

# The Role of Exporters' Emotional Intelligence in Building Foreign Customer Relationships

## Abstract

Despite the critical importance of emotional intelligence in effectively interacting with other people, its role has been overlooked in scholarly research on cross-border interorganizational relationships. Drawing on Emotion Regulation Theory, we propose a model that conceptualizes links among exporters' emotional intelligence, key behavioral dimensions characterizing the atmosphere of the relationship with import buyers, and the resulting relational performance. We test the model with data collected from 262 Greek exporters using structural equation modeling. The results indicate that higher levels of exporter emotional intelligence enhances communication and social bonding with the importer, while diminishing distance and conflict in their working relationship. Relational performance is positively influenced by communication and social bonding, but negatively affected by distance and conflict. The results also reveal the moderating effect of both opportunism and interpartner incompatibility on the association between the exporter's emotional intelligence and the behavioral atmosphere of the relationship with import buyers.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence, exporting, business relationships, relational performance

## **Introduction**

Emotions are critical psychological forces that can affect the behavior of the parties in a buyer–seller relationship and ultimately determine its success or failure (Brown, Cron, and Slocum 1997; Kadic-Maglajlic et al. 2016). Emotions shape behavioral interactions in a relationship by providing information about the social environment and incentivizing acceptable social behavior (Shiota et al. 2004). Although emotions are complex, dynamic, and multifarious in nature, the degree to which knowledge from emotions is acquired, processed, and utilized largely depends on the level of emotional intelligence possessed by the interacting parties in a relationship (Kidwell et al. 2011). Emotional intelligence is defined as “a subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey and Mayer 1990, p. 189). It combines the domains of emotions and intelligence, enabling people to understand, explore, and adapt to the social environment of a relationship (Salovey and Grewal 2005).

Notwithstanding the pivotal role of emotional intelligence in effectively managing relationships, only a few empirical marketing studies have examined this construct in an interorganizational context (for a summary of studies, see Appendix A). Surprisingly, none of these studies tries to connect the role of emotional intelligence with specific aspects of the behavioral atmosphere governing the working relationship between sellers and buyers, which is essentially the “heart” of the relationship (Ford et al. 2011). Moreover, although evidence indicates that the way people manage their emotions in interfirm business relationships influences performance outcomes, this has rarely been tackled from an emotional intelligence perspective (Schumacher, Wheeler, and Carr 2009). Furthermore, even though buyer–seller relationships in an international context are heavily influenced by cultural, economic, and allied differences, which have a strong impact on emotions, no study has yet investigated the role of

emotional intelligence in cross-border relationships (Orr and Scott 2008).

Emotional intelligence is particularly important and useful for exporters when dealing with import buyers, because, when transcending national boundaries, firms are usually confronted with numerous internal (e.g., functional) and external (e.g., environmental) barriers that require special “soft” skills (at the individual and/or group level) (Leonidou 2004; Magnusson et al. 2013; Morgan, Feng, and Whitley 2018). In addition, the often substantial physical, social, and psychological distance between exporters and importers gives rise to uncertainties about each other’s intentions and actions, which can provoke misunderstandings, bitter feelings, and negative emotions (Li and Ng 2002). Furthermore, the volatile and complex nature of the global business environment provides a fertile ground for buyers (especially those located in culturally dissimilar countries) to act opportunistically and irresponsibly, thus making it imperative to understand, manage, and direct emotions in a way that will avoid negative consequences for the working relationship (Barnes et al. 2010).

Given these gaps in the literature, this article aims to shed light on the role of emotional intelligence in influencing key behavioral aspects of the atmosphere governing exporter–importer relationships and the resulting performance outcomes. We have three primary objectives: (1) to examine the effect of an exporter’s emotional intelligence on both positive and negative behavioral dimensions of the working relationship with the importer; (2) to explore the impact of these behavioral parameters on relational performance; and (3) to investigate the moderating effect of opportunism and interpartner incompatibility, two common problems in international buyer–seller interactions, on the link between emotional intelligence and relationship behavioral dimensions.

Our study is theoretically anchored on the Gross’s (1999) model of emotion regulation, which has been widely used in both psychology and business research to investigate connections between emotional intelligence and relational variables. This model centers on the

idea that emotion regulation requires perceiving, understanding, and using emotions to enable the individual to modulate emotional tendencies and manifested emotional responses (Gross 1999; Rottenberg and Gross 2003; Wong and Law 2002). Moreover, it incorporates all conscious and nonconscious strategies that people employ to increase, maintain, or decrease experiential, behavioral, and physiological components of emotional reactions (Gross 2001). Furthermore, the model implies different outcomes for different strategies of emotion regulation, such as social (e.g., interpersonal liking), cognitive (e.g., job performance), and affective (e.g., positive mood) (Gross 2002; Hur et al. 2015; Lee and Ok 2012).

Understanding the role of emotional intelligence in exporter–importer relationships is crucial for three primary reasons. First, emotional intelligence has been reported to be a good predictor of cross-cultural adjustment and performance of managers in foreign markets (Koveshnikov, Wechtler, and Dejoux 2014; Wechtler, Koveshnikov, and Dejoux 2015). Along these same lines, the proper handling of the exporter–importer relationship using emotional intelligence should create an atmosphere that is conducive to improving relational performance outcomes. This reasoning can be ascribed to the instrumentality of emotional intelligence in increasing one’s ability to effectively adapt to various sociocultural settings (Jyoti and Kour 2017; Lin, Chen, and Song 2012). Although emotions have the same basic causes, sociocultural differences (which are particularly evident in international business relationships) affect their specific roots and the way these are expressed (Caruso 2015). Thus, capitalizing on emotional intelligence, exporters can better understand, monitor, and control the emotions expressed in the working relationship with importers in a more constructive way (Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey 2016).

Second, previous research has stressed the importance of managerial qualities (e.g., personality, values, abilities) as having an influential role on sustaining and developing harmonious relationships with foreign customers (Sichtmann and von Selasinsky 2011; Sousa,

Ruzo, and Lozada 2010), and similar positive effects are expected with regard to the emotional intelligence level of people directly responsible for export operations. Indeed, other streams of marketing research indicate that emotional intelligence can be used effectively to improve relationships due to the inherent adaptive interaction capability of emotionally intelligent people (e.g., Delpechitre and Beeler 2018). For example, research has shown that salespeople with high levels of emotional intelligence tend to exhibit adaptive selling and customer orientation (Kadic-Maglajlic et al. 2016; Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker 2004), and service providers who exhibit emotional intelligence can help improve satisfaction, loyalty, and trust among service receivers (Fernandes, Morgado, and Rodrigues 2018; Tsaur and Ku 2019).

Third, there are indications that emotional intelligence raises team performance by building shared mental frameworks among team members (Xiang, Yang, and Zhang 2016), developing team identity (Lin 2015), and forming emotionally competent group norms (Stubbs Koman and Wolff 2008). Emotional intelligence allows people to listen to alternative views, build team spirit, and improve problem-solving abilities (Druskat and Wolff 2001). Exporters and their import buyers could also be considered a team, as they are dependent on each other to achieve their goals, transfer resources, and conduct mutually beneficial activities (Ford et al. 2011). As such, when properly used, emotional intelligence helps monitor emotions in such a way as to give direction to the behavioral dynamics of the working relationship with the aim to improve its effectiveness and efficiency (Vandekerckhove et al. 2008). In particular, the emphasis of our study is on behavioral aspects that have been repeatedly cited in the pertinent literature as critical in cross-border interorganizational relationships—namely, communication, social bonding, relational distance, and conflict (Barnes et al. 2010; Skarneas, Saridakis, and Leonidou 2018; Yen and Barnes 2011).

## **Understanding Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional intelligence refers to a group of competencies for identifying, processing, and managing people's emotions (Zeidner, Roberts, and Matthews 2008). While intelligence quotient (IQ) and emotional intelligence (EI) have a small (but positive) correlation, they are independent concepts (Rosete and Ciarrochi 2005). For example, somebody may have a high general intelligence but also face problems identifying and managing his or her emotions. Notably, unlike general intelligence, emotional intelligence is subject to change (either positive or negative) and can be learned (Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker 2006). Individuals or groups of people with high levels of emotional intelligence are in a better position and are more flexible to adjust their response tendencies and, therefore, are more effective and efficient in interacting with other people and selecting the optimal course of action (Wong and Law 2002). Although the extant literature is far from unanimous in a conceptualization of emotional intelligence, it is possible to distinguish three approaches regarding its content: (1) the *ability model*, which treats emotional intelligence as a mental ability; (2) the *trait model*, which places emotional intelligence within the realm of personality; and (3) the *mixed model*, which considers emotional intelligence as a package of personal qualities comprising both abilities and personality traits (Zeidner, Roberts, and Matthews 2008).

The ability model is based on the idea that there are individual differences among people regarding their ability to reason and use emotions to effectively enhance their thoughts (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso 2008). According to this model, emotional intelligence comprises four key dimensions: (1) *perceiving emotion*—recognizing and appraising emotions in the self and in others accurately; (2) *using emotion*—accessing, generating, and using emotions to facilitate thinking and problem solving; (3) *understanding emotion*—analyzing complex emotions and forming emotional knowledge, such as which emotions are similar and what they convey; and (4) *managing emotion*—regulating emotions in the self (e.g., maintaining composure in the presence of negative emotions) and in others (e.g., influencing emotional

responses positively) to achieve a desired outcome (Mayer and Salovey 1997; Salovey and Grewal 2005).

