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## Trust and affective commitment as energizing forces for export performance

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the effects of trust, commitment, relation-oriented competencies and entrepreneurial competencies on export performance. Using survey data from 134 exporting organizations located in the south of the Netherlands, a conceptual model is tested in which trust and affective commitment act as energizing forces for the development of competencies that have a positive effect on export performance. The main difference between this approach and other models is that affective commitment is hypothesized to have an indirect effect on performance, rather than a direct effect. This prediction is borne out by the data, which indicates that the role of trust and affective commitment in relational models of export performance may need to be reconsidered.

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## 1. Introduction

As the importance of internationalization grows for many organizations around the globe, there is an increasing interest in the variables that predict export performance. In the existing literature, three perspectives can be distinguished. The most dominant is the structure–conduct–performance (SCP) framework, which is anchored in industrial organization and based on micro-economic theory. The dominance of this theoretical perspective, whether explicit or implied, has shaped the variables that have been investigated, and to some extent the methodologies adopted. The most prominent variables have been firm and product characteristics (internal), export market and industry characteristics (external) and strategy variables, which are aimed at achieving a fit between the internal and the external (e.g. Aaby & Slater, 1989; Bilkey & Tesar, 1977; Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Diamantopoulos, 1999; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Katsikeas, Piercy, & Ioannidis, 1996; Katsikeas, Leonidou, & Morgan, 2000; Lages & Montgomery, 2004; Lages, 2000; Leonidou, Katsikeas, & Samiee, 2002; Leonidou, Katsikeas, Paliawadana, & Spyropoulou, 2007; Morgan, Kaleka, & Katsikeas, 2004; Shoham, Evangelista, & Albaum, 2002; Shoham, 1998; Sousa, Martinez-Lopez, & Coelho, 2008; Styles & Ambler, 2000; Toften, 2005).

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Despite the dominance of this perspective, two other theoretical approaches have received some attention over the past decade: The resource-based view of the firm, which argues that firms gain competitive advantage by leveraging internal resources (Morgan et al., 2004; Piercy, Kaleka, & Katsikeas, 1998; Wolff & Pett, 2000), and the relational approach, also referred to as the “behavioral perspective” (Leonidou, Katsikeas, & Hadjimarcou, 2002) or the “relational paradigm” (Chrysochoidis & Theoharakis, 2004; Pressey & Tzokas, 2004; Styles & Ambler, 1994, 2000; Zhang, Cavusgil, & Roath, 2003). The rationale of this perspective is that exporting does not only involve economic transactions (i.e., the exchange of goods and services for money), but also relationships between the different parties involved. To be successful, exporters and their foreign customers need entrepreneurial competencies (Balabanis & Katsikea, 2003) as well as relation-oriented competencies (Styles, Patterson, & Ahmed, 2008). Moreover, the productivity of their relationship is likely to be affected by relationship quality characteristics such as trust and commitment.

There is some disagreement, however, with regard to the exact role that these last two variables play. Traditionally, trust and commitment have been modeled as mediators between relationship management characteristics and performance (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Styles et al., 2008). In Styles et al.’s (2008) conceptual model, for example, trust and commitment mediate the effects of relational skills such as cultural sensitivity and effective communication. More specifically, cultural sensitivity and effective communication have a positive effect on trust, trust has a positive effect on commitment and commitment has a positive effect on export performance.

A different approach is taken by Meyer, Becker, and Vandenberghe (2004), who argue that commitment is not a mediator, but an energizing force: A special form of motivation that binds individuals or organizations to “actions and decisions that have relatively long-term implications” (Meyer et al., 2004, p. 994). Although their study focuses on the commitment and motivation of employees within an organization, we hypothesize that commitment can also motivate an entire organization to invest money, time and effort in developing the skills and competencies that are necessary for export success.

Meyer et al. (2004)’s view on commitment has not yet been incorporated in theoretical models of export performance. This study aims to change that by developing and testing a model in which trust and commitment act as energizing forces for the development of competencies that enhance export performance. The main difference between this approach and traditional models is that the effect of commitment on performance is no longer considered to be direct.

The findings of this study will have important implications for both academics and practitioners. First, considering that there is very little and fragmented research in this area, this study will help academics to better understand the impact of variables like trust and commitment on export performance. In addition, the results will provide guidance to business practitioners, because they will indicate which characteristics and competencies are the best predictors for export success.

In the next section, we will discuss the theoretical justification for the ‘energizing forces’ model, as well as the conceptualization of its constituent variables. Subsequently, we describe the materials and methods that were used to test the model. Finally, we will discuss our results and their implications for theory and practice.

## 2. The energizing forces model

### 2.1. The role of commitment

In Sousa et al.’s (2008) review of the export performance literature between 1998 and 2005, managerial commitment to exporting emerges as the most frequently cited management characteristic to influence export performance. Committed managers are believed to be more careful in planning the allocation of relevant resources, which reduces uncertainty and increases the effectiveness of the marketing strategy. Furthermore, commitment is essential in fostering a long-term orientation (Larson, 1992; Styles et al., 2008) and mutual cooperative behavior (Leonidou, Palihawadana, & Theodosiou, 2006; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

According to Meyer et al. (2004), commitment can be defined as the binding of an individual to a course of action specified within the terms of that commitment. It is often also referred to as an attitude of attachment and an intention to continue a relationship (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the current study, the focus was not on specific relationships with specific customers, but rather on the intention to maintain relationships with foreign customers in general. This was due to our decision to take the firm as the unit of analysis (cf. Sousa et al., 2008, p. 365).

Allen and Meyer (1990) distinguish three different components of commitment: affective, calculative, and normative commitment. In an exporting context, affective commitment can be conceptualized as the exporting organization’s desire to build and maintain relationships with foreign customers because of the enjoyment of the relationships for their own sake, separate from their instrumental worth (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer, & Kumar, 1996; Kumar, Hibbard, & Stern, 1994). Calculative (or continuance) commitment is the degree to which an exporting organization experiences a need to build and maintain relationships with foreign customers because of the significant perceived switching costs associated with leaving those relationships (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Geyskens et al., 1996). Finally, normative commitment is reflected in the perceived moral obligation of an exporting organization to stay in relationships with foreign customers (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

Since affective and calculative commitment are believed to be the most relevant types of commitment in inter-organizational settings (Mathieu & Zazac, 1990; Styles et al., 2008), we decided to include both variables in the conceptual model. The roles they play, however, are quite distinct. According to Meyer et al. (2004, p. 1001), affective commitment is

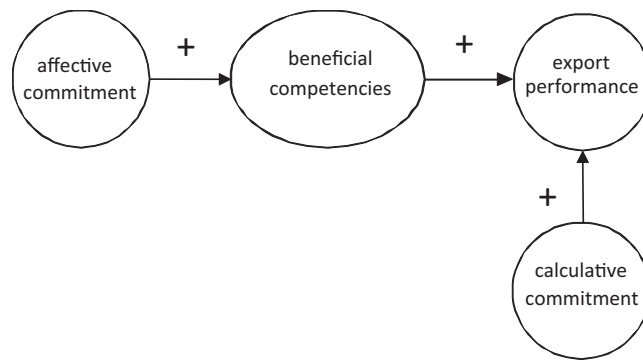


Fig. 1. Preliminary version of the energizing forces model.

accompanied by feelings of intrinsic motivation and a promotion focus. This suggests that exporters who are affectively committed to their exporting activities perceive success in this area as an ideal that satisfies their need for accomplishment (Higgins, 1998). Consequently, these exporting organizations can be expected to invest more money, time and effort into developing or acquiring beneficial competencies which could enhance their export performance.

