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**Enhancing international buyer-seller relationship quality and long-term orientation
using emotional intelligence: The moderating role of foreign culture**

Abstract

Building on Emotion Regulation Theory, we examine the role of an exporter's emotional intelligence (EI) in enhancing the quality and boosting the long-term orientation of the working relationship with its import buyers. Using data gathered from 262 Greek exporters, we confirm that the proper use of EI helps to improve trust, commitment, cooperation, and satisfaction in the relationship with their importers, which subsequently contribute to its long-term orientation. This favorable effect of EI on relationship quality dimensions is amplified when exporters deal with importers located in countries with cultures characterized by low power distance, low individualism, low masculinity, high uncertainty avoidance, and high (national) long-term orientation.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; exporting; buyer-seller relationships; culture.

Introduction

Emotions are “coordinated responses that occur when an organism encounters meaningful stimuli that exercise its adaptive capacities” (Rottenberg & Gross, 2003, p. 228). These play a crucial role in influencing an individual’s interactions with other people, shaping in this way the dynamics and outcomes of their relationships with them (Jones & George, 1998). However, to be able to use emotions effectively to maintain harmonious relationships, certain competences are needed, usually expressed in the form of an individual’s emotional intelligence (EI) (Gross, 1998). The latter is defined as the ability to process sophisticated information about one’s and others’ emotions, in order to utilize them to guide positive thinking and behavior in a relationship (Mayer et al., 2008). It is based on the idea that individuals have (or can develop) an ability to use their emotions and those of others rationally to create a constructive climate (Brackett et al., 2011).

Although psychology research has repeatedly confirmed the role of EI in improving relationships between interacting individuals (e.g., Lopes et al., 2003), its examination within a business context has been confined mainly to the sphere of relationships between supervisors-employees (e.g., Jordan & Troth 2011), salespersons-customers (e.g., Delpechitre et al., 2018), and service providers-consumers (e.g., Matute et al., 2018). One summary conclusion that can be derived from these studies is that the proper use of EI between parties in an interpersonal working relationship can indeed improve various positive dimensions of their interactive behavior, such as trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. It can also help individuals to adopt long-term orientation in their relationships with other people by prioritizing and positively adapting their thoughts to fluctuating emotions taking place during their interactions (Bande et al., 2015; Lin, 2010).

Notwithstanding the relatively extensive research on EI within the context of interpersonal relationships, its application to inter-organizational business relationships,

particularly within an international context, is virtually absent. This is despite hints in the extant literature that EI could be usefully employed in: (a) improving the quality of one's social interactions with others by devoting a positive attention to their partners, rather than focusing entirely on themselves (Lopes et al., 2004; Schutte et al., 2001); (b) allowing individuals to better appraise their strengths, weaknesses, biases, and assumptions concerning relationships with partners from diverse backgrounds, including different cultures (Chrobot-Mason & Leslie, 2012); and (c) downregulating negative emotions (e.g., stress) and harnessing positive emotions (e.g., calmness) that could facilitate constructive relational adaptations (Yoo et al., 2006).

Moreover, culture regulates emotions through norms in order to ensure that behavior (driven by emotions) conforms to cultural prescriptions, allows effective functioning of society, and prevents social chaos (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012). As such, there are hints in the literature (e.g., Grandey et al., 2010; Gunkel et al., 2016) that EI itself (and its association with other variables) are influenced by cultural values, which implies that perception, understanding, management, and use of emotions are culture-dependent. Although various meta-analyses stress the existence of a moderating role played by cultural characteristics on the association between a leader's EI and subordinate job satisfaction (Miao et al., 2016), a leader's EI and subordinate task performance (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018), a person's EI and entrepreneurial intentions (Miao, Humphrey, Qian, & Pollack, 2018), and a service provider's EI and service quality (Miao et al., 2019), there is virtually no research exploring how national culture moderates the influence of EI on cross-border inter-firm relational phenomena.

Furthermore, an issue of major concern in international business relationships, and particularly in exporter-importer relationships, has to do with the high discontinuity rates, probably due to the high geographic, social, and institutional distances separating the parties involved (Chang et al., 2015; Wahyuni et al., 2007). This can be mainly attributed to the lack of a long-term orientation in the relationship which is vital in: (a) gaining a long-term return on

the relational, financial, and other investments made by the interacting parties over time (Kumar et al., 2003); (b) preventing partners from performing acts of self-interest that can lead to catastrophic results (Wang et al., 2020); (c) encouraging adaptations to changing conditions within and outside the working relationship, which are vital in reducing uncertainty, rigidity, and tardiness when operating in unknown environments (Johnson, 1999); and (d) improving effectiveness and efficiency aspects of the working relationship and enhancing financial performance through an ongoing stream of business transactions (Stump et al., 2002).

In light of the above gaps in the literature, this article explores the role of EI in influencing the quality of the exporter-importer relationship (taking into consideration the idiosyncrasies of foreign cultures) and how this in turn contributes to the adoption of long-term orientation.¹ We are particularly interested in finding out how exporters can use their EI as a tool to enhance trust, commitment, cooperation, and satisfaction in their relationship with import buyers. We also want to show how different cultural characteristics of importers can moderate the influence of EI on each of these four elements comprising relationship quality. Finally, it is our intention to examine how each of these relationship quality dimensions can facilitate the long-term orientation of interactions between exporters and importers.