The trait model is based on an individual's perceptions of his or her emotional abilities, that is, the extent to which the individual believes him- or herself to be good at understanding, regulating, and expressing emotions to adapt to the environment and maintain general well-being (Petrides et al. 2016). Trait emotional intelligence (or emotional self-efficacy) is defined as "a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions" (Petrides and Furnham 2003, p. 40) and includes cross-situational behavioral consistencies that are displayed in certain traits or acts rather than one's abilities (Petrides and Furnham 2000). Some of the personality traits characterizing emotional intelligence include adaptability, assertiveness, emotion expression, emotion management, emotion perception, emotion regulation, empathy, happiness, impulsiveness, optimism, relationship skills, self-esteem, self-motivation, social competence, and stress management (Petrides and Furnham 2003).

In the mixed model, emotional intelligence consists of various noncognitive capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence an individual's ability to effectively cope with environmental demands and pressures (Bar-On 1997). However, these capabilities, competencies, and skills are instrumental only to the extent that individuals effectively understand and express themselves, understand and relate to others, and cope with everyday challenges and pressures (Bar-On 2010). In his conceptualization of the mixed model, Bar-On (1997) argues that emotional intelligence consists of five core dimensions: intrapersonal (i.e., self-regard, emotional self-awareness, assertiveness, independence, self-actualization), interpersonal (i.e., empathy, social responsibility, interpersonal relationship), stress management (i.e., stress tolerance, impulse control), adaptability (i.e., reality testing, flexibility, problem solving), and general mood (i.e., optimism, happiness). In another mixed model, Goleman (1998) conceptualizes emotional intelligence as consisting of five emotional

competences divided into personal and social dimensions. While the former includes self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation, the latter refers to empathy and social skills.

Recent critical review studies emphasize that the four abilities comprising the ability model provide the best representation of emotional intelligence, while trait and mixed models refer only to emotional and social competencies (Cherniss 2010; Roberts et al. 2010). Both trait and mixed models comprise dimensions that are not included in the original definition of emotional intelligence, which emphasizes a mental ability role (Daus and Ashkanasy 2005; Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey 2016). Other studies on emotional intelligence also note that there is little overlap between ability-based performance measures and self-report measures (Zeidner, Roberts, and Matthews 2008). Specifically, ability model-based emotional intelligence tends to correlate with general intelligence by .30 to .40, while trait- and mixed model-based emotional intelligence tends to correlate highly with personality traits (Zeidner, Roberts, and Matthews 2008). Thus, for the purposes of our study, we adopt the ability model because it provides a more accurate conceptualization of emotional intelligence.

### **Theoretical Background**

Our study is theoretically anchored in the Gross's (1999) model of Emotion Regulation, also called Emotion Regulation Theory. This refers to the process by which an individual regulates which emotions to have, when to have them, and how to experience and express them (Gross 2002). Emotions emerge, either automatically or after interpreting a message, when something important to the individual is at stake. These circumstances evoke a set of coordinated behavioral, experiential, or physiological dispositions that may affect the way individuals react to perceived situational opportunities and challenges that emerge from the external social environment (Delpechitre and Beeler 2018). In the case of a mismatch between emotions and a specific situation, a person will try to regulate his or her emotional responses to achieve



specific goals (Gross 2002).

According to Gross (1999), emotion regulation takes the form of decreasing emotions that induce nonuseful behavior, originate from an overly simple assessment of a situation, or have a tendency to contradict other vital goals of the individual. Conversely, emotion regulation can also be used to increase emotions when there is a need to provide a positive emotional response (e.g., happiness for good news) and/or when it is important to replace one emotion with another (e.g., anxiety with enthusiasm). To decrease negative emotions or increase positive emotions, individuals undergo specific emotion regulation processes involving metacognitive and other response mechanisms in which emotionally intelligent processes are translated into action (Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts 2003). In other words, emotion regulation allows people to manage their emotional responses to better align with the external social environment (Delpechitre and Beeler 2018).

Emotions can be regulated at five points during the emotion generation process, namely: (1) selection of the situation—that is, approaching or avoiding certain people or things, given their possible emotional impact; (2) modification of the situation—that is, tailoring the selected situation in order to alter its emotional effect; (3) deployment of attention—that is, choosing on which specific aspects of the situation to concentrate; (4) change of cognitions—that is, selecting which possible meaning to assign to that particular aspect of the situation to decrease or enhance the emotional response; and (5) modulation of experiential, behavioral, or physiological responses—that is, endeavors pursued to influence the evoked emotion response tendencies (Gross 2002).

Notably, there are hints in the pertinent literature that regulating emotions through the proper use of emotional intelligence plays an important role in allowing a relationship to function well, because it can improve its atmosphere by enhancing, for example, communication, adaptation, and understanding (Delpechitre, Beeler-Connelly, and Chaker

2018; Kadic-Magljajlic et al. 2016; Matute, Palau-Saumell, and Viglia 2018), while minimizing the negative role of other behavioral factors in the working relationship, such as conflict, destructive acts, and grudges (Ahn, Sung, and Drumwright 2016; Beverland, Chung, and Kates 2009; Chowdhury 2014). The extant literature also indicates that when emotionally intelligent people are involved in relationships with others, these relationships are usually characterized by harmony, satisfaction, and other positive outcomes (Fitness 2006; Lopes et al. 2004; Schutte et al. 2001).

### **Conceptual Model and Hypotheses**

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of our study, which is composed of three sets of constructs: emotional intelligence (a higher-order construct comprising self-emotion appraisal, other people's emotion appraisal, utilization of emotion, and regulation of emotion), relationship atmosphere (consisting of communication, social bonding, relational distance, and conflict), and relational performance (for operational definitions of each construct in the model, see Appendix B). According to our model, if an exporter has high levels of emotional intelligence, this will enhance communication levels and social bonding with the importer and reduce relational distance and conflict. The resulting favorable atmosphere will subsequently have a positive effect on the performance of the relationship.<sup>1</sup> The model also includes two moderators—opportunism and interpartner incompatibility—which are hypothesized to moderate the association between emotional intelligence with each of the four behavioral dimensions.

**...insert Figure 1 about here...**

#### ***Emotional Intelligence and Relationship Atmosphere***

Emotional intelligence facilitates *communication* in the exporter–importer relationship. This is

because exporters high in emotional intelligence not only accurately decode emotional messages of the importer, but also better understand verbal and nonverbal messages in their communication with the importer (Jacob et al. 2013; Lanciano and Curci 2015; Morand 2001). Due to their ability to be open to information transmitted by either positive or negative feelings and to perceive and understand others' emotions, emotionally intelligent exporters tend to listen to different perspectives and look for creative solutions, free from feeling threatened by making mistakes (Jordan and Troth 2004; Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey 2016). In general, they are more open to expressing their feelings when communicating with their import buyers, which improves the quality of the feedback received (Wang 2015). They can also use their emotions to concentrate on issues that warrant particular attention in the relationship and find more rational solutions that are mutually beneficial to themselves and their import buyers (Lanciano and Curci 2015). Emotionally intelligent exporters can also dedicate more time and effort to their communication processes with foreign buyers, thus enhancing the clarity, frequency, and richness of the information exchanged (Wang 2015). Emotionally intelligent exporters are also in a better position to regulate their emotions when communicating with importers and, by connecting to positive emotions or disconnecting from negative emotions, transmit messages effectively (Lanciano and Curci 2015). This will help ensure the appropriateness of communication by encouraging both parties to comply with specific ethical rules when exchanging information (Troth, Jordan, and Lawrence 2012). Drawing on the foregoing discussion, we posit the following:

**H<sub>1a</sub>:** The higher the level of the exporter's emotional intelligence, the higher is the level of communication with the importer.

We also expect that exporters with high emotional intelligence will be able to build and strengthen their *social bonds* with import buyers, because they are in a better position to understand and manage the social environment in which they operate (Czarna et al. 2016). This is particularly important in an international business setting, where there is often significant

physical and psychological distance between sellers and buyers. The strong communal qualities of an emotionally intelligent exporter foster greater social appreciation by the other party and strengthen friendliness, attachment, and social cohesion (Czarna et al. 2016; Troth, Jordan, and Lawrence 2012). In addition, emotional intelligence helps people better understand and show more empathy toward others' emotions, thus facilitating social interaction and support between the exporter and the importer (Lu and Fan 2017; Salovey and Mayer 1990). An accurate appraisal of one's own and others' emotions allows the emotionally intelligent exporter to behave in a more socially adaptive manner in international markets (Koveshnikov, Wechtler, and Dejoux 2014). Further strengthening the social bond with the importer, emotionally intelligent exporters are better able to regulate moods in a positive way, which is essential for developing prosocial behavior (e.g., controlling impulsive actions) (Lopes et al. 2004; Schutte et al. 2001). Thus, we posit the following:

**H1b:** The higher the level of the exporter's emotional intelligence, the higher is the level of the social bonding with the importer.