Calculative commitment, on the other hand, is associated with a relatively strong prevention focus (Meyer et al., 2004, p. 1001). Exporters who are calculatively committed to their exporting activities continue their relationships with foreign customers because leaving them would cost too much. Calculative commitment can still have a positive effect on export performance, for example because it encourages operational integration and the exchange of data (Styles et al., 2008, p. 884). However, given its extrinsic nature, it is unlikely to serve as an energizing force for the development of beneficial competencies.

In summary, we hypothesize affective commitment to have a positive effect on the development of beneficial competencies, which in turn have a positive effect on export performance. Details about the beneficial competencies included in the current study are provided in the next section. Calculative commitment is hypothesized to have a direct positive effect on export performance. A preliminary version of the energizing forces model is shown in Fig. 1.

## 2.2. Beneficial competencies

In their comprehensive literature review, Sousa et al. (2008) also discuss firm competencies that have been shown to have a positive impact on export performance. Broadly speaking, these competencies can be divided into two types: (1) Skills that are needed to gain or maintain a competitive advantage in foreign markets and (2) Skills that are needed to build relationships with foreign customers. We refer to the first type as 'entrepreneurial competencies' and to the second type as 'relation-oriented competencies'. These competencies are general, in the sense that they can be applied in all relationships with foreign customers, regardless of their specific cultural background or the geographical market in which they operate.

### 2.2.1. Entrepreneurial competencies

In order to become competitive in a foreign market, organizations can leverage their product development skills, their market knowledge or their product line breadth (Sousa et al., 2008). This should be easier for firms that adopt what Covin and Slevin (1991) have called an entrepreneurial posture. Such a posture is reflected in the firm's propensity to take risks, its propensity to make product innovations and its propensity to compete proactively with industry rivals.

The adoption of an entrepreneurial posture is believed to be particularly beneficial in dynamic environments (Balabanis & Katsikea, 2003; Covin & Slevin, 1989). Since export markets tend to be more diverse than domestic ones, some authors argue that for firms with exporting ambitions, the adoption of an entrepreneurial posture is almost a necessity (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Balabanis and Katsikea (2003) have shown that organizations which are able to adopt an entrepreneurial posture in their export ventures indeed perform better. Therefore, we decided to include entrepreneurial posture in the energizing forces model as a beneficial competency.

### 2.2.2. Relation-oriented competencies

As stated in the introduction, the behavioral perspective on export performance focuses on the social aspects of exchange relationships, rather than their economic aspects (Leonidou et al., 2006). Since business-to-business relationships tend to involve strong interdependencies and a high degree of complexity (Gross, Banting, Meredith, & Ford, 1993), investing in sound relationships is likely to be beneficial to both sellers and buyers. In order to build such relationships, firms need to be able to communicate effectively with their customers (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Mohr & Spekman, 1994). Effective communication holds exchange partners together, coordinates their programs and actions and encourages participative decision-making (Leonidou et al., 2006, p. 153).

Effective communication is particularly important in an international setting, where cultural and linguistic differences may lead to severe misunderstandings and miscommunication. Firms can overcome these differences by developing a high degree of cultural sensitivity (La, Patterson, & Styles, 2005; Styles et al., 2008) and a high level of proficiency in the language of their foreign customers (Williams & Chaston, 2004). This is why cultural sensitivity and linguistic competence were the two relation-oriented competencies included in our model. Below, both concepts will be explained further.

Cultural sensitivity is defined by Harich and LaBahn (1998) as “a general open-mindedness with respect to different cultures and the willingness to understand the ways in which cultures differ”. Cultural sensitivity can help develop intimate relations with customers to the level that rivals cannot replicate (Srivastava, Fahey, & Christensen, 2001). Moreover, cultural sensitivity has been shown by Harich and LaBahn (1998) and Skarmeas, Katsikeas, and Schlegelmilch (2002) to have a positive impact on export performance.

Linguistic competence can be defined as the capacity of an organization and its personnel to communicate effectively in foreign languages, and to convey information in a manner that is easily understood by foreign customers. Many studies have explored the relationship between linguistic competence and export performance (Bilkey & Tesar, 1977; Cunningham & Spiegel, 1971; Enderwick & Aloorie, 1994; Lautanen, 2000; Schlegelmilch & Crook, 1988; Schlegelmilch & Ross, 1987; Swift, 1990; Turnbull & Welham, 1985; Ursic & Czinkota, 1989; Walters, 1990; Williams & Chaston, 2004). These authors argue that, besides enhancing the effectiveness of verbal and written communication, language skills can also directly improve export performance. Furthermore, a lack of foreign language knowledge may cause managers to perceive more ‘psychological distance’ between their home and foreign markets, and can therefore hinder export success (Swift, 1991; Turnbull & Welham, 1985).

To summarize, the three relevant competencies included in the current study are linguistic competence, cultural sensitivity and entrepreneurial posture. All three have previously been shown to have a positive effect on export performance. As a result, the energizing forces model now looks as in Fig. 2.

### 2.3. The role of trust

In the relationship management literature, commitment is inextricably linked with trust. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 22), both commitment and trust are necessary to produce outcomes that promote efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness. In the current study, trust is defined as the belief that an organizational foreign customer will be honest, fair, and reliable (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Anderson & Narus, 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987; Leonidou et al., 2006; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This conceptualization of trust corresponds closely to Styles et al.’s definition of goodwill trust, which they conceive as a “higher-order, deeper form of trust, which may be more subjective” (Styles et al., 2008, p. 886).

When the parties involved in a business-to-business relationship trust each other, they are less likely to show opportunistic behavior (Leonidou et al., 2006) or take advantage of each other (Styles et al., 2008). As a result, the desire to continue and strengthen the relationship is encouraged (Hunt & Nevin, 1974; Leonidou et al., 2006; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Schurr & Ozanne, 1985). Therefore, we hypothesize trust to have a positive effect on affective commitment, which means that it effectively serves as another energizing force.

In our model, trust is not linked to calculative commitment, as calculative commitment is conceptualized as the *need* to maintain relationships with foreign customers, rather than the *desire* to do so. Furthermore, Styles et al. (2008, p. 886) argue that the subjective nature of this type of trust makes it more likely to be associated with affective commitment than with calculative commitment.