Our study contributes to the international business literature by: (a) extending the EI knowledge accumulated on interpersonal relationships to cross-border business relationships, with a particular focus on enhancing the quality of interactions between exporters and importers, which is a core issue in achieving international business success (Leonidou et al., 2014); (b) highlighting the importance of cultural contingencies in the importer's country in

¹ Long-term orientation is defined as the willingness of interacting partners to develop a long-term relationship, characterized by an emphasis on reaching future goals and a concern for current and future results (Ganesan, 1994). As such, it has to do with a willingness to have a long-lasting relationship, concern for the outcomes of both interacting parties, and focus on long-term goals, concessions, and profitability (Ganesan, 1994). This differs from commitment, which is defined as a desire to maintain a valued relationship with another firm (Moorman et al., 1992; Gundlach et al., 1995), as well as a belief that this relationship is important enough to make it worthwhile to work hard and make specific investments to maintain it (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

influencing the favorable effect of an export manager's EI on the quality of the working relationship at the inter-organizational level (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018); and (c) stressing the conducive role of achieving high levels of relationship quality (through the proper use of EI) in cultivating a long-term oriented spirit between interacting parties, which is vital in protecting their relationship against factors that may lead to its discontinuity (Barnes et al., 2010).

In the following sections, we first provide the research background by explaining EI, pinpointing its role in building relationships, and reviewing the pertinent literature on EI within an international business context. We then present the theoretical base of our study, develop the conceptual model, and formulate the research hypotheses. The next section explains the research methodology, particularly focusing on sampling procedures, construct measurement, questionnaire design, and data collection. This is followed by an analysis of the data and presentation of the results. In the final sections, we discuss the study findings, derive implications, and recommend directions for future research.

Research background

Understanding emotional intelligence

EI is “the ability to reason validly with emotions and with emotion-related information, and to use emotions to enhance thought” (Mayer et al., 2016, p. 295). Notably, these abilities exist within the social setting in which they operate, which requires the emotionally intelligent individual to know the behavioral patterns considered appropriate and acceptable by those with whom s/he interacts, in order to comprehend and navigate the social environment (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). Mayer et al. (2016) regard EI, together with social and personal intelligence, as

“hot intelligence”, as it requires reasoning with information of importance to the individual and is used to manage what matters most to the individual, such as senses for social acceptance.

According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), EI comprises four branches, namely, perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions. *Perceiving emotions* refers to the ability to accurately identify emotions in one’s own physical conditions and thoughts, as well as to detect and decipher emotions in faces, pictures, voices, language, and cultural artifacts (Mayer et al., 2016). Perceiving emotions requires recognizing and inputting verbal and nonverbal information from the emotion system (Salovey et al., 2008). This ability also involves distinguishing between authentic and unauthentic emotional expressions. It is the most fundamental aspect of EI, in that it enables other processing of emotional information (Mayer et al., 2016; Salovey & Grewal, 2005). This ability increases the opportunity to learn more from and understand more about one’s own and others’ emotions and thoughts (Salovey et al., 2008).

Using emotions refers to the ability to employ emotions to facilitate cognitive activities (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). It involves harnessing emotions for solving problems more effectively, better reasoning, more effective decision-making, and creative engagements (Salovey et al., 2008). This ability involves selecting problems depending on the way the current emotional state can facilitate thought, prioritizing cognitive activities by directing attention based on ongoing emotional states, and generating emotions to assist judgment and memory (Mayer et al., 2016; Salovey & Grewal, 2005).

Understanding emotions is the ability to label emotions with words, to grasp emotional messages, to recognize the complex relationships among emotions, to sense emotional transitions, to understand complicated and mixed emotions, and to have insight into the causes, meanings, and outcomes of emotions (Salovey & Grewal, 2005; Salovey et al., 2008). This ability also provides the individual with an emotional forecasting skill, that is, insight into the way one could feel under certain conditions. Emotionally intelligent people can also sense the

situations that might give rise to emotions. It also allows one to notice cultural differences in the assessment of emotions (Mayer et al., 2016). Being able to understand the meaning of emotions, how various emotions combine, and how emotions progress over time, provides the individual with the competence to gain insight into human interactions (Salovey et al., 2008).

Managing emotions is the ability to regulate one's own and others' emotions (both positive and negative) in order to achieve goals (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). This ability involves: (a) assessing strategies to keep, down-regulate, or up-regulate emotional reactions; (b) evaluating the effectiveness of emotions by observing their impact on self and others; and (c) being ready to face both positive and negative emotions and their messages (Mayer et al., 2016). While the other three branches of EI involve discrete realms of information processing connected to the emotions system, managing emotions is integrated with the individual's plans and work (Mayer et al., 2004).

Emotional intelligence and relationship building

An individual with high levels of EI is usually very selective in activating his/her emotional ability to develop relationships with others. This implies that it is likely for emotionally intelligent individuals to leverage their emotions in such a way as to avoid undeserving partners, because of potential harm to the relationship (Gross, 2001). For example, if there are signs that the other party is pathologically problematic, an emotionally intelligent individual may decide not to regulate emotions, because this would be both ineffective and inefficient (von Gilsa et al., 2014).

Individuals high in EI are more motivated to solve relational problems by taking into consideration their concerns and those of the other party. They are less likely to lose temper in cases of relational problems but instead take constructive actions by shifting attention to long-term relational goals (Krishnakumar et al., 2019; Shih & Susanto, 2010). Since relationships

are dynamic phenomena, there is always the possibility for a seemingly promising relationship to deteriorate or an existing problematic relationship to have the potential to improve. This underscores the crucial role of an executive's EI to initiate, manage, and sustain the business relationships at all stages of his/her organization's interactions with other firms, in order to ensure at any time high levels of relationship quality.

Within an inter-organizational context, individual managers can: (a) initiate business with people in a new partner firm, in which case they can use their EI to avoid embarking on a problematic relationship or alternatively proceeding with the further development of a promising relationship; and/or (b) handle an already existing relationship (which may or may not be problematic), in which case they can use their EI to constructively improve its atmosphere. With regard to the latter case, there are indications from the management literature (e.g., Krishnakumar et al., 2019; Shih & Susanto, 2010) that emotionally intelligent people are in a better position than their counterparts who do not possess such ability to effectively handle existing relationships in a way to improve their quality and performance outcomes.