Emotional intelligence is also conducive to reducing relational distance between exporters and importers, because an emotionally intelligent exporter can better read the moods, feelings, and needs of the importer and cope with any anxiety, stress, and uncertainty arising from differences in business, cultural, technological, and other factors prevailing in the working relationship with the foreign partner (Fall et al. 2013). Emotional intelligence also helps the exporter minimize distance in the relationship by deploying more resources to better interpret the nuances of the foreign buyer, especially in light of the highly complex, volatile, and risky nature of the international business environment, which increases the possibility of misunderstandings, mistakes, and biases (Chrobot-Mason and Leslie 2012). When the exporter makes proper use of emotions in the relationship, this will shift attention away from stereotypical judgments and help maintain optimism with respect to the challenges of the working relationship, thus improving interactions with customers (Jassawalla, Truglia, and

Garvey 2004; Kovesnikov, Wechtler, and Dejoux 2014; Yoo, Matsumoto, and LeRoux 2006). Emotional regulation by the exporter will also reduce relational distance, because it helps minimize negative emotions (e.g., anxiety) and boost positive emotions (e.g., confidence) when confronted with highly uncertain and complex situations, as in the case of international business transactions (Yoo, Matsumoto, and LeRoux 2006). Accordingly, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H1c:** The higher the level of the exporter's emotional intelligence, the lower is the relational distance from the importer.

We also expect an exporter's high level of emotional intelligence to reduce conflict in the working relationship with the importer. This can be attributed to an ability to regulate and control emotions in such a way that any disagreements are kept at manageable levels (Mulki et al. 2015). This is particularly important when operating in foreign markets, in which conflict is more likely to arise due to sociocultural and other differences between the interacting parties. Using emotional intelligence, the exporter can (1) recognize well in advance the signs of conflict and take measures to prevent its escalation (Śmieja and Stolarski 2018); (2) openly share areas of disagreement with the foreign buyer and show empathy with any concerns (Ayoko, Callan, and Härtel 2008); and (3) diffuse hostile actions by regulating mood, controlling anxiety, and stifling impulse (Biggart et al. 2010). In addition, emotional intelligence helps the exporter adopt an optimistic perspective regarding the future of the working relationship with the importer, which facilitates the constructive management of disagreements (Mulki et al. 2015). Even when there is an escalation of conflict, emotionally intelligent exporters will try to resolve it in an amicable and constructive way by adopting collaborative conflict resolution patterns to keep the relationship alive and ongoing (Jordan and Troth 2004; Zeidner and Kloda 2013). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1d:** The higher the level of the exporter's emotional intelligence, the lower is the conflict with the importer.

### ***Behavioral Dimensions and Relational Performance***

Communication refers to the formal or informal exchange of accurate, timely, and sufficient information between interacting parties on important issues regarding their working relationship (Mohr and Spekman 1994). It is conducive to achieving relational performance goals, because the interdependence of exporters and importers requires constant participation to appropriately identify roles, responsibilities, and expectations and to coordinate activities (Jean and Sinkovics 2010; Mohr and Spekman 1994). This is particularly vital in international business transactions, due to their numerous complexities, problems, and risks (Dou et al. 2010). Sufficient communication between exporters and their foreign buyers is essential in achieving performance goals because (1) it can generate insights into each other's strategies and operations and improve the understanding of the countries in which they operate (Ling-Yee 2010; Nes, Solberg, and Silkoset 2007); (2) it encourages partner responsiveness and willingness to become more helpful, which in turn signals that the other party is honest and will deliver relational expectations (Johnston et al. 2012); and (3) it improves relationship efficiency insofar as the regular exchange of useful information helps minimize confusion and reduce uncertainty about the joint operation due to unexpected environmental changes (Jean and Sinkovics 2010). Accordingly, we posit the following:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** The higher the level of communication in the exporter–importer relationship, the higher is the level of relational performance.

*Social bonding* is the degree of mutual personal friendship and appreciation established by the interacting parties in a working relationship, which helps the parties understand each other's desires, goals, and intentions (Yang, Zhang, and Jiang 2011). Having a strong social bond with another party reduces negative intentions, enhances ethicality and decency in actions, and facilitates effectiveness and efficiency in the relationship between exporters and importers (Granovetter 1985; Wuyts and Geyskens 2005). Through social bonding, business partners can better predict the behavior of the other party; form ideas about fulfilling their

expectations; and dispel suspicions about the partner's intentions, reliability, and benevolence (Paulssen and Roulet 2017). Social interactions between exporters and importers also result in congruency of norms, values, and expectations, as well as an understanding of any constraints to the working relationship, which are common in international business (Barnes et al. 2015; Sheng et al. 2006). These are essential in fostering confidence, coordination, and flexibility in the relationship and help reduce controlling costs (Sheng et al. 2006). Furthermore, there is ample empirical evidence indicating that strong social bonds increase the likelihood that business partners will keep their promises and fulfill expectations (Havila, Johanson, and Thilenius 2004), will work hard and in a coordinated way to meet interorganizational goals (Barnes, Yen, and Zhou 2011), and will flexibly adapt to successfully accommodate new market conditions (Gençtürk and Aulakh 2007). Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** The higher the level of social bonding in the exporter–importer relationship, the higher is the level of relational performance.

Relational distance is the degree to which the partners in a relationship are unfamiliar with each other's ways of thinking and working, which stems from structural, operational, temporal, and other differences between them (Ford et al. 2011). Relational distance discourages interacting parties from helping each other attain their goals, as their different business practices, values, and systems may give rise to antithetical courses of action (Leonidou, Barnes, and Talias 2006). In an international business setting, relational distance is further amplified by sociocultural, political-legal, technological, economic, and other differences between the exporter's and the importer's respective countries (Stöttinger and Schlegelmilch 1998). In the case of high distance, cues needed to infer that a partner keeps promises and meets expectations are insufficient, which may result in confusion regarding the specific roles and responsibilities within the working relationship (Dong, Ju, and Fang 2016). Relational distance also hinders the smooth operation of the working relationship because it creates suspicion over the fulfilment of promises given (Katsikeas, Skarmeas, and Bello 2009);

disrupts information exchange, which is vital for coordinating activities (Nes, Solberg, and Silkoset 2007); and reduces mutual interest in achieving joint goals (Leonidou, Barnes, and Talias 2006). These negative effects of relationship distance can lead to the poor coordination of activities in the relationship (Andersen, Christensen, and Damgaard 2009), hamper the proper transfer of resources between the exchange parties (Jean, Sinkovics, and Kim 2017), and make the appreciation of relational investments difficult (Leonidou et al. 2011). High distance also increases both direct (e.g., transaction) and indirect (e.g., controlling) costs, with negative implications on financial outcomes (Durand, Turkina, and Robson 2016; Sachdev and Bello 2014). The foregoing discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

**H4:** The lower the relational distance in the exporter–importer relationship, the higher is the level of relational performance.

Conflict is a blocking behavior that obstructs interacting parties in a relationship from securing resources and/or performing activities needed for their advancement (Anderson and Narus 1990). This often becomes more evident when crossing national boundaries because of differences in business systems, cultural settings, and work mentality between exporters and importers. Destructive conflict involves confrontation, which can be transformed into actions that deliberately aim to harm or impede the other partner in the relationship (Ren, Oh, and Noh 2010). Ongoing destructive disagreements between parties in a relational exchange can give rise to goal incompatibilities, evoke feelings of bitterness and injustice, and encourage individualistic, short-term behavior (LaBahn and Harich 1997). Such disagreements also cause parties to dedicate resources to unproductive causes rather than supporting value-enhancing activities (Zaheer, McEvily, and Perrone 1998). Exporter–importer relationships characterized by high levels of conflict are expected to perform poorly because the interacting parties tend (1) to invest little effort in achieving relational goals and have little motivation to work hard for the other party; (2) to have expectations that are difficult to fulfil, with the costs incurred in the relationship usually exceeding the benefits; and (3) to become suspicious of the



benevolence and integrity of their partners, which may require an allocation of resources to maintain better control (Barnes et al. 2010; Leonidou, Talias, and Leonidou 2008).

Accordingly, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>5</sub>:** The lower the conflict in the exporter–importer relationship, the higher is the level of relational performance.

### ***The Moderating Role of Opportunism and Interpartner Incompatibility***

Opportunism is defined as self-interest seeking with guile (Williamson 1979). Such behavior can be manifested by either performing certain actions (e.g., violation of terms, forced renegotiation, misrepresentation of information) or refraining from performing certain actions (e.g., shirking, showing inflexibility, failing to provide assistance when needed) (Wathne and Heide 2000). Opportunism increases transaction costs because of the need to allocate substantial resources to control the party in the relationship that acts opportunistically (Wathne and Heide 2000). Opportunism finds particularly fertile ground in international buyer–seller relationships, due to the geographic and cultural distance between the interacting parties, which creates information asymmetries and difficulties in exposing and verifying opportunistic acts (Katsikeas, Skarmas, and Bello 2009; Li and Ng 2002; Luo, 2009). A foreign partner behaving opportunistically can create conflict (Barnes et al. 2010), fuel suspicion about trustworthiness (Katsikeas, Skarmas, and Bello 2009), and decrease overall relationship effectiveness (Obadia, Vida, and Pla-Barber 2017). Although emotionally intelligent exporters are able to regulate emotions to maintain a positive atmosphere in the working relationships with importers, opportunistic behavior is still difficult to detect. Opportunistic behavior will have a detrimental effect on communication and social bonding and will aggravate distance and conflict (de Clercq et al. 2014). Because emotional intelligence is used primarily to improve the well-being of a relationship rather than combat deviant behavior that is damaging to the relationship, its favorable effect on enhancing relational performance will weaken under opportunistic conditions (Kluemper, deGroot, and Choi 2011). The threat or foresight of

opportunism can evoke negative emotions, such as stress, fear, and anxiety, which usually coexist with defensive (e.g., rejecting to have contact), avoidant (e.g., finding excuses to avoid contact), or indifferent (e.g., staying apathetic in an unavoidable interaction) behavior (Gross 2001; Williams 2007). Evidence also suggests that when a partner behaving opportunistically, people may choose not to regulate their emotions but rather express their real, authentic emotions and cause confrontation (von Gilsa et al. 2014). Thus, we posit the following:

**H<sub>6</sub>:** As the level of the importer's opportunism increases, the exporter's emotional intelligence has (a) a weaker positive effect on communication, (b) a weaker positive effect on social bonding, (c) a weaker negative effect on relational distance, and (d) a weaker negative effect on conflict.