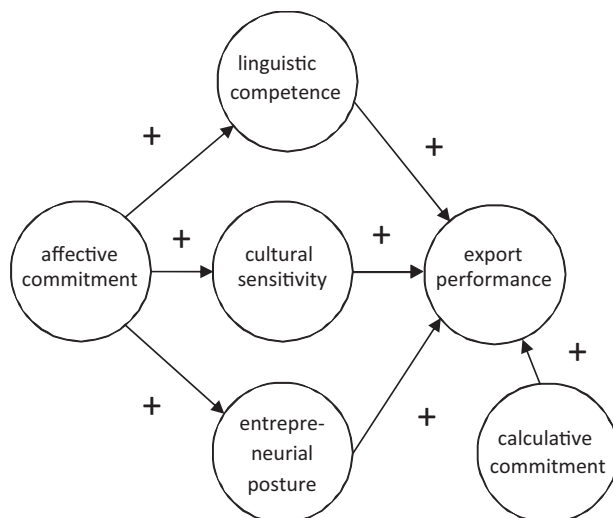


Fig. 2. The energizing forces model after inclusion of the beneficial competencies.

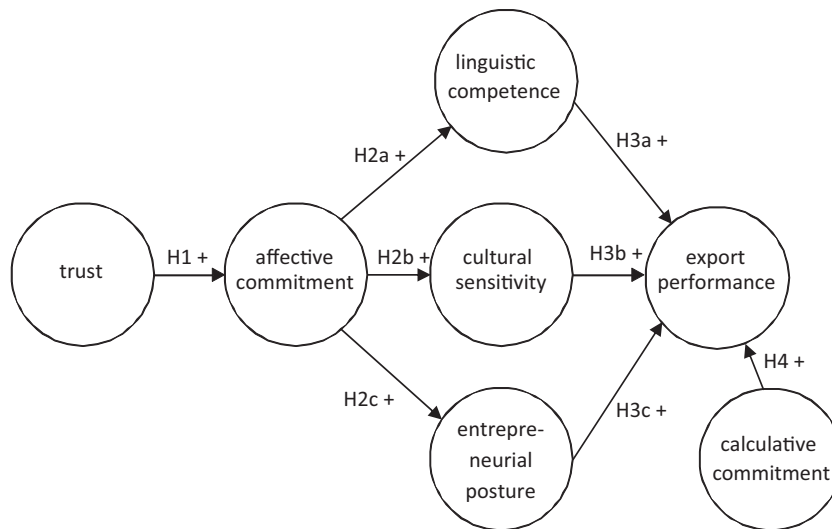


Fig. 3. The energizing forces model.

#### 2.4. The full model

The full energizing forces model can be seen in Fig. 3. This model includes the following hypotheses:

H1 Trust has a positive effect on affective commitment.

H2 Affective commitment has a positive effect on beneficial competencies.

H2a Affective commitment has a positive effect on linguistic competence.

H2b Affective commitment has a positive effect on cultural sensitivity.

H2c Affective commitment has a positive effect on entrepreneurial posture.

H3 Beneficial competencies have a positive effect on export performance.

H3a Linguistic competence has a positive effect on export performance.

H3b Cultural sensitivity has a positive effect on export performance.

H3c Entrepreneurial posture has a positive effect on export performance.

H4 Calculative commitment has a positive effect on export performance.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sample characteristics

By e-mail we asked 3875 exporting organizations from the southern part of the Netherlands to fill out an online questionnaire in May–June 2009. 254 exporting organizations reacted positively to this request. Respondents who did not completely fill out the questionnaire were removed from the sample. 134 participants filled out the entire questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 3.5%.

Although the participating organizations exported all over the world, the most frequently mentioned export countries were Germany and Belgium. The average number of employees of the companies was 17, but almost one third of the sample consisted of single owner companies. Overall, the wholesale and industry sectors were overrepresented in our sample. For 20% of the companies the sales generated by export amounted to 10% or less of their total sales, while 23% of the companies indicated that they generated all their sales from export.

Despite the fact that the questionnaire was distributed during an economic downturn, 31% of the participants reported that sales from export, when compared to last year, stayed the same. 38% of the companies thought that their export goals had been reached and 43% was satisfied with their export performance.

#### 3.2. Questionnaire development

This section describes the measurement instrument that was used. The entire questionnaire was in Dutch. Unless indicated otherwise, all statements in the questionnaire were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ('completely disagree'–'completely agree'). Since our unit of analysis was the firm, participants were explicitly instructed to answer the questions from the perspective of the organization, not their own individual perspective. Furthermore, all relationships with foreign

customers had to be taken into account simultaneously. This means that participants were not allowed to focus on one particular export venture, since doing so might introduce bias in their replies.

### 3.2.1. Export performance

Export performance can be divided into financial and non-financial performance. Financial export performance refers to export sales intensity, export profit intensity and export sales growth. Other financial indicators are market share, return on assets, return on investment, export profit growth and ratios of export sales to the number of export managers and employees (Lages, 2000). Non-financial indicators of export performance include goal achievement, satisfaction, perceived success, and perceived importance of a certain item to export performance (Lages, 2000). Other non-financial indicators are customer, employee and shareholder satisfaction and loyalty (Hooley, Greenly, Fahy, & Cadogan, 2001). Financial and non-financial measures can be operationalized in objective and subjective terms. However, most financial measures are objective and most non-financial measures are subjective. Lages (2000) advises to use multiple measures, since in order to capture the complexity of the concept, it is better to construct a scale based on a set of different variables (Bijmolt & Zwart, 1994; Shoham, 1996). For our research we will use both financial and non-financial measurements of export performance, using objective as well as subjective terms. We measured export performance using the following financial measures (Kaynak & Kuan, 1993; Shoham, 1996):

- percentage of sales generated by export;
- percentage of profit generated by export;
- increase or decrease in export sales (in terms of percentage);
- increase or decrease in export profit (in terms of percentage);
- export sales growth in the previous year as compared to competitors (rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represents 'much worse than competitors' and 7 represents 'much better than competitors');
- export profit growth in the previous year as compared to competitors (rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represents 'much worse than competitors' and 7 represents 'much better than competitors').

As non-financial measures of export performance we included one item for perceived success (e.g. Cavusgil & Zou, 1994; Singer & Czinkota, 1994), two items for overall satisfaction with export performance (e.g. Evangelista, 1994; Seifert & Ford, 1989), and one item each for the satisfaction and loyalty of employees, customers and shareholders (Hooley et al., 2001).

### 3.2.2. Commitment

Affective commitment was measured with a three-item scale from Leonidou et al. (2006), since their conceptualization of commitment as the desire to maintain relationships with foreign customers corresponds closely to our definition of affective commitment. Originally, Leonidou et al. (2006) used five items, two of which were excluded after exploratory factor analysis. To keep our questionnaire short, we only included the three items that showed sufficient unidimensionality in their study.