Emotional intelligence in international business research

Research on EI within the context of international business, although dating back to the early 2000s, has surprisingly made slow progress since then. A number of scholars (e.g., Gabel Shemueli & Dolan, 2011; Gabel et al., 2005; Koveshnikov et al., 2014; Konanahalli & Oyedele, 2016; Wechtler et al., 2015) have stressed the role of high levels of EI in facilitating expatriate managers to make a smooth adjustment to the foreign market's operating requirements. Chew et al. (2019) also indicated that EI helps through cross-cultural adjustment to enhance the task performance and psychological well-being of the expatriate manager, while at the same time reducing premature return. Emotionally intelligent expatriate managers were also found to deliver better performance results (Gabel et al., 2005) and higher levels of organizational commitment (Lii & Wong, 2008) compared to their counterparts with low EI levels.

Other researchers have focused on foreign cultural influences on EI. For example, Gunkel et al. (2014) demonstrated that individuals scoring high on uncertainty avoidance and (national) long-term orientation tend to be more emotionally intelligent, while Gunkel et al. (2016) noted that collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and (national) long-term orientation are conducive to the adoption of integrating, obliging, and compromising conflict-handling styles through the positive mediating role of EI. Butler et al. (2014) also showed that, in multinational corporations, the positive impact of EI on leadership effectiveness becomes stronger in cultural contexts characterized by higher levels of uncertainty avoidance and collectivism. Grandey et al. (2010) also showed that the expression of anger toward high familiarity targets is less acceptable in collectivistic, as opposed to individualistic, cultures, while the expression of anger toward low familiarity targets (e.g., customers) does not differ between the two cultures.

With regard to research on EI in international business relationships, Leonidou, Aykol, et al. (2019) revealed that an export executive's EI could improve the atmosphere and performance of the working relationship with the foreign customer, particularly when the latter does not behave opportunistically and is more compatible with the exporter in terms of goals, values, and strategies. Focusing on the negotiating aspect of international buyer-seller relationships, Lee et al. (2006) reported that, as opposed to their US counterparts, Chinese partners tend to suppress any negative emotions, while seeking compromise, in order to avoid tension and possible negative outcomes.

Reus (2012), in his investigation of EI within a cross-border acquisition setting, showed that cultural distance between the acquiring and the acquired companies reduces the likelihood of emotional attending by the former, but the humane-oriented nature of the culture of the latter increases the likelihood that the acquirer will engage in emotional attending. Quintillán and Peña-Legazkue (2019) found that following an economic shock, developing country-based entrepreneurs with high EI levels tend to internationalize more than their counterparts with low

EI levels. They also revealed that, compared to education level and previous experience, EI makes a stronger impact on the firm's internationalization process.

A final line of research examined EI within the context of international business students. For example, Chia (2005) demonstrated that improved EI among accounting major graduates has been responsible for increasing their chances of successfully completing job interviews and securing job offers in multinational accounting firms. Lillis and Tian (2009) also concluded that business students with high levels of EI were in a better position to recognize context-based emotion patterns and adapt to intercultural contexts, compared to those with low levels of EI. Similarly, Townsend et al. (2015) revealed that high EI among international business students is a major contributor to developing cross-cultural capability.

Theory, model, and hypotheses

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of our study, which draws on Emotion Regulation Theory, stating that individuals have a controlling influence on which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and display them (Gross, 2002). Emotion regulation is based on the idea that individuals can make changes in their emotional response tendencies, which shape the ultimate emotional responses that they manifest (Gross, 1999; Rottenberg & Gross, 2003). This is because emotions are not forcing individuals to respond in certain ways, but serve as flexible behavioral guiding systems, which individuals are able to regulate (Gross, 2002; Rottenberg & Gross, 2003). Emotion regulation helps individuals to use emotions to their advantage and to reach their goals (Gross, 1998). If there is incongruity between the emotions felt and the current situation, the individual down-regulates or up-regulates emotional responses to ensure that emotions enable them to attain their goals (Gross, 2002). In fact, people are able to regulate the suspension, rise time, magnitude, continuity, and offset of their responses (Gross, 1998).

...Insert Figure 1 about here...

The effect of emotional intelligence on relationship quality

Emotionally intelligent exporters are in a better position to cultivate mutual trust in the working relationship with the importer. Emotions represent important facets of the experience of trust, as the decision to trust someone is affected both by the trustor's current emotional state and by the examination of their feelings toward the trustee (Jones & George, 1998). Exporters with high EI are better able to sense the outcomes of expressing negative emotions and use their social skills to build rapport with their partners and develop a common ground, which helps mutual interests to be manifested and mutual positive attitudes to develop (Kim et al., 2015). The degree to which both parties can develop a common frame of reference and take the role of the other creates an optimistic and trustworthy climate in the relationship (Jones & George, 1998). Besides, emotionally intelligent exporters usually take the perspective of the importer and regulate their emotional reactions in order to obtain mutually positive outcomes, which represent emotional investments directed toward increasing trust between interacting parties (Chun et al., 2010). We can therefore assert that:

H_{1a}: The exporter's emotional intelligence has a positive effect on trust in the relationship with the import buyer.