*Interpartner incompatibility* refers to the lack of congruence between the interacting parties in a buyer–seller relationship with regard to their organizational culture, strategies, and policies, and procedures (Sarkar, Aulakh, and Cavusgil 1998). Such incompatibility is aggravated in an international business setting, due to the existence of additional national differences relating to cultural orientation, business systems, regulatory frameworks, and other environmental factors (Luo and Park 2004; Meyer and Altenborg 2008). Although an emotionally intelligent exporter is in a better position to choose compatible foreign partners who make it possible to maximize potential in the working relationship (Dust et al. 2018), there are instances in which the relationship is initiated accidentally (e.g., receipt of unsolicited orders from a foreign customer), without the option to choose. In this case, although an emotionally intelligent exporter is in a position to foster harmony in the relationship with the import buyer, incompatibility between them will diminish this favorable impact. Indeed, interpartner incompatibility may accentuate conflict in the relationship because one party's efforts to achieve its own goals will prevent the other from doing so (Das and Rahman 2010). Incompatibility will also hamper adequate information exchange (Sarkar et al. 2001), obstruct social bonding (Sarkar, Aulakh, and Cavusgil 1998), and maintain distance between parties (Cheung, Myers, and Mentzer 2010). These situations, in turn, will give rise to uncertainty,

insecurity, and suspicion about the foreign partner's behavior and erect a barrier against the harmonization of their intended strategies (Luo and Park 2004). As a result, the exporter will be reluctant to dedicate resources to the working relationship (de Clercq et al. 2014) or make adaptations required for its smooth functioning (Freitas and Salovey 2000). Under these circumstances, the emotionally intelligent exporter will regulate his or her emotions to reduce communication, avoid socialization, maintain distance, and deny the amicable resolution of disagreements with the import buyer (de Clercq et al. 2014). Formally, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>7</sub>:** As the level of incompatibility with the importer increases, the exporter's emotional intelligence has (a) a weaker positive effect on communication, (b) a weaker positive effect on social bonding, (c) a weaker negative effect on relational distance, and (d) a weaker negative effect on conflict.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Sampling Procedures***

We conducted the study in Greece, where we collected data from indigenous exporters from a cross-section of industries in the private sector. We randomly selected 1,000 exporters using the ICAP Export Directory, which stores contact details and other useful information for more than 10,000 exporters located in the country.<sup>2</sup> In each firm selected, the person in charge of export operations was contacted by phone both to provide information about the study objectives and to confirm his or her interest in participating in the survey. These initial contacts resulted in 595 exporters expressing an interest in participating in the survey and agreeing to receive the questionnaire. Respondents were given the option of accessing the survey either online or by mail. Those who refused to participate in the study gave reasons such as company policy not to divulge information, lack of time, or discontinuation of export operations.

### ***Unit of Analysis***

The unit of analysis in our study was the single relationship between a Greek exporter and a particular import buyer. Exporters have multiple relationships with foreign buyers located in different countries, where relationship characteristics are likely to vary in terms of age, stage of development, and behavioral dynamics. We asked participants to concentrate on the third most important foreign buyer they have in terms of sales volume. This was deemed necessary to achieve variability in our data and avoid respondent selection bias by focusing only on successful relationships with foreign customers (Anderson and Narus 1990; Skarmeas et al. 2008).

### ***Scale Development***

We derived the measurement scales for our constructs from the pertinent literature (see Appendix C). Specifically, emotional intelligence was based on the work of Wong and Law (2002) and was operationalized as a higher-order construct of four other subconstructs, namely, self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, utilization of emotion, and regulation of emotion, each of which contained four items.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the relationship atmosphere variables, communication was a five-item scale, based on Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin (1996), and social bonding was a five-item scale derived from the work of Mavondo and Rodrigo (2001). The relational distance scale was based on Hallén and Sandström (1991) and included five items, and the conflict scale, which also comprised five items, was extracted from Kumar, Stern, and Achrol (1992). We operationalized relational performance with four items taken from the work of LaBahn and Harich (1997). With regard to moderation variables, the opportunism scale contained four items extracted from Yilmaz and Hunt (2001), while interpartner incompatibility was a five-item scale derived from Sarkar, Aulakh, and Cavusgil (1998).

### ***Questionnaire Design***

The survey instrument was a precoded and self-administered questionnaire, which was built

around the items of the operationalized constructs. Each item was measured on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). The questionnaire also included items assessing various organizational and export-related demographics, such as years in business/exporting, number of employees in business/exporting, and company sales/export sales. We also inserted a set of questions (measured on a seven-point scale, where 1 = “very low” and 7 = “very high”) at the end of the questionnaire to assess the extent of respondent familiarity, knowledgeable, and confidence with regard to the information provided (Cannon and Perreault 1999). The questionnaire was first prepared in English and then translated into Greek, and any linguistic issues were resolved using a back-translation procedure (Craig and Douglas 2005). Before initiating the data collection process, we pretested the questionnaire with five exporters in terms of relevance, flow, and readability.

### ***Data Collection***

We used both postal and electronic methods to collect the data, according to the preferences of the respondents. Each questionnaire was supplemented with a cover letter explaining the objectives, importance, and confidentiality of the study. To solicit a maximum level of participation, we sent reminder letters and contacted exporting firms by phone and, sometimes, personally. Of the 595 exporters who received the questionnaire, 268 responded. However, we discarded six questionnaires due to incomplete data, inconsistencies in the answers given, and unsuitability of the key informant (scoring lower than 4 on a 7-point scale on any of the questions referring to familiarity, knowledgeable, and confidence). Thus, the final usable sample comprised 262 questionnaires, representing an effective response rate of 44.0%.

### ***Controlling for Bias***

Key informants were individuals with direct responsibility for the firm’s international operations with the specific import buyer, namely, export managers (41.4%), company owners

(18.9%), general managers (17.9%), marketing/sales managers (15.6%), and others (6.2%). These respondents provided high-quality data, as indicated by mean scores of 6.14, 5.98, and 6.27 (out of 7) for their familiarity, knowledgeable, and confidence with regard to the subject respectively. With regard to nonresponse bias, we compared the answers of early and late respondents using Armstrong and Overton's (1977) procedures, which revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups using a t-test analysis.

## **Research Findings**

We analyzed the data in two steps with structural equation modeling, using the EQS program. The first step provides information about the measurement model and explains the data purification process. In the second step, we present the results of the structural model with regard to the main, moderating, and control effects.

### ***Measurement Model***

We tested the prespecified relationships between the constructs and their indicators using a confirmatory factor analysis, in which each observed variable was restricted to load on its a priori set factor, while the underlying factors were allowed to correlate (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). We used the elliptical reweighted least squares procedure to estimate the measurement model, revealing a satisfactory fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 1233.81$ ,  $p = .000$ , d.f. = 870; normed fit index [NFI] = .92; nonnormed fit index [NNFI] = .94; comparative fit index [CFI] = .94; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .06) (Diamantopoulos and Siguaaw 2009) (see Table 1).

**...insert Table 1 about here...**

With regard to data purification, convergent validity was met, as the  $t$ -value for each indicator was always high and significant, all standard errors of the estimated coefficients were very low, and the average variance extracted for each latent variable was equal to or above the

threshold level of .50 (Hair et al. 2018). Discriminant validity was also evident because the confidence interval around the correlation estimate for each pair of constructs examined never included 1.00 (Anderson and Gerbing 1988), while the correlation for each pair of constructs never exceeded the square root of the average variance extracted (Fornell and Larcker 1981) (see Table 2). Construct reliabilities were also satisfactory, as all constructs in the study had Cronbach's alphas greater than .70. Composite reliabilities also exceeded the minimum acceptable value of .70.

**...insert Table 2 about here...**

To control for common method bias, we used a confirmatory factor approach, in which all items included in the measurement model were restricted to load on a single factor (Venkatraman and Prescott 1990). The model fit indices revealed very poor values, well below the commonly acceptable cutoff points (i.e.,  $\chi^2 = 3,127.40$ ,  $p = .000$ , d.f. = 702; NFI = .40; NNFI = .43; CFI = .46; RMSEA = .17). We also employed the partial correlation technique, using "foreign market dynamism" as a marker variable, a construct that is theoretically not connected to other constructs in the model. Our analysis revealed that this marker variable had no significant correlation with the other constructs, while the significance of the correlation coefficients did not change after implementing the various partial correlation adjustments (Lindell and Whitney 2001). In brief, the results from both tests did not reveal the existence of common method bias.