Calculative commitment was measured using a three-item scale from Meyer, Allen, & Smith (1993). The original items were concerned with employee loyalty, but they could easily be adapted to the context of an exporter's relationship with foreign customers. The main reason for choosing this scale instead of the one used by Styles et al. (2008) was that their items were concerned with calculative commitment to a specific foreign customer, whereas our focus was on foreign customers in general.

### 3.2.3. Trust

Trust was operationalized using a three-item scale from Leonidou et al. (2006). Again, we only included items which showed a sufficiently high item-to-total correlation in the original study. It could be argued that the concept of trust is too subjective to be measured using Likert scales. On the other hand, it is important to note that trust is defined in the current study as a belief. Compared to emotions or feelings, beliefs can more easily and reliably be measured using quantitative instruments such as scales. This is also evidenced by the existence of a Generalized Belief Scale (McCroskey & Richmond, 1989).

### 3.2.4. Cultural sensitivity

We operationalized cultural sensitivity in accordance with Johnson, Cullen, Sakano, & Takenouchi (1996) and Styles et al. (2008) on a seven-item scale. This scale was chosen because it could easily be applied to the firm as a whole, in contrast to instruments like the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire or the Intercultural Readiness Check (Van der Zee & Brinkmann, 2004), which focus on individual competencies. Furthermore, this scale allowed us to measure sensitivity to cultural differences in general, rather than sensitivity to specific differences between one culture and another.

### 3.2.5. Linguistic competence

For linguistic competence, it was also important to employ a scale that could be applied to the firm as a whole. Since no suitable scale could be identified in the literature, consensus scaling was used to select a small number of relevant measurement items. The final selection consisted of the following three statements:

- In our contacts with foreign customers we use the language of that customer.
- Our company uses promotion materials (brochures, flyers, web site) in the language of foreign customers.
- When gathering information that is relevant for our export ventures, we use sources in the language of foreign customers.

The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 represented ‘never’ and 7 represented ‘always’. This allowed respondents to take differences between languages into account, while still providing information about all relationships with all foreign customers.

3.2.6. Entrepreneurial posture

To measure the exporting organization’s entrepreneurial posture, we used Covin & Slevin’s (1989) strategic posture scale, which consists of semantic differentials with contrasting theorems. It should be noted that this scale is concerned with entrepreneurial posture in general, rather than entrepreneurial posture in an exporting context. Nevertheless, Balabanis and Katsikea (2003) were able to demonstrate a positive effect of entrepreneurial posture on export performance using this scale. Because we felt that adapting the items to an exporting context might diminish the reliability of the scale, we decided to use the original items. However, we did restrict ourselves to the six items included in Balabanis and Katsikea (2003).

3.3. Statistical analysis

The statistical analysis proceeded in several steps. First, exploratory factor analysis was used to assess the unidimensionality and validity of the constructs. Items which exhibited high cross-loadings were dropped. More importantly, this analysis revealed that the items in the entrepreneurial posture scale were not unidimensional. Instead, two separate variables could be distinguished: innovativeness and risk-taking. Therefore, the conceptual model discussed earlier had to be adapted slightly.

More specifically, H2c was split into two hypotheses: H2c (“affective commitment has a positive effect on innovativeness”) and H2d (“affective commitment has a positive effect on risk-taking”). Similarly, H3c was split into H3c (“innovativeness has a positive effect on export performance”) and H3d (“risk-taking has a positive effect on export performance”). The new version of the model is given in Fig. 4.

All other constructs, including export performance, turned out to be unidimensional. The final list of constructs and items can be found in Appendix A.

Next, cluster analysis was used to identify multivariate outliers. A dendrogram of the participants was created using centroid clustering based on the squared Euclidian distance. In the dendrogram, eleven participants were identified as outliers. These participants were removed from the data set.

The model was fitted using a Partial Least Squares (PLS) procedure. PLS was chosen because the sample size was relatively small and because some of the measured variables (most notably, the measurement items for cultural sensitivity) showed highly uneven distributions. One advantage of PLS in comparison to covariance-based approaches to structural equation

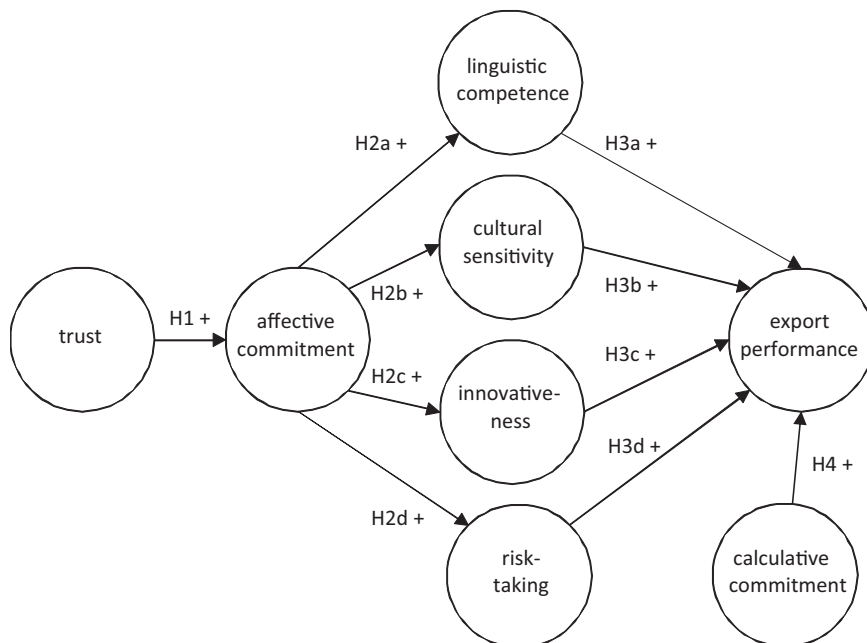


Fig. 4. The energizing forces model after exploratory factor analysis.

modeling is that PLS does not presume any distributional form for measured variables (Chin, 1998, p. 295). Furthermore, PLS can be applied more easily to relatively small data sets, as it only requires ten cases per predictor in the regression with the largest number of parameters (Chin, 1998, p. 311). The complete model was tested using software package SmartPLS 2.0 (Ringle, Wende, & Will, 2005).

The measurement properties of the different constructs in the model were checked by assessing convergent validity, reliability and discriminant validity. For the structural models, *t*-values were computed on the basis of 1000 bootstrapping runs.

The overall fit of the model was evaluated using Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, & Lauro (2005) goodness-of-fit (GOF) measure. This measure is computed as follows:

$$\sqrt{(\text{Mean}(\text{communality}) \times \text{Mean}(R^2))}$$

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. The energizing forces model

To assess whether the constructs showed sufficient convergent validity, we examined the factor loadings shown in Table 1 (see Appendix B). All factor loadings were higher than 0.5. Furthermore, all scales met the standard requirements for reliability, given that the lowest score for composite reliability was 0.82. To evaluate discriminant validity, we checked for each construct whether the square root of the AVE was higher than the individual correlations with other latent variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 2 (see Appendix B), this was indeed the case. Hence, we can conclude that the measurement model did not exhibit any problems.