Exporters high in EI are also expected to help increase the degree of commitment in the relationship with their import buyers. Because of their ability to effectively perceive and understand emotions, emotionally intelligent exporters are more sensitive to partner emotions, needs, and problems, which leads them to respond in a constructive manner (e.g., sometimes helping to solve problems by engaging in extra-role behavior), which, in turn, may motivate the importer to recognize, appreciate, and reciprocate this benefit (Abraham, 1999; Kearney et al., 2017; Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018; Turnispeed & Vandewaa, 2012). Indeed, their high

degree of empathy enables them to interpret events from the perspective of the partner and the relationship as a whole, which results in the internalization of relational norms, the pursuit of mutual interests, and the engagement in voluntary work to accomplish relational goals (Abraham, 1999). They can also use their emotional resources more effectively and regulate their emotions in order to have a positive effect on the relationship, which will contribute to the development of emotional attachment in the relationship (Levitats & Vigoda-Gadot, 2017). Emotionally intelligent exporters also tend to substitute any dysfunctional feelings with positive affect, shifting their attention to mutually agreed ways of constructively solving problems and maintaining harmony in their interactions (Abraham, 1999; Carmeli, 2003). This enables to effectively cope with any difficulties involved in sustaining the relationships with import buyers (which are characterized by high levels of distance, uncertainty, and information asymmetry), since the cultivation of optimistic and positive attitudes enables identification with the relationship and boosts willingness to make future emotional investments, which is an integral part of commitment (Abraham, 1999; Carmeli, 2003). Moreover, by constructively resolving any problems and/or amicably accommodating any differences that may arise in the interaction with the import buyer is expected to enhance commitment levels in the relationship (Blankenburg Holm et al., 1996; Styles et al., 2008). The following hypothesis can be made:

H_{1b}: The exporter's emotional intelligence has a positive effect on commitment in the relationship with the import buyer.

Cooperation involves emotional abilities to perceive, understand, and manage own and others' emotions for the pursuit of superior goals (Jordan & Troth, 2002). Emotionally intelligent exporters are expected to augment cooperation in the relationship, as they can better appraise and manage their own and partner's emotions in a way to achieve commonly agreed goals, harmonize their relational expectations, and perform mutually beneficial actions (Sy & Côté, 2004). Prior research also indicates that cooperative people tend to display greater

emotional sensitivity, particularly in the case of negative emotions, such as distress, unhappiness, and helplessness (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Also, their ability to distinguish between genuine and fake emotions, through the sensing of explicit (e.g., tone of voice) and/or implicit (e.g., body language) signals, helps to promote collaboration between interacting parties (Elfenbein et al., 2007; George, 2000). Thanks to the accurate appraisal of a partner's emotions and their roots, as well as the ability to positively influence a partner's emotions, emotionally intelligent exporters can facilitate: (a) understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each party in the working relationship; (b) viewing the relationship as one unit, rather than consisting of separate/independent partners; (c) resolving any problems that may arise in an amicable, optimistic, and constructive way; and (d) minimizing the impact of conflict and frustration associated with relational goal alignment and investment of efforts (George, 2000, Sy & Côté, 2004). In addition, the ability of emotionally intelligent people to manage emotions helps, on the one hand, to diffuse any barriers (e.g., tension) that would be destructive for the working relationship, and, on the other, to enhance motivations (e.g., enthusiasm), which are essential to accomplishing their common goals (Sy & Côté, 2004). Thus, we can posit that:

H_{1c}: The exporter's emotional intelligence has a positive effect on cooperation in the relationship with the import buyer.

Emotionally intelligent exporters are also expected to improve satisfaction levels in their relationship with importers. This is because people with high EI have the ability to accurately perceive, decode, and express their own and others' emotions, thus preventing any misinterpretations (e.g., conceiving anxiety as hostility) that may cause negative affect (Härtel et al., 2008). Such an ability matters particularly in international buyer-seller relationships, because the inherent psychic distance between interacting parties may easily give rise to such misinterpretations. Emotionally intelligent exporters are also in a better position to clearly

convey and be the recipient of expectations relating to the working relationship with import buyers, thus facilitating mutual goal fulfilment (Fitness, 2006). Moreover, the fact that high levels of EI provide insights into how emotions are developed, interpreted, and transformed, enables taking appropriate reciprocal actions that will elicit mutually beneficial responses and ultimately lead to desired relational outcomes (Mueller & Curhan, 2006). In addition, the ability to better understand the roots and consequences of emotions in a working relationship helps to resolve possible transgressions in a constructive and satisfactory way (Fitness, 2006). Hence, we can hypothesize that:

H_{1a}: The exporter's emotional intelligence has a positive effect on satisfaction in the relationship with the import buyer.

The effect of relationship quality on long-term orientation

Trust is the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to the actions of another, that rests on the expectation that the latter will carry out certain actions important to the former, regardless of its ability to control the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995). Trust increases long-term orientation, which is an indication of the willingness of interacting parties to develop a long-lasting association (Ganesan, 1994). Thus, a trustee that is honest, fair, and reliable makes the trustor believe that s/he will continue in future to show the same integrity, benevolence, and ability (Ta et al., 2018). Being trustworthy helps to alleviate anxiety, reduce uncertainty, and cultivate optimism in the working relationship, which are essential ingredients for developing enduring business relationships (Wagner et al., 2011). In fact, trust signals that the trustee is attentive to the trustor's interests (rather than self-interest), seeks joint benefits, and adheres to principles acceptable to the trustor (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Mayer et al., 1995). This is particularly critical in international business relationships where trust increases the probability of extending collaboration with the foreign partner in the long run, because: (a) it reduces the risk of short-term thinking resulting from the predictability, benevolence, and interest in the well-being of

the partner; (b) it fosters a belief that short-term inequities will be resolved in future through mutually satisfactory solutions; and (c) it allows the confidence to make enduring relationship-specific investments and take risks whenever required (Wang et al., 2014). Trusting partners also show a greater tendency to preserve their reputation by foregoing attractive short-term outcomes in order to enjoy long-term benefits (Chiles & McMackin, 1996). Hence, we can hypothesize that:

H₂: The existence of high levels of trust in the working relationship between the exporter and the import buyer will enhance its long-term orientation.