To assess the potential for endogeneity bias in our study, we employed the Two-stage Least Squares technique. We used foreign environmental uncertainty, tolerance, coercive power, and noncoercive power as instrumental variables for communication, social bonding, relational distance, and conflict. These instrumental variables were correlated with their respective endogenous explanatory variables but not with relational performance. We assessed the strength of instrumental variables with *F*-tests (Stock and Watson 2011) and computed an

efficient model and a consistent model. The results of the Durbin–Wu–Hausman test revealed that communication, social bonding, relational distance, and conflict are exogenous to relational performance, with the estimates of all instrumental variables yielding  $F$ -statistics higher than 10 (Stock and Watson 2011).

### ***Structural Model***

We used the structural model to test our hypotheses by adopting the elliptical reweighted least squares technique. Based on various indicators ( $\chi^2 = 1,233.48, p = .000, \text{d.f.} = 871; \text{NFI} = .91; \text{NNFI} = .93; \text{CFI} = .94; \text{RMSEA} = .07$ ), the results of the structural model reveal an acceptable model fit. Table 3 shows the standardized path coefficients with corresponding  $t$ -values for each hypothesis tested.

**...insert Table 3 about here...**

### ***Main Effects<sup>4</sup>***

The results reveal that the exporter's emotional intelligence has a strong positive impact on communication with the import buyer ( $\beta = .44, t = 3.23, p = .00$ ), which lends support to H<sub>1a</sub>. In addition, emotional intelligence strengthens the exporter's social bonds with the importer ( $\beta = .28, t = 2.26, p = .02$ ), in support of H<sub>1b</sub>. Moreover, high exporter emotional intelligence leads to a decrease in relational distance with the import buyer ( $\beta = -.40, t = -2.69, p = .01$ ), thus lending credibility to H<sub>1c</sub>. In support of H<sub>1d</sub>, emotionally intelligent exporters have lower levels of conflict in their working relationship with import buyers ( $\beta = -.28, t = -2.69, p = .03$ ).

In accordance with H<sub>2</sub>, our findings confirm that communication is indeed a strong predictor of the exporter–importer relationship performance ( $\beta = .54, t = 5.50, p = .00$ ). The results also verify H<sub>3</sub> because strong social bonding between exporters and importers contributed positively to relationship performance ( $\beta = .36, t = 4.58, p = .00$ ). As we predicted in H<sub>4</sub>, our findings confirm the negative effects of relational distance on exporter–importer relational performance ( $\beta = -.14, t = -1.79, p = .07$ ). Finally, our results support H<sub>5</sub>, because it



was found that the prevalence of conflict in the relationship between exporters and importers has damaging effects on performance ( $\beta = -.38$ ,  $t = -4.43$ ,  $p = .00$ ).

### *Moderation Effects<sup>5</sup>*

We tested the moderation hypotheses using the interaction approach, in which we analyzed the effect of the cross-product between each moderating variable and the hypothesized path (Ping 1995). With respect to opportunism, the results confirm a weaker positive effect of emotional intelligence on communication ( $\beta = -.39$ ,  $t = -3.86$ ,  $p = .00$ ) and social bonding ( $\beta = -.54$ ,  $t = -4.20$ ,  $p = .00$ ), as well as a weaker negative effect of emotional intelligence on relational distance ( $\beta = .52$ ,  $t = 3.66$ ,  $p = .00$ ) and conflict ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $t = 2.76$ ,  $p = .01$ ). These results lend support to H<sub>6a</sub>, H<sub>6b</sub>, H<sub>6c</sub>, and H<sub>6d</sub>, respectively. Likewise, the results also confirm H<sub>7a</sub>, H<sub>7b</sub>, H<sub>7c</sub>, and H<sub>7d</sub>, because when the level of interpartner incompatibility increases, the positive impact of emotional intelligence on communication ( $\beta = -.40$ ,  $t = -3.88$ ,  $p = .00$ ) and social bonding ( $\beta = -.29$ ,  $t = -2.76$ ,  $p = .01$ ) becomes weaker, while the negative effect of emotional intelligence on distance ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $t = 1.91$ ,  $p = .06$ ) and conflict ( $\beta = .47$ ,  $t = 4.55$ ,  $p = .00$ ) also becomes weaker.

### *Control Effects*

We also examine the impact of relationship age and relationship status as control variables on relational performance. Relationship age positively affects the performance of the exporter–importer relationship ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $t = 1.73$ ,  $p = .08$ ), meaning that the longer the duration of the relationship, the greater the likelihood it will perform well. However, relationship status—that is, whether the relationship was growing or declining—did not have a statistically significant effect on relational performance ( $\beta = .04$ ,  $t = .49$ ,  $p = .63$ ).

## **Study Implications**

This study shows the pivotal role of the exporter's emotional intelligence in establishing a positive atmosphere in the working relationship with import buyers, which ultimately leads to superior relational performance that is beneficial for both parties. Specifically, we show that emotionally intelligent exporters tend to improve communication and social bonding in the relationship, while reducing distance and conflict. However, this favorable association between emotional intelligence and behavioral dimensions of the relationship tends to become weaker when the import buyer acts opportunistically and lacks compatibility with the exporter. Our study also confirms the instrumental role of effective communication, strong social bonds, low relational distance, and reduced conflict in enhancing relational performance.

### *Theoretical Implications*

In this study, we conceptualized and empirically tested a model in which the emotional intelligence of the exporter boosts relational performance by improving interorganizational behavioral interactions with the importer. We do so by transferring theories, concepts, and ideas developed in psychology and management to an international business relationship context. Specifically, we extend the repeatedly confirmed prorelational effect of emotional intelligence developed in psychology research to exporter–importer relationships, yielding consistent results. The relevance of such knowledge transfers from other disciplines to international marketing implies that emotional intelligence can also be linked to other behavioral dimensions characterizing interorganizational relationships, such as exercised power (Schutte and Loi 2014), ethical conduct (Fu 2014), and social responsibility (Leonidou et al. 2015).

Our study connects emotions with behaviors in the working relationship between exporters and importers, indicating that these should be studied inseparably from each other. The use of emotional intelligence as a means to identify, evaluate, and control emotions between sellers and buyers implies that it can serve as a useful theoretical construct to better

understand international marketing phenomena. Indeed, various behavioral dimensions (e.g., communication, social bonds, relational distance, conflict) characterizing business relationships do not exist in a vacuum, but are affected by overt and/or covert psychological forces inherent in the interacting parties. Thus, exporter's emotional intelligence is instrumental in shaping the nature of behavioral interactions with import buyers, ultimately determining whether outcomes are successful.

Our study also underscores the pivotal role played by constructs at the individual manager level (i.e., emotional intelligence) in influencing constructs at the organizational level (i.e., communication). This implies that other types of intelligence, such as the intelligence quotient (IQ), cultural intelligence, or creative intelligence, may also have an important role to play in cross-border business research, affecting different facets of international marketing activities, such as foreign environmental scanning, market selection and entry, and new product development. Other important personal factors of managers that are inherent to international marketing operations (e.g., personality traits) might also act as antecedents to behavioral interactions with foreign customers and ultimately influence performance outcomes.

The results pertaining to the moderating role of opportunism and interpartner incompatibility on the effect of emotional intelligence on various behavioral aspects of the exporter–importer relationship stress the need to adopt a contingency perspective. This is particularly true when investigating international marketing phenomena, in which the environment is characterized by high dynamism, uncertainty, and diversity, thus adding more complexity and uniqueness to the study of interorganizational business relationships. As such, other variables particular to international business relationships (e.g., cultural dimensions) may also moderate the instrumentality of emotional intelligence in improving behavioral interactions between exporters and import buyers.

### *Managerial Implications*

The positive role of emotional intelligence in strengthening working relationships with import buyers implies that export managers should take this dimension into consideration when recruiting, selecting, and evaluating people for their international operations, especially those who will have direct contact with and responsibility for foreign customers. Therefore, it is important to periodically monitor these employees' emotional intelligence capabilities using reliable tests (e.g., the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test) and to take corrective actions when necessary. Firms should also create specialized training programs (e.g., role playing) with the aim of helping existing export staff to enhance their emotional intelligence skills (e.g., self-control). Temporarily assigning import-related roles to export employees, so that they can better understand the foreign partner's perspective, might be a viable technique to use in such training programs.

People involved in the firm's export operations should skillfully use their emotional intelligence as a tool to enhance relational performance with import customers through proper treatment of various critical behavioral dimensions of their working relationship. Specifically, they could use emotional intelligence to (1) enhance communication by encouraging frequent and open information exchange, (2) cultivate social bonds by enhancing friendship and social interaction with personnel in the importing organization, (3) reduce relational distance by adopting an empathic attitude toward foreign buyers and managing negative emotions through adaptive and reconciling behavior, and (4) reduce conflict by encouraging frank discussion with import partners and resolving disagreements in an amicable way.

However, export managers should also be aware that, despite the favorable role of emotional intelligence in improving the working relationships with foreign customers, when the latter act opportunistically and/or are incompatible, the effectiveness of emotional intelligence diminishes. Given this harmful moderating impact of opportunism and interpartner incompatibility, emotionally intelligent exporters should be cautious when selecting their

import buyers, and focus on those who are both reliable and compatible. They also need to be able to spot signs of opportunism (e.g., lack of assistance in difficult times) or incompatibility (e.g., preventing goal achievement) with their current import buyers, particularly during the early phases of their relationship.