The results for the structural model can be seen in Fig. 5 and Table 3 (see Appendix B). All but two effects were significant. Trust had a positive effect on affective commitment, affective commitment had a positive effect on linguistic competence, cultural sensitivity, innovativeness and risk-taking, and export performance was positively affected by cultural sensitivity, innovativeness, and calculative commitment. Hence, the only hypotheses that were not supported by the data were H3a (a positive effect of linguistic competence on export performance) and H3d (a positive effect of risk-taking on export performance).

All in all, the model predicted 28% of the variance in export performance. The  $R^2$  values for the other latent variables can be seen in Table 4 (see Appendix B). The goodness-of-fit for the energizing forces model was  $\sqrt{(0.723 \times 0.119)} = 0.293$ . This exceeds the cut-off value of 0.25 for medium effect sizes of  $R^2$ , as proposed by Wetzels, Odekerken-Schröder, and Van Oppen (2009).

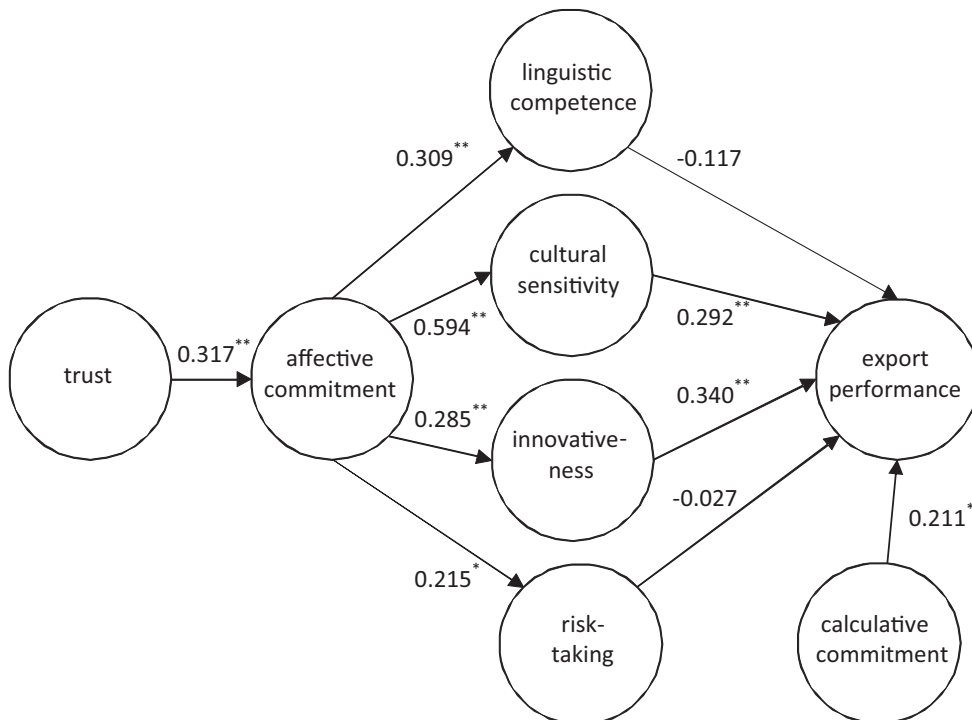


Fig. 5. Path estimates for the energizing forces model.



#### 4.2. Post hoc analysis

Although the energizing forces model fitted the data reasonably well, there were two variables which failed to show an effect on export performance: linguistic competence and risk-taking. Therefore, we decided to test an alternative model in a post hoc analysis. In this model, the effects of linguistic competence and risk-taking on export performance were no longer direct, but indirect. Williams and Chaston (2004, p. 464) argue that “language skills can facilitate the more general cultural sensitivity which is seen as an important prerequisite of international marketing success.” Similarly, Harich and LaBahn (1998) found that the ability to speak the language of a foreign business partner is considered as proof of the appreciation of the business partner’s culture. As such, it contributes positively to cultural sensitivity (cf. Shapiro, Ozanne, & Saatcioglu, 2008). Therefore, we expected linguistic competence to have a positive effect on cultural sensitivity.

A similar case can be made for the relationship between risk-taking and innovativeness. According to Miller (1983, p. 780), risk-taking in itself is not sufficient. Firms should also engage in product-market or technological innovations. Miller and Friesen (1982) argue that the nature of innovative processes is strongly influenced by whether firms are inclined to take risks in their product-market strategies. They argue that innovation comes more naturally to firms that are not afraid to take considerable risks. Our hypothesis in the alternative model was therefore that risk-taking has a positive effect on innovation, which in turn affects export performance. The alternative model is shown in Fig. 6.

This model includes the following hypotheses:

- H1 Trust has a positive effect on affective commitment.
- H2 Affective commitment has direct and indirect positive effects on beneficial competencies.
- H2a Affective commitment has a positive effect on linguistic competence.
- H2b Affective commitment has a positive effect on cultural sensitivity.
- H2c Affective commitment has a positive effect on innovativeness.
- H2d Affective commitment has a positive effect on risk-taking.
- H2e Linguistic competence has a positive effect on cultural sensitivity.
- H2f Risk-taking has a positive effect on innovativeness.
- H3 Beneficial competencies have a positive effect on export performance.
- H3a Cultural sensitivity has a positive effect on export performance.
- H3b Innovativeness has a positive effect on export performance.
- H4 Calculative commitment has a positive effect on export performance.

The procedure for statistical analysis was the same as for the original model. As shown in Tables 5 and 6 (see Appendix C), there were no problems with convergent validity, reliability or discriminant validity. All factor loadings and AVEs were above 0.5, while all reliabilities were above 0.7. Furthermore, the square roots of the AVEs were higher than the correlations with other constructs.

For the structural model, the PLS analysis indicated that all effects were significant in the predicted direction (see Fig. 7 below and Table 7 in Appendix C). This suggests that risk-taking only affects export performance in so far that it leads to innovation on behalf of the exporter. Exporters who take more risks are more innovative, and this innovativeness has a positive effect on export success. The same is true for linguistic competence. By itself, this variable does not predict export performance, but as soon as it is accompanied by an increase in cultural sensitivity, it does have a positive effect.