Commitment refers to “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman et al., 1992, p. 316). By its very nature, commitment denotes an advanced stage of bonding, in which the parties involved in a relationship show an implicit or explicit promise to stay together and prolong its existence (Dwyer et al., 1987). This is because commitment involves durability in the sense that the interacting parties appreciate the relational benefits gained, which in turn increases the depth (e.g., intensifying partner training) and breadth (e.g., allocating additional resources) of relational investments that are gradually developed over time (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Dwyer et al., 1987). Such investments increase both familiarization with and dependence on the partner, and cannot be transferred to other relationships, implying that the early termination of the relationship would lead to economic losses (Poppo et al., 2008). Similarly, commitment in a relationship increases the cost of switching to alternative partners, which acts as a disincentive to quit an existing, proven relationship (Dwyer et al., 1987). Relational commitment also involves the deliberate and consistent devotion of resources, driven by the high value attached to the partner, to maintain the relationship in return for future gains (Dwyer et al., 1987; Lin & Germain, 1999), thus increasing the likelihood of seeking a long-term orientation in the relationship (Haugland, 1999). The following hypothesis can be made:

H₃: The existence of high levels of commitment in the working relationship between the exporter and the import buyer will enhance its long-term orientation.

Cooperation is the process of collaboration between interacting parties in a relationship, by jointly formulating plans and actions to achieve mutually-established goals and obtain mutually beneficial values (Sibley & Michie, 1982; Stern & Reve, 1980). This involves joint efforts that ensure the effective and efficient functioning of the relationship, because cooperative partners tend to make short-term sacrifices in anticipation of long-term gains (Blankenburg Holm et al., 1996). In contrast, the absence of a cooperative spirit makes the relationship vulnerable to short-term (and sometimes opportunistic) actions, which can jeopardize its future continuation (Das & Teng, 2000). Cooperative endeavors by the parties involved in a relationship tend to enhance compatibility perceptions and encourage inter-partner alignment in terms of objectives, strategies, and behaviors (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Artto et al., 2015; Hadjikhani et al., 2012). Cooperative partners usually seek to maintain a relationship in the long run through coordinated activities and complementary resource exchanges, which create valuable investments over time that signify common interest and risk-sharing (Poppo et al., 2008). In fact, the long-term benefits derived from this cooperative relationship minimize the need to look for alternative partners (Poppo et al., 2008). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H₄: The existence of high levels of cooperation in the working relationship between the exporter and the import buyer will enhance its long-term orientation.

Satisfaction refers to a positive affective state derived from an assessment of all facets of a relationship (Anderson & Narus, 1984) and provides a good indication of the extent to which this relationship meets the expectations of the parties involved (Wilson, 1995). Satisfaction increases future business intentions in a relationship, and therefore enhances its long-term orientation for several important reasons. First, a satisfactory relationship yields rich

rewards, while at the same time does not incur substantial costs, which provides the impetus for interacting parties to adopt a long-term perspective, with a view to achieving further gains (Gassenheimer et al., 1996; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Second, due to the positive value added, such a relationship will deepen the interaction between parties, increase switching costs, and reduce the attractiveness of alternative working relationships (Karunaratna & Johnson, 1997; Ping, 2003). Third, the fact that relational expectations in terms of gains received have been met in the existing relationship validates the choice of the specific partner, thus reducing risks to further continuing the relationship and maintaining high performance levels (Ebers & Maurer, 2016). Fourth, satisfaction derived from a value-enhancing and goal-accomplishing relationship is a positive learning experience that acts as an impetus to further gaining value from it in the future (Ebers & Maurer, 2016; Glavee-Geo, 2019). We can therefore hypothesize that:

H₅: The existence of high levels of satisfaction in the working relationship between the exporter and the import buyer will enhance its long-term orientation.

The role of foreign customer culture as a moderator

We now examine the moderating role of Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) foreign cultural dimensions, namely power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and (national) long-term orientation, on the association between EI and relationship quality.

Power distance is the degree to which less powerful individuals in a country's institutions and organizations expect and accept an unequal distribution of power (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In cultures with high power distance, relationships are characterized by a limited flow of emotional resources (Vidyarthi et al., 2014). Individuals from high power distance cultures are expected to be less sensitive to others' empathetic actions, as they believe in inequality among people (Gunkel et al., 2014). A substantial emotional distance separates more powerful individuals from those that are less powerful, with the former characterized by

higher status, greater wealth, and better education, as opposed to the latter (Basabe et al., 2002). Compared to people living in low power distance countries, high power distance individuals tend to reduce social proximity and are less approachable (Vidyarthi et al., 2014), thus making the task of the emotionally intelligent exporter to monitor their emotions rather difficult (Vidyarthi et al., 2014). In addition, emotions are valued less in high power distance countries, where individuals tend to suppress their emotional responses in order to preserve harmony (Matsumoto et al., 2008). Hence, we may posit that:

H₆: Power distance negatively moderates the association between EI and (a) trust, (b) commitment, (c) cooperation, and (d) satisfaction in the relationship between the exporter and the import buyer.

Individualism represents the extent to which ties between people living in a society are loose (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). People living in individualistic cultures are distinctive in their view of relationships, because they emphasize self-interest than relational interest and value transactions more than behavioral interactions (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018). They also differ from their counterparts living in collectivistic cultures in the way they express positive and negative emotions (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). For example, regulating emotions (e.g., self-control) to keep in-group harmony helps to increase the chances of survival and success of working relationships in collectivistic societies (Gunkel et al., 2016; Matsumoto, 2006). As such, individuals with high levels of EI have a personal advantage in emotion management and fulfilment of collectivist expectations (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018). However, if the foreign buyer is from an individualist culture, his/her emotions are more difficult to control, thus making the task of the emotionally intelligent exporter to improve the quality of the relationship rather cumbersome (Baker et al., 2013). The following hypothesis can therefore be made:

H₇: Individualism negatively moderates the association between EI and (a) trust, (b) commitment, (c) cooperation, and (d) satisfaction in the relationship between the exporter and its import buyer.