Just as export managers can utilize their emotional intelligence in effectively dealing with their foreign buyers, import managers can also make use of emotional intelligence to influence the behavioral dynamics of their relationship with the exporter. When both parties in the exporter–importer relationship are emotionally intelligent, one would expect enhanced overall relational performance. Thus, export managers should aim, whenever possible, to deal with individuals in the import organization characterized by high emotional intelligence. However, they should be alert to the possibility that emotional intelligence may not always be used in an appropriate manner, but can also be a tool to “exploit” other people’s behaviors (Côté et al. 2011). In this case, export managers should maintain a careful and continuous evaluation of their import buyers’ intentions and act accordingly.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Our study has several limitations, which also provide the basis for new research directions. First, we conducted the study in a single export country, which necessitates verification of the external validity of our findings by testing the conceptual model in other country settings with different socioeconomic profiles. The study could also be replicated in the area of export services, which has experienced significant growth in recent decades, particularly among firms located in developed countries. Our research could also be extended to other types of foreign business relationships, such as those between international joint venture partners.

Second, methodologically speaking, and following the pattern of most research in marketing, we assessed emotional intelligence using self-reported measures taken from

individuals participating in the study, rather than how emotional intelligence is perceived by those with whom the person is interacting. It would be useful to seek the views of import buyers regarding the level of an exporter's emotional intelligence on each of the four dimensions examined. The inexistence of differences in the importer's views with those of the exporter could serve as an additional indication of the lack of common method bias in the study.

Third, we examined the emotional intelligence of exporters only, thus adopting a single actor perspective. However, as we mentioned previously, import buyers also have emotional intelligence, which may act synergistically or catalytically with the exporter's emotional intelligence. Thus, it is essential to gather emotional intelligence data from the corresponding person in the importer's organization. A matched-paired dyadic approach would provide a more comprehensive picture of the various behavioral dimensions of the relationship and the resulting outcome.

Fourth, the dynamic nature of exporter–importer relationships requires a longitudinal research design to monitor changes in the relationship over a long period of time. This would allow observation of the role of emotional intelligence at different stages (e.g., exploration, expansion, commitment, dissolution) of the relationship cycle. In addition, because an exporting department (especially in larger-sized firms) is usually staffed by many people, it would be interesting to measure “group emotional intelligence” and its effect on the relationship with the foreign buyer.

Fifth, future studies should include additional behavioral atmosphere dimensions that characterize the exporter–importer relationship, such as trust, commitment, and cooperation. In addition to these behavioral dimensions, it is also important to investigate the link between emotional intelligence and structural aspects of the relationship (e.g., governance mechanisms, relational norms, control systems). The link between an exporter's emotional intelligence and foreign customer affect also warrants examination. A recent meta-analysis in the management

field has revealed that both state-positive and state-negative affect act as mediators between emotional intelligence and job-related outcomes (Miao, Humphrey, and Qian 2017).

Sixth, we operationalized performance as a global latent construct, focusing mainly on the effectiveness and efficiency aspects of the working relationship between exporters and import buyers. It would be enlightening if future studies would also investigate the instrumental role of the exporter's emotional intelligence on other types of business performance resulting from the exporter–importer relationship, such as those pertaining to customer (e.g., end-user satisfaction), product-market (e.g., market share), or financial (e.g., profitability) issues (Katsikeas et al. 2016).

Finally, because emotional intelligence can potentially be improved (or deteriorate), it would be interesting to explore factors that can drive such change. The moderating role of other factors, such as the individual's cultural orientation and personality traits, also warrants investigation. Certain demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, education) of the managers directly involved with exporting/importing could also be used as controls on emotional intelligence.

## Notes

1. The association of the four relationship atmosphere dimensions (i.e., communication, social bonding, relational distance, and conflict) with relational performance, though seemingly self-evident, is necessary to include in the conceptual model because (1) Gross's (2002) Emotion Regulation Theory stresses that the proper use of emotional intelligence ultimately affects the success of a relationship with a partner through the mediating role of various behavioral interactions and (2) while the impact of these relationship dimensions has been studied extensively in relation to satisfaction as an outcome variable, their specific effect on relational performance (a more global indicator of the success of a working relationship) has been rarely investigated.
2. The sampling frame of Greek exporters provided by ICAP has been used in other empirical export studies (e.g., Salavou and Halikias 2009). ICAP annually publishes the Greek Export Directory for the Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the most reliable source of information for exporting companies in Greece.
3. Our study treats emotional intelligence as a reflective construct, which is based on the assumption that latent constructs cause the observed variables and that measurement error results in the inability to fully explain these measures (Hair et al. 2018). The same reflective scale of emotional intelligence has also been used in prior research focusing on either intraorganizational (e.g., Bozionelos and Singh 2017) or interorganizational (e.g., Naudé et al. 2014) relationships.
4. We also carried out a post hoc analysis connecting each of the four dimensions of emotional intelligence (i.e., self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, utilization of emotion, regulation of emotion) with each of the four behavioral constructs (i.e., communication, social bonding, relational distance, conflict). The results indicate variations in the four emotional intelligence dimensions in terms of their impact on these constructs.
5. In designing our conceptual model, we followed the pattern of studies in the psychology field, in which emotional intelligence is theoretically considered the driving force in manipulating one's own and other people's emotions. However, we also used the four dimensions of emotional intelligence (i.e., self-emotion appraisal,

others' emotion appraisal, utilization of emotion, and regulation of emotion) as moderators between each of the four behavioral constructs and relational performance, indicating, with a few exceptions, strong effects.

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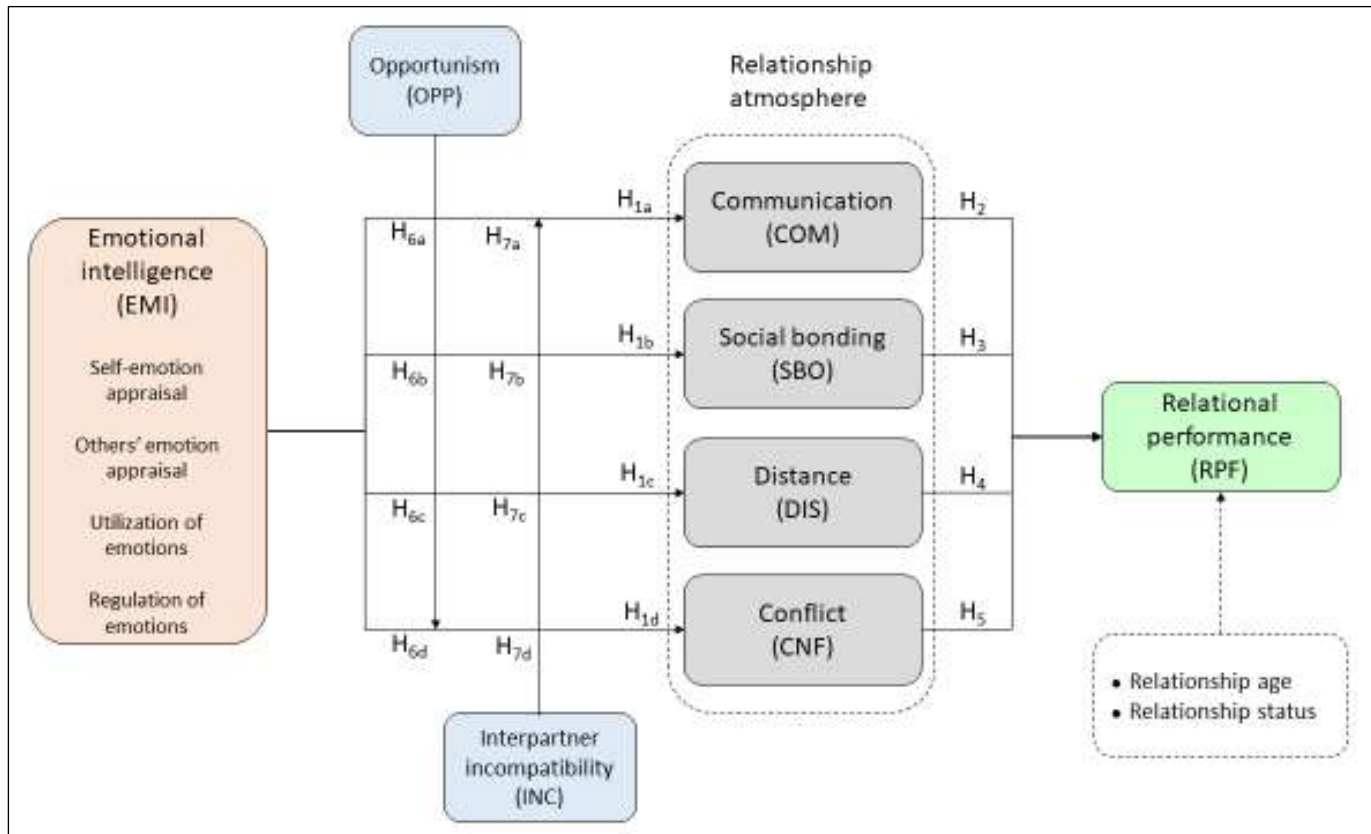


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**Figure 1: The Conceptual Model.**