The alternative model has a higher value for goodness-of-fit than the original model (0.318 vs. 0.294), but explains slightly less of the variance in export performance ( $R^2 = .27$  vs.  $R^2 = .28$ ). Still, we prefer the alternative model because it is

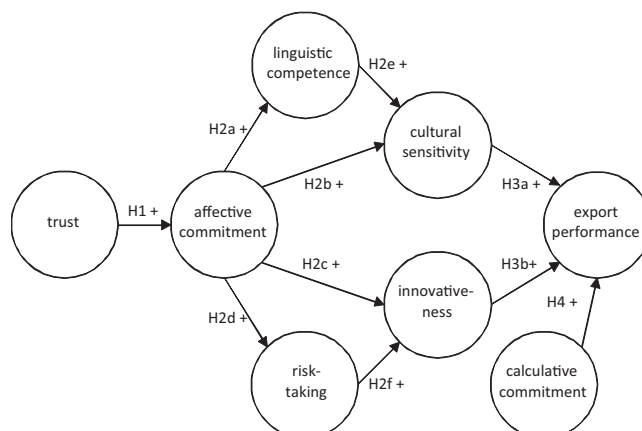


Fig. 6. The alternative energizing forces model tested in the post hoc analysis.

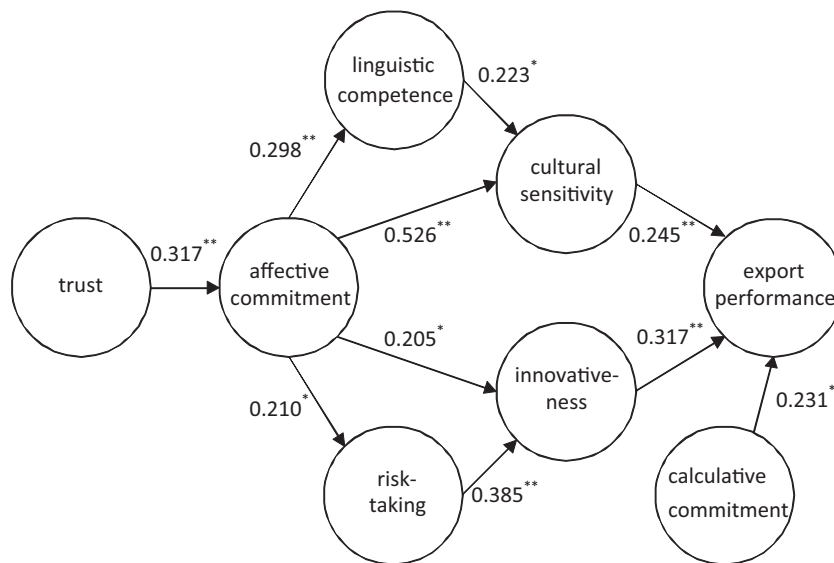


Fig. 7. Path estimates for the alternative energizing forces model tested in the post hoc analysis.

more parsimonious and because it explains more of the variance in cultural sensitivity and innovativeness. In Table 8 (see Appendix C), detailed information is provided about communalities,  $R^2$  values and goodness-of-fit for the alternative model.

## 5. Conclusions and discussion

This study explored the effects of trust, commitment, entrepreneurial competencies and relation-oriented competencies on export performance. The immediate cause for conducting this study is the disagreement that exists in the literature with regard to the exact role that trust and commitment play in explaining export performance. Traditionally, trust and commitment have been modeled as mediators (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Styles et al., 2008). In Styles et al.'s (2008) conceptual model, for example, trust and commitment mediate the effects of relational skills such as cultural sensitivity and effective communication. A different approach is taken by Meyer et al. (2004), who argue that commitment is not a mediator, but an energizing force: A special form of motivation that binds individuals or organizations to "actions and decisions that have relatively long-term implications" (Meyer et al., 2004, p. 994). Commitment motivates an exporting organization to invest money, time and effort in developing beneficial competencies that are necessary for export success. This view on commitment has not yet been incorporated in theoretical models of export performance.

This study aimed to change that by developing and testing a model in which trust and commitment act as energizing forces for the development of competencies that are beneficial for export performance. The main difference between this approach and traditional models is that the effect of commitment on performance is no longer considered to be direct.

The results show that the predictions of the energizing forces model are borne out by the data. Trust and affective commitment are the drivers of beneficial competencies, which in turn have a positive impact on export performance. However, in the initial analysis two beneficial competencies, linguistic competence and risk-taking, did not show a direct positive effect on export performance. A post hoc analysis was conducted because, given earlier research findings, we found it hard to believe that these variables would have no impact on export performance. In this analysis, the effects of linguistic competence and risk-taking on export performance were hypothesized to be indirect instead of direct. The post hoc analysis supported these hypotheses.

Our final results clearly reveal that affective commitment toward exporting acts as a motivation for an exporting organization to invest money, time and effort in developing the skills and competencies that are necessary for export success. We show that affective commitment affects export performance positively via cultural sensitivity and innovativeness. This is in line with Higgins' (1998) and our arguments that exporting organizations that are affectively committed are willing to invest money, time and effort into developing and acquiring competencies that would enhance their export performance.

Moreover, affective commitment has a positive effect on cultural sensitivity via linguistic competence and a positive effect on innovativeness via risk-taking. In other words, two of the organizations' beneficial competencies included in our study (cultural sensitivity and innovativeness) have a direct positive effect on export performance. For the other competencies (linguistic competence and risk-taking), the effect on export performance is indirect.

The indirect effect we observed for risk-taking corresponds with the argument that risk-taking as such is no guarantee for success, as long as it is not accompanied by innovativeness (Miller, 1983). This is exactly what the results show: innovativeness was strongly influenced by the propensity of an organization to take risks.

With regard to the role of linguistic competence, our findings are in line with those of Williams and Chaston (2004), who argue that language skills facilitate cultural sensitivity, which by itself is an important indicator of export success, and Harich

and LaBahn (1998), who show that the ability to speak a foreign language serves as a proof of the appreciation of the other party's culture.

Trust in foreign customers functions as the driver of affective commitment. In accordance with Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust as well as commitment appear to be necessary conditions to produce positive outcomes. Calculative commitment, on the other hand, has a direct positive impact on export performance due to its cost-focused nature (Meyer et al., 2004).

The results of our research indicate that the role of trust and affective commitment in relational models of export performance needs to be reconsidered. Our theoretical reasoning as well as our empirical results provide support for the energizing forces model. Trust in foreign customers and affective commitment toward exporting can indeed motivate exporting organizations to invest in developing competencies that are beneficial for their export performance. Therefore, the prevailing view that trust and affective commitment mediate between skills and performance can no longer be taken for granted.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

Our study has important implications for the way affective commitment and trust should be modeled in relational theories of export performance. Now that both trust and affective commitment appear to operate as energizing forces (Meyer et al., 2004; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Pinder, 1998), it becomes necessary to test the energizing forces model against the assumptions that affective commitment is a direct antecedent of export performance (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Styles et al., 2008). Such a test could show that trust and affective commitment should no longer be seen as mediators, but as necessary conditions for the development of entrepreneurial and relation-oriented competencies. The belief that organizational foreign customers will be honest, fair and reliable and the enjoyment of being in a relationship with those customers motivates organizations to innovate, take risks, learn a foreign language and develop more sensitivity to cultural differences.

From a theoretical perspective, this also raises the question which other competencies can be energized by the presence of trust and affective commitment. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate the antecedents of trust, as a high level of trust in foreign customers appears to be the starting point on the road to export success.