Masculinity is the extent to which emotional gender roles are clearly different in a society (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Individuals living in cultures with higher levels of masculinity are expected to attach more importance to challenge, earnings, improvement, and recognition, while those living in low-masculinity cultures are expected to be more pro-relational (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Cultures scoring low on masculinity are also characterized by a higher frequency of positive emotions and emotional support (Basabe et al., 2002), which is conducive to have harmonious relational exchanges (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018). In contrast, in the case of people coming from cultures with high levels of masculinity, the task of handling and monitoring the working relationship in the right direction becomes difficult, because they care more about economic/operational issues than behavioral/emotional ones (Schoefer, 2010). In fact, the expression of particularly soft emotions in a relationship is perceived by high masculine people as a threat to the established identity of a “good” individual (Lindebaum & Cassell, 2012), while emotional attending to others is not fostered (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018). We can posit the following:

H₈: Masculinity negatively moderates the association between EI and (a) trust, (b) commitment, (c) cooperation, and (d) satisfaction in the relationship between the exporter and its import buyer.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which individuals feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). People living in cultures scoring high in uncertainty avoidance are afraid of unstructured situations and unfamiliar risks, and tend to show their emotions at proper times and places (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Such people are characterized by high anxiety levels and seek security through formal rules,

procedures, and contracts (Basabe et al., 2002). Under these conditions, the emotionally intelligent exporter can best use his/her abilities to regulate emotions in order to reduce the level of uncertainty felt by the foreign buyer, enhancing in this way trust and commitment in the working relationship (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018). The prevalence of high levels of uncertainty avoidance in the foreign partner's country may even force the exporter to deploy appropriate EI skills to cope with possible conflicts that may arise from unclear conditions and intentions (Gunkel et al., 2014). In contrast, in cultures scoring low on uncertainty avoidance, individuals tend to hide their emotions (e.g., anxiety, stress, aggression), which makes it difficult for the emotionally intelligent exporter to clearly understand and effectively handle the foreign buyer's concerns (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Hence, we can hypothesize that:

H₉: Uncertainty avoidance positively moderates the association between EI and (a) trust, (b) commitment, (c) cooperation, and (d) satisfaction in the relationship between the exporter and its import buyer.

(National) long-term orientation refers to the promotion of virtues by people – especially perseverance and thrift – oriented toward future rewards (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In contrast, short-term orientation as a cultural value is directed at extolling virtues associated with the past and present – especially with regard to respecting tradition, saving face, and meeting social obligations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Certain characteristics of long-term oriented societies, such as concern with personal adaptiveness and long-term human relations, are expected to enhance the positive role of EI in boosting relationship quality (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In addition, fostering investment in lifelong personal networks (and rejecting pragmatic acts that would put them at risk) is a business value instilled in long-term oriented societies (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Indeed, evidence from international business research (e.g., Gunkel et al., 2014; Gunkel et al., 2016) indicates that the application of EI abilities finds a more fertile ground in long-term oriented societies, where there is a tendency to preserve

relationships by showing more attention to partner feelings and down-regulating negative emotions. Hence, an exporter's EI is expected to further facilitate the improvement of the quality of its working relationships with buyers in cultures having a long-term orientation, because these buyers will tend to value more the importance of achieving harmony, smoothness, and endurance in their business relationships (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018). We can propose the following:

H₁₀: (National) long-term orientation positively moderates the association between EI and (a) trust, (b) commitment, (c) cooperation, and (d) satisfaction in the relationship between the exporter and its import buyer.

Research method

We conducted our study in Greece, by randomly selecting a sample of 1,000 exporting firms out of a total population of more than 10,000 firms registered in the latest ICAP Export Directory. These exporters covered a wide range of industries (including both consumer and industrial goods), were indigenously owned, and belonged to the private sector of the economy. Our key informant was the individual in charge of export operations, who was contacted by telephone to explain the objectives of the study, explore his/her willingness to participate, and clarify his/her postal/electronic contact details. We were able to receive affirmative responses from 595 firms, to which the survey was made available through postal and/or electronic means. Firms that declined to participate in the survey did so mainly on the basis of company policy not to disclose internal information, lack of available time to fill in the questionnaire, or termination of their export activity. We also found that some firms contained in our initial sample had ceased operations altogether.

The research instrument was a pre-coded self-administered questionnaire, which was developed based on well-established and validated scales found in the pertinent literature.

Following Wong and Law (2002), EI was operationalized as a higher order construct consisting of four dimensions (i.e., self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, utilization of emotion, and regulation of emotion). Relationship quality comprised four constructs, namely trust, commitment, cooperation, and satisfaction, which were treated independently from each other. The trust scale was based on Doney and Cannon (1997), whereas the scale for commitment was extracted from Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Gundlach et al. (1995). The cooperation scale was derived from the works of Sibley and Michie (1982) and Morgan and Hunt (1994). The satisfaction scale items were obtained from Leuthesser and Kohli's (1995) study. With regard to the long-term orientation scale, this was based on Ganesan's (1994) work. All constructs were measured on a 7-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree. The foreign culture-based moderators, comprising power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and (national) long-term orientation, were measured using import buyer's country scores derived from Hofstede's database (geerthofstede.com).

The various model constructs and their operationalized scales were incorporated in a questionnaire in three different sections, with each corresponding to emotional intelligence, relationship quality, and long-term orientation. The questionnaire also included a section seeking information on the firm's exporting activities (e.g., export experience, nature of products exported, export destination countries), while another section requested information about business experience, number of employees, and sales turnover. At the end of the questionnaire there was a set of questions assessing the familiarity, knowledgeableability, and confidence of the key informant (Cannon & Perreault, 1999).

The questionnaire was initially designed in English and went through a translation and back-translation process to and from Greek, which resolved any linguistic issues (Craig & Douglas, 2005). The unit of analysis in the study was the single relationship of an exporter with

a particular import buyer in a specific foreign country. To ensure variability in responses and to minimize respondent selection bias, when filling the questionnaire, respondents were asked to refer to their third most important import buyer in terms of sales volume, and clearly specify the country of this importer (Anderson & Narus, 1990). Before sending out the questionnaire to respondents, we conducted a pre-test with five export managers in order to assess its workability, flow, and duration, with some minor mistakes being corrected.