**Table 1.** Measurement Model Results.

Constructs	Scale Items	Standardized Loadings	t	$\alpha$	$\rho$	AVE	Mean score	SD	Item mean	Item SD
Self-emotion appraisal	SEA1	.69	*	.77	.74	.51	5.88	.75	5.54	1.03
	SEA2	.76	6.36						6.02	.91
	SEA3	.77	6.41						5.98	.90
	SEA4	.61	5.53						6.01	1.02
Others' emotion appraisal	OEA1	.76	*	.82	.76	.63	4.95	.88	4.66	1.05
	OEA2	.82	7.81						5.08	1.10
	OEA4	.80	7.72						5.12	.90
Utilization of emotion	UOE1	.70	*	.80	.75	.53	5.82	.82	5.97	1.06
	UOE2	.73	6.54						5.57	1.11
	UOE3	.72	6.51						5.68	1.07
	UOE4	.75	6.70						6.05	.91
Regulation of emotion	ROE1	.78	*	.87	.81	.65	5.29	.99	5.37	1.27
	ROE2	.83	9.02						5.29	1.04
	ROE3	.72	7.69						5.17	1.33
	ROE4	.88	9.58						5.31	1.03
Communication	COM1	.80	*	.76	.71	.65	5.00	1.23	5.01	1.17
	COM4	.82	7.78						4.93	1.45
	COM5	.79	8.03						5.08	1.28
Social bonding	SBO1	.74	*	.91	.85	.66	3.63	1.58	3.46	1.82
	SBO2	.84	8.90						4.14	1.91
	SBO3	.91	9.62						3.22	1.82
	SBO4	.85	8.96						3.79	1.82
	SBO5	.72	7.52						3.55	1.88
Relational distance	DIS1	.68	*	.75	.75	.51	3.32	1.17	3.78	2.02
	DIS2	.69	5.52						3.29	1.71
	DIS3	.67	5.43						3.23	1.48
	DIS4	.71	5.66						3.48	1.62
	DIS5	.61	5.09						2.81	1.42
Conflict	CNF1	.69	*	.83	.80	.54	1.98	.99	2.25	1.35
	CNF2	.79	7.51						2.07	1.36
	CNF3	.66	6.32						2.14	1.40
	CNF4	.77	7.31						1.87	1.17
	CNF5	.76	7.23						1.61	1.01
Relational performance	REP1	.86	*	.93	.87	.77	5.37	1.10	5.14	1.22
	REP2	.93	13.82						5.52	1.26
	REP3	.87	12.39						5.42	1.19
	REP4	.85	11.67						5.41	1.15
Opportunism	OPP1	.66	*	.81	.76	.55	2.40	1.17	2.68	1.49
	OPP2	.86	7.36						2.10	1.27
	OPP3	.68	6.14						2.41	1.58
	OPP4	.74	6.63						2.40	1.51
Interpartner incompatibility	INC1	.69	*	.72	.71	.52	2.45	1.23	2.45	1.30
	INC2	.69	6.24						2.26	1.25
	INC3	.68	6.13						2.60	1.29
	INC5	.62	5.52						2.54	1.38

\* Item fixed to set the scale.

<sup>a</sup>Emotional intelligence (EMI) is a higher-order factor (Mean score = 5.52, SD = .61).

Note: Fit statistics of model:  $\chi^2 = 1,233.81$ ,  $p = .000$ , d.f. = 870; NFI = .92; NNFI = .94; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .06.

**Table 2. Correlation Matrix.**

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Self-emotion appraisal	<b>.71</b>										
2. Others' emotion appraisal	.42**	<b>.79</b>									
3. Utilization of emotion	.46**	.41**	<b>.73</b>								
4. Regulation of emotion	.28**	.25**	.30**	<b>.81</b>							
5. Communication	.18*	.24**	.14	.04	<b>.81</b>						
6. Social bonding	.13	.19*	-.01	-.02	.34**	<b>.81</b>					
7. Relational distance	-.30**	-.18*	-.06	-.07	-.30**	-.47**	<b>.68</b>				
8. Conflict	-.24**	-.05	-.08	-.07	-.23*	-.10	.28**	<b>.73</b>			
9. Relational performance	.23*	.28**	.25**	.15	.57**	.47**	-.34**	-.43**	<b>.88</b>		
10. Opportunism	-.07	-.01	.02	.04	-.33**	-.07	.29**	.58**	-.36**	<b>.74</b>	
11. Interpartner incompatibility	-.40**	-.22*	-.30**	-.20*	-.52**	-.30**	.45**	.52**	-.57**	.45**	<b>.67</b>

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

**Note:** Values below the diagonal refer to correlation estimates among constructs, and values on the diagonal refer to the square roots of the average variance extracted.

**Table 3.** Structural Model Results.

H	Hypothesized Association	Standard Path Coefficient	t-value	p-value
<b>Main Effects</b>				
H <sub>1a</sub>	Emotional intelligence → Communication	.44	3.23	.00
H <sub>1b</sub>	Emotional intelligence → Social bonding	.28	2.26	.02
H <sub>1c</sub>	Emotional intelligence → Relational distance	-.40	-2.69	.01
H <sub>1d</sub>	Emotional intelligence → Conflict	-.28	-2.18	.03
H <sub>2</sub>	Communication → Relational performance	.54	5.50	.00
H <sub>3</sub>	Social bonding → Relational performance	.36	4.58	.00
H <sub>4</sub>	Relational distance → Relational performance	-.14	-1.79	.07
H <sub>5</sub>	Conflict → Relational performance	-.38	-4.43	.00
<b>Moderation Effects</b>				
H <sub>6a</sub>	Opportunism → Communication	-.13	-1.35	.18
	Emotional intelligence × Opportunism → Communication	-.39	-3.86	.00
H <sub>6b</sub>	Opportunism → Social Bonding	-.35	-2.74	.01
	Emotional intelligence × Opportunism → Social bonding	-.54	-4.20	.00
H <sub>6c</sub>	Opportunism → Relational distance	.18	1.51	.13
	Emotional intelligence × Opportunism → Relational distance	.52	3.66	.00
H <sub>6d</sub>	Opportunism → Conflict	.10	1.43	.15
	Emotional intelligence × Opportunism → Conflict	.28	2.76	.01
H <sub>7a</sub>	Interpartner incompatibility → Communication	-.10	-1.11	.15
	Emotional intelligence × Interpartner incompatibility → Communication	-.40	-3.88	.00
H <sub>7b</sub>	Interpartner incompatibility → Social bonding	-.04	-.56	.58
	Emotional intelligence × Interpartner incompatibility → Social bonding	-.29	-2.76	.01
H <sub>7c</sub>	Incompatibility → Relational distance	.11	.98	.27
	Emotional intelligence × Interpartner incompatibility → Relational distance	.21	1.91	.06
H <sub>7d</sub>	Interpartner incompatibility → Conflict	.35	3.48	.00
	Emotional intelligence × Interpartner incompatibility → Conflict	.47	4.55	.00
<b>Control Effects</b>				
	Relationship age → Relational performance	.11	1.73	.08
	Relationship status → Relational performance	.04	.49	.63

**Note:** Fit statistics of Model:  $\chi^2 = 1,233.48$ ,  $p = .000$ , d.f. = 871; NFI = .91; NNFI = .93; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .07.

## Appendix A. Indicative Empirical Marketing Studies on Emotional Intelligence.

Study	Objectives	Methodology	Key findings
Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker (2004)	To investigate the relationships between customer-oriented selling and emotional intelligence.	Mail survey of 103 salespeople from a company specializing in medical devices in the United States.	A salesperson's higher levels of emotional intelligence are associated with higher levels of customer orientation, while customer orientation is positively correlated with salesperson performance.
Kidwell, McFarland, and Avila (2007)	To examine the ability to perceive emotion relative to its effect on adaptive selling, customer-oriented selling, and sales performance.	Online survey in the United States on 135 matched salespeople-supervisor pairs working in 15 business-to-business (B2B) firms operating in various sectors.	Both adaptive selling and customer-oriented selling positively influence perceived selling performance. The ability to perceive emotions enhances the positive effects of adaptive selling and customer-oriented selling on both perceived and supervisor-rated selling performance.
Schumacher, Wheeler, and Carr (2009)	To examine the relationship between a customer's emotional intelligence and a customer's relationship performance.	Mail survey in the United States on 34 buyers and their 102 suppliers.	Buyers' emotional intelligence perceived by suppliers is positively correlated with the buyers' relationship performance perceived by suppliers. Buyers' emotional intelligence, based on buyers' and suppliers' assessment difference, is related to buyers' relationship performance, based on buyers' and suppliers' assessment differences.
Singh and Venugopal (2012)	To identify salesperson variables that improve the effectiveness of their customer orientation through a mediating mechanism, resulting in an enhanced individual sales performance	Survey on 286 Indian salespeople working in a print media company	The use of natural rewards strategies has a positive impact on a salesperson's level of customer orientation. A salesperson's customer orientation positively influences his or her sales performance, sales skills, and emotion regulation abilities. Both sales skills and emotion regulation improve a salesperson's sales performance.
Agnihotri et al. (2014)	To examine the factors that drive boundary-spanner creativity and how the latter affects performance and service outcomes	Online survey in the United States on 107 sales representatives and their 19 direct managers in a B2B telecommunications company	Emotional intelligence, along with knowledge and manager feedback, positively influences sales representatives' creativity. Sales representatives' creativity, in turn, improves their performance and ability to solve customer problems. Emotional intelligence strengthens the positive effect of knowledge on creativity.
Naudé et al. (2014)	To illuminate the entrepreneurs' characteristics that affect small and medium-sized enterprises' performance by investigating the mediating role of network structure and external networking behavior	Survey on 227 chief executive officers of small Iranian information technology firms	Emotional intelligence of the chief executive officer positively affects entrepreneurial style, network structure, and external networking behavior. Network structure and entrepreneurial style mediate the link between emotional intelligence and SME performance.
Kadic-Maglajlic et al. (2016)	To examine the interrelationships among emotional intelligence, relational selling behavior, and salesperson performance	Online survey in Croatia on 245 B2B salespeople	Emotional intelligence is a facilitator of both adaptive selling behavior and customer-oriented selling behavior. Both types of selling behaviors mediate the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and salesperson performance.
McFarland, Rode, and Shervani (2016)	To investigate the moderating effects of emotional intelligence on the links among role stress and emotional exhaustion, customer-oriented selling, and interactional sales performance	Online survey in the United States on 143 sales representatives of a Fortune 500 company operating in transportation business	Higher levels of emotional intelligence decrease the negative effect of role stress on customer-oriented selling and on interactional sales performance. Emotional intelligence also weakens the positive influence of role ambiguity on salesperson emotional exhaustion.
Kearney et al. (2017)	To assess (1) the behavioral interdependence between frontline and back-office employees and their joint effect on customer-related organizational performance and (2) to test the moderating effect of the emotional intelligence of frontline salespeople and back-	Survey on 105 frontline salespeople and 77 back-office employees working in a large multinational B2B electronics company in the United Kingdom	Salespeople's customer orientation boosts organizational performance, while emotional intelligence of the salesperson strengthens this relationship. Both salespeople's and back-office employees' emotional intelligence drives back-office employees' citizenship behavior. Back-office employees' citizenship behavior drives business performance. Back-office employees' emotional intelligence strengthens the positive effect of