### 5.2. Managerial implications

Awareness of the energizing effects of trust and affective commitment can help managers improve their organizations' export performance. To do so, they need to foster trust in foreign customers and enhance affective commitment to the organizations' exporting ventures.

With regard to developing trust in foreign customers, this implies that organizations should look for trustworthy foreign prospects and avoid unpleasant interactions with them in order to increase the benevolence toward and the confidence in foreign customers. Therefore, careful customer screening at for instance the Chamber of Commerce is necessary. Moreover, investing in getting to know foreign customers and developing a good relationship with them is essential. This requires frequent personal contact as well as a well-functioning CRM system.

Although trust in foreign customers drives affective commitment toward exporting, affective commitment in itself can also be influenced by organizational characteristics, work experience and personal characteristics. Clear export policies that are well-explained and perceived as fair tend to increase the affective commitment of an exporting organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Job challenge with regard to export activities is important, whereas role ambiguity and role stress should be avoided. Employees that are allowed to participate in decision-making with regard to export activities can be expected to show more affective commitment than those who can or may not participate in decision-making (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Finally, personal characteristics such as work experience with foreign customers and affective commitment propensity support the entire organization's affective commitment toward export. HRM of exporting organizations should take into account these characteristics when hiring new employees and offering personal development plans to current employees (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

Trust and affective commitment are necessary conditions for the development of relation-oriented and entrepreneurial competencies which in themselves have a positive effect on export performance. Trust and affective commitment increase the willingness to invest in linguistic competence, which facilitates communication with foreign customers, and cultural sensitivity. This second competence helps organizations to develop awareness of the differences in doing business with foreign customers and to adapt to these differences more effectively. This has a positive impact on export performance.

Trust and affective commitment also encourage risk-taking and innovativeness on behalf of the exporting organization. Exporters who want to invest in and dedicate resources to foreign customers are generally more willing to take risks when innovating. The innovativeness of export organizations is reflected in adapting products and services to the exact specifications of foreign customers. When successfully done, this enhances the export performance of the organization.

Calculative commitment also has a positive effect on export performance. However, while affective commitment is focused on the dedication (a positive motivator) to do business with foreign customers, calculative commitment is focused on the necessity ('locked in' or a negative motivator) to do business with foreign customers. Affective commitment, therefore, will be a far more important driver of export performance in the long run than calculative commitment and deserves to be treated as such. Focusing on affective commitment is far more important for an exporting organization than focusing on calculative commitment. Calculative commitment only has a direct impact on export performance and does not lead to the acquisition or development of necessary competencies to guarantee long-lasting success as an exporting organization.

### 5.3. Limitations and directions for further research

We recognize that our study has limitations. Some of these could be related to the characteristics of our sample. Our respondents consist of directors of enterprises from the province of Limburg, in the south of the Netherlands. The province of Limburg is an area with a width of 16 miles, enclosed between Germany at the east and Belgium at the south and west side. Due to this geographic location, organizations from this region may be more involved in export than companies from regions in the Netherlands that are not that close to the border. The generalizability of our results may therefore be limited. Consequently, it would be interesting for further research to assess the moderating effect of for instance organization size and region where the organization is located. Additionally, an analysis of the results for different subgroups, such as wholesale and industry or the age of the organization could also address the issue of the generalizability of the results.

Second, single method bias may be a shortcoming of our study. We used one questionnaire to measure our all relevant constructs. Though common method variance does not seem to be an issue for our data, one can never be completely certain that some relationships between constructs are over- or underestimated due to skewed error distributions. Moreover, testing for the reliability and the validity of the constructs, especially discriminant validity, also serves to diminish the risk of incorrect estimation of the relationships between the constructs. Still, further research might use a multi-trait, multi-method approach in order to even better exclude the risk of single method bias.

A third issue here is the fact that the respondents were asked to provide self-assessments. In order to minimize self-assessment bias we instructed the respondents, who were representatives of the exporting organizations (mostly the owners/managers), to fill out the questionnaire from the perspective of the organization. Moreover, almost all scales for measuring the different constructs were validated and found reliable in earlier research, thereby also decreasing the risk of self-assessment bias. Further research could use experiments or even observations to address this issue in greater detail.

A fourth shortcoming is that we only investigated one side of the dyad: The exporting organization. This means that the beneficial competencies were only investigated from the perspective of the exporter and that perspective of the foreign customers could not be taken into account. As a result, our results cannot be directly compared to those of [Styles et al. \(2008\)](#).

Besides including the perspective of the foreign customer, interesting directions for further research could also be the inclusion of the duration of a particular relationship as a moderating variable. It could be assumed that the longer a relationship exists, the bigger the energizing effect of affective commitment on the development of relevant competencies will be.

Finally, our model focuses on competencies which are general, in the sense that they can be applied in different relationships with different foreign customers. It could also be interesting to look at the energizing effect of trust and commitment on relation-specific investments ([Blankenburg-Holm, Eriksson, & Johanson, 1996](#); [Chetty, Eriksson, & Lindbergh, 2006](#)). Focusing on the level of individual customers could clarify how different levels of trust and affective commitment can lead to differentiation in customer-related monetary investments.

## Appendix A. Latent variables and their measurement items

Export performance		Cultural sensitivity	
EP4	How do you judge the export sales growth in the previous year as compared to competitors?	CS1	Our company is aware of the difference in doing business with foreign customers
EP6	How do you judge the export profit growth in the previous year as compared to competitors?	CS2	Our company always tries to show its willingness to adapt to their way of doing business
EP7	Our company achieved its export objectives	CS3	Our employees are aware that the norms for communication are different in their culture
EP8	Our company is satisfied with its export	CS4	Our company has worked very hard to familiarize itself with their legal and economic environment
EP9	Our company thinks it is successful when it comes to export	CS6	Some of our employees speak the language of foreign customers or try to learn it
		CS7	Our company knows a lot about the culture of foreign customers and their way of doing business
Affective commitment		Calculative commitment	
AC2	Our company wants to invest a lot of time in getting to know our foreign customers	CALC2	Life in our company would be disrupted if we decided to end our relationships with our foreign customers
AC3	Our company will dedicate whatever resources are necessary to develop a good relationship with foreign customers	CALC3	We have too few alternatives to consider ending our relationships with foreign customers

Appendix A (Continued)