To encourage participation in the study, we explained in the covering letter the objectives, significance, and confidentiality of the study, offered to provide participants with a summary report of the findings, while, in cases of non-response, these were sent reminder letters and/or contacted by telephone. As result, we were able to receive 268 responses corresponding to a 45% response rate (which is well above the average in extant exporting research). Six of the responses had to be excluded due to missing data, inconsistent responses, and unsuitability of the key informant (i.e., cases with scores lower than 4 (out of 7) in the three key informant suitability questions), thus bringing the final sample down to 262. To control for non-response bias, we followed Armstrong and Overton's (1977) procedures, where we compared the answers of early and late respondents, revealing no statistically significant differences between the two groups.

Data analysis and findings

Measurement model

Data were analyzed with structural equation modeling using the EQS program and adopting the elliptical reweighted least squares (ERLS) technique. We tested two measurement models using confirmatory factor analyses. The first model comprised the observed items of the five first-order latent constructs, in which each manifest variable was restricted to load on its prespecified factor (with the underlying factors being allowed to correlate), indicating a good fit to the data

($\chi^2 = 292.62$, $p = .00$, $df = 160$; NFI= .94; NNFI= .96; CFI= .97; RMSEA= .07). The second model contained the multidimensional constructs of the second-order EI, also demonstrating satisfactory fit indices ($\chi^2 = 122.19$, $p = .00$, $df = 73$; NFI= .93; NNFI= .94; CFI= .95; RMSEA= .07) (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) (see **Table 1**).

...Insert Table 1 about here...

The data purification process also showed that: (a) *convergent validity* was established, because 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 construct was equal to or above .50 (Hair et al., 2018); (b) *discriminant validity* was ensured, because the confidence interval around the correlation estimate for each pair of constructs examined never included 1.00 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), whereas the correlation for each pair of constructs was always lower than the square root of their average variance extracted (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) (see **Table 2**); and (c) construct reliability was satisfactory, because the Cronbach's alphas for all constructs were greater than .70, while composite reliabilities also exceeded the threshold level of .70.

...Insert Table 2 about here...

To minimize the possibility of common method bias, we took the following precautionary measures: (a) we assured respondents that they would have anonymity and that their answers would be treated as strictly confidential, while the results would be provided in an aggregated form; (b) we encouraged respondents to complete the questionnaire in an objective and accurate way, clearly indicating to them that there were no right or wrong answers; (c) we counterbalanced the order of questions measuring dependent and independent variables; (d) we incorporated reverse items in some of the measurement scales, to ensure that the respondent was paying careful attention to the questions asked; and (e) we combined

subjective data obtained from managers, with objective data derived from secondary sources (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

We also checked for common method bias using two post-hoc bias tests. The first test was based on the partial correlation technique, where a marker variable (a construct theoretically disconnected to the various model constructs) did not exhibit a significant correlation with the other constructs, while the significance of the correlation coefficients did not change following various partial correlation adjustments (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). The second test was based on the common method factor test, whereby items were allowed to load on their theoretical construct and on a latent common method variance factor, revealing that the structural parameters across the models that included and excluded the latent common method variance factor were stable (which is an indication of the inexistence of common method bias) (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Although there is a possibility for long-term orientation to contribute to an improved relationship quality, the extant literature (e.g., Barnes et al., 2010; Yen & Abosag, 2016; Yen & Barnes, 2011) has adopted the causality pattern of the existence of high levels of relationship quality leading to a high long-term orientation. This is because relationship quality is of paramount importance for: (a) the smooth progression of the working relationship to more advanced stages of development (Akrouf, 2014); (b) the achievement of high levels of relational performance in terms of effectiveness and efficiency (Leonidou et al., 2013); and (c) the overall financial success of the working relationship that ensures its further continuation (Barnes et al., 2015). However, to eliminate the potential for endogeneity bias and ensure that the hypothesized relationship quality variables are indeed predictors of long-term orientation (rather than the reverse), we used the two Stages Least Square method.

In doing so, we employed four instrumental variables that are likely to have an impact on their respective independent variables (i.e., relationship quality constructs), but unlikely to influence the long-term orientation, except through their effect on relationship quality variables (Antonakis et al., 2014). The instrumental variables selected were tolerance for trust, reassessment actions for commitment, partner incompatibility for cooperation, and partner punishment for satisfaction. We regressed the endogenous independent variables on their selected instrumental variables, saved the regression residuals, and then regressed the long-term orientation on the residuals by replacing the respective relationship quality constructs with their residuals (Zaefarian et al., 2017). We measured the strength of instrumental variables with *F*-tests, with *F*-values exceeding the threshold of 10 (Stock & Watson, 2011). We then computed an efficient model and a consistent model. The Hausman test revealed no significant difference between the efficient and the consistent models, implying that all four relationship quality dimensions are exogenous to long-term orientation (Antonakis et al., 2014).

Structural model

With regard to the structural model, our results also revealed a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 175.69$, $p = .00$, $df = 112$; NFI = .93; NNFI = .93; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .08) (see **Table 3**). Overall, the results indicate that the exporter's EI is indeed influential in shaping the quality of exporter-importer relationships. Analytically, as stated in H_{1a}, the exporter's EI fosters trust between the interacting parties ($\beta=.71$, $t=1.93$, $p=.05$). The results also confirm the conducive role of EI on commitment, thereby supporting H_{1b} ($\beta=.66$, $t=2.04$, $p=.04$). H_{1c} receives support, since the exporter's EI increases cooperation in the working relationship with the import buyer ($\beta=.73$, $t=2.14$, $p=.03$). H_{1d} was also verified, as EI was found to boost satisfaction in the relationship between exporters and importers ($\beta=.76$, $t=2.26$, $p=.02$).

