the criteria on product quality, food safety and hygiene, packaging, transportation and legal procedures as prescribed by each import countries.

Secondly, improving competitiveness through the investment in applying high technology in production, post-harvest storage and deep processing to improve productivity, quality and added value for the product. Continuing to carry out research and development (R&D) when promoting research activities to have new breeds, diversify products, develop products processed from dragon fruit and qualify the increasingly diverse needs of the market. Researching on post-harvest storage, deep processing and process improvement to meet the increasingly strict requirements of the international market. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen management and administration through advanced management models, effective supply chain management.

Thirdly, developing a well-known brand and marketing strategy for Vietnam's dragon fruits through fascinating telling stories about the product, emphasizing the origin, cultivation process, quality and nutritional value. Besides, enhancing promotional campaigns by using traditional and digital marketing channels, participating in international exhibition fairs, developing websites, digital marketing, sales live-streams ... Moreover, the enterprises also should invest in international cooperation by establishing strategic partnerships with foreign distributors, retailers and even foreign e-commerce platforms to broaden global distribution channels.

Furthermore, enterprises and cooperatives should level up managerial capacity and trade risks management by focusing on training management teams with strong adaptability to change, advanced negotiation skills, effective dispute resolution and comprehensive international risk management capabilities.

Finally, it is also necessary for the agencies to assist the support policies and solve difficulties for businesses such as: (1) Credit policies and financial support through the design of preferential credit packages for agricultural export enterprises, especially in post-harvest technology investment and logistics; (2) Infrastructure and regional logistics development by building storage centers, cold storage and specialized logistics for dragon fruits in key production areas; (3) Policies on standards and quality by supporting businesses in meeting international technical standards (Global GAP, HACCP, Organic, etc.), while promoting quick and transparent quarantine system, thereby expanding and improving the processing capacity of quality products, ensuring food safety and hygiene, meeting the requirements of the market; (4) National trade promotion as relevant ministries should develop a national brand strategy for Vietnam's dragon fruit, strengthen the presence at fairs, exhibitions or international distribution channels. These implications not only help businesses improve their competitiveness but also support the Vietnam's dragon fruit industry to shift in the direction of sustainable development and increase the value in the global supply chain, in the hope that the Vietnam's dragon fruit industry will find a long-term sustainable development path, thereby contributing to the country's common socio-economic development.

Limitations of the study should be acknowledged by the descriptive nature of the IFE and EFE methods, the subjectivity of expert-based scoring, the narrow sectoral focus and small data availability.

Future studies should employ causal modeling or mixed methods to validate and expand upon these findings of dragon fruit's industry.

The study mainly focused on the hub dragon fruit production areas of Vietnam and business organizations with large production and purchasing quantities. When conducting the survey, there was a quite large gap in competitiveness level of large companies specializing in dragon fruit export compared to cooperatives, big enterprises and small enterprises of dragon fruit production. This suggests considering the ability to expand cooperation, link the horizontal and vertical value chain between businesses to promote the development of the dragon fruit industry in Vietnam. Therefore, the study can be a premise for the next further studies on the business development strategy of Vietnam dragon fruit industry.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this study.

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