Trust		Linguistic competence	
TRST1	Our foreign customers have so far been very frank in dealing with our company	LC1	In our contacts with foreign customers we use the language of that customer
TRST2	Our foreign customers will always keep a trade secret concerning our business venture	LC2	Our company uses promotion materials (brochures, flyers, web site) in the language of foreign customers
TRST3	Our foreign customers are honest about problems caused by them in the working relationship	LC3	When gathering information that is relevant for our export ventures, we use sources in the language of foreign customers
<b>Innovativeness</b>			
INNO1	No new lines of products or services	<i>How many new lines of products or services has your company marketed in the past 5 years?</i>	
INNO2	Is very seldom the first business to introduce new products/services, administrative techniques, operating technologies, etc.	Very many new lines of products or services	
<b>Risk-taking</b>			
RISK1	A strong proclivity for low-risk projects (with normal and certain rates of return)	<i>In general, the top managers of our company have...</i>	
RISK2	Owing to the nature of the environment, it is best to explore it gradually via timid, incremental behavior	A strong proclivity for high-risk projects (with chances of very high returns)	
RISK3	Typically adopts a cautious, 'wait-and-see' posture in order to minimize the probability of making costly decisions	<i>In general, the top managers of our company believe that...</i>	
		Owing to the nature of the environment, bold, wide-ranging acts are necessary to achieve the firm's objectives	
		<i>When confronted with decision-making situations involving uncertainty, our company...</i>	
		Typically adopts a bold, aggressive posture in order to maximize the probability of exploiting potential opportunities	

Appendix B. Measurement and structural properties for the energizing forces model

See Tables 1–4.

Table 1  
Measurement properties for the energizing forces model.

		Composite reliability	Variance explained	Loading
Linguistic competence	LC1	.87	.70	.79
	LC2			.86
	LC3			.86
Cultural sensitivity	CS1	.89	.59	.77
	CS2			.84
	CS3			.89
	CS4			.78
	CS6			.59
	CS7			.70
Trust	TRST1	.82	.61	.87
	TRST2			.78
	TRST3			.68
Affective commitment	AC2	.93	.87	.94
	AC3			.93
Calculative commitment	CALC2	.91	.83	.94
	CALC3			.88
Risk-taking	RISK1	.85	.66	.86
	RISK2			.79
	RISK3			.79
Innovativeness	INNO1	.90	.81	.89
	INNO2			.91

**Table 1** (Continued)

		Composite reliability	Variance explained	Loading
Export performance	EP4	.93	.72	.88
	EP6			.85
	EP7			.81
	EP8			.81
	EP9			.88

**Table 2**

Discriminant validity for the energizing forces model.

	AC	CALC	CS	EP	INNO	LC	RISK	TRST
AC	<b>0.934<sup>a</sup></b>							
CALC	0.149 <sup>b</sup>	<b>0.909</b>						
CS	0.594	0.173	<b>0.768</b>					
EP	0.203	0.282	0.348	<b>0.846</b>				
INNO	0.285	0.032	0.195	0.372	<b>0.900</b>			
LC	0.309	−0.094	0.364	0.032	0.178	<b>0.836</b>		
RISK	0.215	0.067	0.148	0.182	0.421	−0.069	<b>0.813</b>	
TRST	0.317	0.015	0.350	0.265	0.198	0.218	−0.036	<b>0.779</b>

<sup>a</sup> Numbers shown in boldface denote the square root of the AVE.<sup>b</sup> The other numbers represent correlations between latent variables.**Table 3**Beta coefficients and *t*-values (in parentheses) for the energizing forces model.

From-to	AC	CS	EP	INNO	LC	RISK
AC		.594 (9.05)** H2b		.285 (3.76)** H2c	.309 (4.56)** H2a	.215 (2.49)* H2d
CALC			.211 (2.62)* H4			
CS			.292 (3.73)** H3b			
INNO			.340 (4.33)** H3c			
LC			−.117 (1.20) H3a			
RISK			−.027 (0.30) H3d			
TRST	.317 (4.48)** H1					

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .**Table 4**Communalities,  $R^2$  values and goodness-of-fit for the energizing forces model.

	Communality	$R^2$	
AC	0.873	0.100	
CALC	0.827	0.000	
CS	0.589	0.353	
EP	0.716	0.279	
INNO	0.810	0.081	
LC	0.699	0.095	
RISK	0.661	0.046	
TRST	0.607	0.000	
Average	0.723	0.119	GOF = 0.293

Appendix C. Measurement and structural properties for the alternative model

See Tables 5–8.

**Table 5**  
Measurement properties for the alternative model tested in the post hoc analysis.

		Composite reliability	Variance explained	Loading
Linguistic competence	LC1	.88	.71	.83
	LC2			.84
	LC3			.85
Cultural sensitivity	CS1	.89	.59	.76
	CS2			.83
	CS3			.88
	CS4			.78
	CS6			.62
	CS7			.72
Trust	TRST1	.82	.61	.87
	TRST2			.78
	TRST3			.68
Affective commitment	AC2	.93	.87	.94
	AC3			.93
Calculative commitment	CALC2	.91	.83	.94
	CALC3			.88
Risk-taking	RISK1	.85	.67	.84
	RISK2			.81
	RISK3			.80
Innovativeness	INNO1	.89	.81	.88
	INNO2			.92
Export performance	EP4	.93	.72	.88
	EP6			.86
	EP7			.81
	EP8			.81
	EP9			.88

**Table 6**  
Discriminant validity for the alternative model tested in the post hoc analysis.

	AC	CALC	CS	EP	INNO	LC	RISK	TRST
AC	<b>0.934<sup>a</sup></b>							
CALC	0.149 <sup>b</sup>	<b>0.909</b>						
CS	0.593	0.170	<b>0.768</b>					
EP	0.203	0.282	0.346	<b>0.846</b>				
INNO	0.286	0.030	0.195	0.372	<b>0.899</b>			
LC	0.298	−0.098	0.380	0.025	0.155	<b>0.840</b>		
RISK	0.210	0.067	0.144	0.184	0.428	−0.081	<b>0.816</b>	
TRST	0.317	0.015	0.348	0.264	0.199	0.211	0.039	<b>0.779</b>

<sup>a</sup> Numbers shown in boldface denote the square root of the AVE.

<sup>b</sup> The other numbers represent correlations between latent variables.

**Table 7**  
Beta coefficients and *t*-values (in parentheses) for the alternative model tested in the post hoc analysis.

From-to	AC	CS	EP	INNO	LC	RISK
AC		.526 (7.21)** H2b		.205 (2.98)* H2c	.298 (4.01)** H2a	.210 (2.48)* H2d
CALC			.231 (2.92)* H4			

Table 7 (Continued)

From-to	AC	CS	EP	INNO	LC	RISK
CS			.245 (3.65)** H3a			
INNO			.317 (5.23)** H3b			
LC		.223 (3.05)* H2e				
RISK				.385 (4.97)** H2f		
TRST	.317 (4.49)** H1					

\*  $p < .05$ .\*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 8

Communalities,  $R^2$  values and goodness-of-fit for the alternative model tested in the post hoc analysis.

	Communality	$R^2$	
AC	0.872822	0.100	
CALC	0.827113	0.000	
CS	0.58918	0.397	
EP	0.715805	0.268	
INNO	0.808519	0.223	
LC	0.705654	0.089	
RISK	0.665364	0.044	
TRST	0.607269	0.000	
Average	0.724	0.140	GOF = 0.318

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