	office employees		salespeople's emotional intelligence on back-office employees' citizenship behavior.
Ogilvie et al. (2017)	To build and test a model examining the relationship between salesperson effort and relational performance	Online survey in the United States on 107 matched subordinate-supervisor dyads in the sales division of a B2B media company	There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between sales effort and relational performance, though this relationship becomes a positive linear one when the salesperson has higher levels of emotional intelligence.
Briggs, Kalra, and Agnihotri, (2018)	To understand the role of the salespeople's ability to appraise emotions and its impact on job-related consequences in a transaction-oriented setting	Survey in an emerging market on 152 matched pairs of salespeople and supervisors working in a financial services organization	Emotion appraisal ability gives rise to emotional exhaustion of the salesperson but improves his or her customer service. Emotional exhaustion decreases both customer service and sales performance.
Delpechitre and Beeler (2018)	To examine how a salesperson's emotional intelligence affects his or her emotional labor strategies and how the latter influences customer outcomes	Online survey on 224 salesperson-customer dyads in three U.S. firms operating in the information technology solutions, energy and gas, and media and telecommunications services industries	A salesperson's emotional intelligence has a positive impact on his or her deep acting emotional labor strategies but a negative impact on surface acting emotional labor strategies. While deep acting emotional labor strategies increase a salesperson's perceived trustworthiness and customer's anticipation of future interactions, surface acting emotional labor strategies diminish the latter. A salesperson's perceived trustworthiness leads to a higher level of anticipated future interactions with the customer.
Delpechitre, Beeler-Connelly, and Chaker (2018)	To gain insight into the way a salesperson's emotional intelligence and empathetic ability affect customer value co-creation behavior and the customer's commitment to a salesperson	Online survey on 224 salesperson-customer dyads in three U.S. firms operating in the information technology, energy, and media/telecommunication industries	A salesperson's ability to perceive and understand emotions positively influences customer value co-creation behavior, as well as customer commitment to the salesperson. The ability of the salesperson to regulate emotions predicts customer commitment to the salesperson. Customer value co-creation is a driver of customer commitment. Salesperson empathy strengthens the positive influence of perceiving emotions and regulating emotions on customer value co-creation and on customer commitment.

## Appendix B. Operational Definitions of Constructs.

Emotional intelligence	The ability to reason validly with emotions and with emotion-related information and to use emotions to enhance thought to reach desired emotional states in oneself and others (Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey 2016, p. 295).
Communication	Formal or informal exchange of accurate, timely, and sufficient information between interacting parties about important issues regarding their working relationship (Mohr and Spekman 1994).
Social bonding	The degree of mutual personal friendship and appreciation established by the interacting parties in a working relationship, which helps them understand each other's desires, goals, and intentions (Yang, Zhou, and Jiang 2011).
Relational distance	The extent to which the partners are unfamiliar with each other's ways of thinking and doing business and organizational norms and values (Ford et al. 2011).
Conflict	The blocking behavior that impedes the members of a buyer-seller relationship from obtaining resources and/or performing activities required for their advancement (Anderson and Narus 1990).
Relational performance	The success of one firm in helping the other achieve its goals by coordinating venture activities and adapting business practices for the other (Kumar, Stern, and Achrol 1992).
Opportunism	Self-interest seeking with guile, manifested in terms of subtle and/or blatant types of behavior (Wathne and Heide 2000; Williamson 1979).
Interpartner incompatibility	The lack of congruence between the interacting parties in a buyer-seller relationship with regard to their organizational cultures, values, norms, policies, procedures, and so forth (Sarkar, Aulakh, and Cavusgil 1998).
Relationship age	The length of time foreign business partners have been working together (Jap and Ganesan 2000).
Relationship status	The extent to which the relationship between the two parties tends to grow or decline (Barnes et al. 2015).

## Appendix C. Constructs and Measurement Scales.

Constructs	Items	Item description	Source
Self-emotion appraisal	SEA1	I have a good sense of why I have certain feelings most of the time.	Wong and Law (2002)
	SEA2	I have a good understanding of my own emotions.	
	SEA3	I really understand what I feel.	
	SEA4	I always know whether or not I am happy.	
Others' emotion appraisal	OEA1	I always know my friends' emotions from their behavior.	Wong and Law (2002)
	OEA2	I am a good observer of others' emotions.	
	OEA3	I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others.	
	OEA4	I have a good understanding of the emotions of people around me.	
Utilization of emotion	UOE1	I always set goals for myself and then try my best to achieve them.	Wong and Law (2002)
	UOE2	I always tell myself I am a competent person.	
	UOE3	I am a self-motivating person.	
	UOE4	I would always encourage myself to try my best.	
Regulation of emotion	ROE1	I am able to control my temper so that I can handle difficulties rationally.	Wong and Law (2002)
	ROE2	I am quite capable of controlling my own emotions.	
	ROE3	I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry.	
	ROE4	I have good control of my own emotions.	
Communication	COM1	The relationship with this importer suffers from inadequate communication procedures. (R)	Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin (1996)
	COM2	There are often communication failures between our company and this importer. (R)	
	COM3	This importer often does not inform us early enough about critical problems concerning the relationship. (R)	
	COM4	This importer keeps our company informed about tactical/strategic issues concerning the relationship.	
	COM5	This importer clearly communicates his/her expectations about our firm's performance.	
Social bonding	SBO1	We often interact with people from this importing firm on a social basis outside work.	Mavondo and Rodrigo (2001)
	SBO2	We openly talk like friends with people from this importing firm.	
	SBO3	We consider people from this importing firm as being almost as close to us as family.	
	SBO4	If we were to change business partners, we would lose a good friend in this importer.	
	SBO5	We would consider whether the feelings of people in this importer's organization would be hurt before we made an important decision.	
Relational distance	DIS1	We do not have close relationships with individuals working in this importing firm.	Hallén and Sandström (1991)
	DIS2	We are not familiar with this importer's business environment.	
	DIS3	We are very familiar with the organizational culture, values, and attitudes of this importer. (R)	
	DIS4	We are not aware of many things about the structural characteristics of this importer's organization.	
	DIS5	We are familiar with the working methods and processes followed by this importer. (R)	
Conflict	CNF1	The roles in the working relationship with this importer are not performed as required, causing many disagreements.	Kumar, Stern, and Achrol (1992)
	CNF2	Often unreasonable demands arise in the relationship with this importer, causing a great deal of frustration.	
	CNF3	The working relationship with this importer is very stressful and worrying, resulting in a lot of tension.	
	CNF4	There are often disagreements between our firm and this importer on issues concerning the relationship.	
	CNF5	The working relationship with this importer is characterized by a high degree of conflict.	
Relational performance	REP1	The relationship between our firm and this importer has been very productive.	LaBahn and Harich (1997)
	REP2	We have found the time and effort spent on this relationship very worthwhile.	
	REP3	The relationship between our firm and this importer has been very effective.	
	REP4	We have a very rewarding relationship with this importer.	
Opportunism	OPP1	This importer alters the facts slightly.	Yilmaz and Hunt (2001)
	OPP2	This importer promises to do things without actually doing them later.	
	OPP3	This importer fails to provide us with the support s/he is obliged to provide.	
	OPP4	This importer avoids fulfilling his/her responsibilities unless s/he is watched closely.	
Interpartner incompatibility	INC1	The organizational values and social norms that pertain between our company and this importer are not compatible.	Sarkar, Aulakh, and Cavusgil (1998)
	INC2	Executives from our firm and those from this importer have incompatible philosophies/approaches to business.	
	INC3	The goals and objectives of our firm are compatible with those of this importer. (R)	
	INC4	The technical capabilities of our firm are incompatible with those of this importer.	
	INC5	The organizational procedures of our firm and those of this importer are compatible. (R)	
	INC6	Employees of both our company and this importer have similar professional or trade skills. (R)	

**Notes:** Measurement was based on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). (R) = reverse-scored scale.