It was also revealed that high levels of relationship quality increase the likelihood of boosting long-term orientation in the exporter's relationship with the importer and this was

particularly true for commitment and satisfaction, which exhibited stronger statistically significant effects compared to trust and cooperation. Specifically, the prevalence of high levels of trust help to foster the long-term orientation of the relationship ($\beta=.16$, $t=1.70$, $p=.09$), thereby confirming H₂. Our results also support H₃, since commitment was highly influential in promoting a long-term orientation in the exporter-importer relationship ($\beta=.40$, $t=2.62$, $p=.01$). As expected in H₄, high levels of cooperation were found to be conducive to long-term orientation ($\beta=.28$, $t=1.83$, $p=.07$). Finally, H₅ was accepted because high levels of satisfaction with the relationship had a strong impact on its long-term orientation ($\beta=.54$, $t=3.27$, $p=.00$).

...Insert Table 3 about here...

Moderation analysis

Moderating effects were tested using the interaction approach (Ping 1995). Our findings reveal that at higher levels of power distance in the import buyer's country, there is a weaker positive effect of EI on trust ($\beta= -.59$, $t= -7.00$, $p= .00$), commitment ($\beta= -.25$, $t= -5.05$, $p= .00$), cooperation ($\beta= -.37$, $t= -6.17$, $p= .00$), and satisfaction ($\beta= -.46$, $t= -8.39$, $p= .00$), which confirms H_{6a-d}. Individualism was also found to diminish the positive effect of EI on trust ($\beta= -.30$, $t= -4.20$, $p= .00$), commitment ($\beta= -.55$, $t= -9.69$, $p= .00$), cooperation ($\beta= -.50$, $t= -8.17$, $p= .00$), and satisfaction ($\beta= -.47$, $t= -8.99$, $p= .00$), thereby supporting H_{7a-d}. As predicted in H_{8a-d}, masculinity weakens the association between EI and trust ($\beta= -.30$, $t= -4.30$, $p= .00$), commitment ($\beta= -.35$, $t= -7.89$, $p= .00$), cooperation ($\beta= -.30$, $t= -5.77$, $p= .00$), and satisfaction ($\beta= -.33$, $t= -7.29$, $p= .00$). H_{9a} and H_{9c} were also confirmed, as uncertainty avoidance strengthens the impact of EI on trust ($\beta= .37$, $t= 5.05$, $p= .00$) and cooperation ($\beta= .40$, $t= 8.52$, $p= .00$) respectively. However, the moderating effect of uncertainty avoidance on the link between EI and commitment ($\beta= .03$, $t= .61$, $p= .54$) and EI and satisfaction ($\beta= .02$, $t= .44$, $p=.66$) was not significant, thus rejecting H_{9b}, and H_{9d}. Finally, in support of H_{10a-d}, our findings show that in the case of importers living in countries high in long-term orientation, the positive

effect of EI on trust ($\beta = .29, t = 5.73, p = .00$), commitment ($\beta = .44, t = 9.52, p = .00$), cooperation ($\beta = .43, t = 7.86, p = .00$), and satisfaction ($\beta = .52, t = 9.68, p = .00$) is amplified.

We also tested an alternative model in which EI was set as a moderating variable between relationship quality (which was treated as a higher-order construct) and long-term orientation ($\chi^2 = 47.39, p = .00, df = 26; NFI = .92; NNFI = .93; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .09$). Interestingly, the results revealed that relationship quality had a positive effect on long-term orientation ($\beta = .34, t = 3.58, p = .00$), with this effect becoming stronger at higher levels of exporter's self-emotion appraisal ($\beta = .43, t = 2.86, p = .00$), other-emotion appraisal ($\beta = .37, t = 2.39, p = .02$), utilization of emotion ($\beta = .40, t = 3.93, p = .00$), and regulation of emotion ($\beta = .37, t = 4.12, p = .00$). These findings indicate that EI does not have only a driving role to play in building harmonious business relationships, but is also pivotal in constantly reinforcing their future sustainability.

Control effects

We controlled for the effect of the importer's share in the firm's total export sales, which were found to have a positive impact on the relationship's long-term orientation ($\beta = .08, t = 1.76, p = .08$). This implies that when there is dependence on the foreign buyer, there is a greater desire by the exporter to preserve the existence of their working relationship in order to reap long-term financial benefits (Skarmeas et al., 2016). We also tested whether the existence of a contractual agreement between the interacting parties would positively influence the relationship's long-term orientation, but this was not found significant ($\beta = .03, t = .98, p = .33$).

Mediation analysis

Our conceptual model posits that the four components of relationship quality, namely trust, commitment, cooperation, and satisfaction, have a mediating role between EI and long-term orientation. We conducted mediation analyses based on SEM to test whether these relationship

quality constructs fully or partially mediate the impact of EI on long-term orientation. **Table 4** shows that the path coefficients from predictor to mediators and from mediators to the dependent variable are different from zero (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Subsequently, we tested the statistical significance of the indirect effects of these four potential mediating variables, using the bootstrapping method (5,000 bootstrapped samples) (Shrout & Bolger 2002). We found that the indirect effect of EI on long-term orientation through all four relationship quality variables is both positive and statistically significant. This was followed by a comparison between a fully mediated model and an alternative partially mediated model, with the latter incorporating a direct path from EI to long-term orientation (Schneider et al., 2005). The analysis revealed that the two models were statistically significantly different ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.90, p < .05$), which shows that the addition of the direct path from EI to long-term orientation improved the model. These results indicate the existence of partial mediation.

...Insert Table 4 about here...

Discussion

This study has amply demonstrated the substantial role of the exporter's EI in creating a high-quality business relationship with the import buyer, which in turn will help to increase its long-term orientation. However, this positive effect on the various dimensions of relationship quality was found to become weaker when import buyers are based in countries scoring high on power distance, individualism, and masculinity, but stronger when the importer is located in countries with high levels of uncertainty avoidance and (national) long-term orientation.

The positive impact of exporter's EI on trust is consistent with previous findings of research conducted within the context of professional team member relationships (e.g., Barczak et al., 2010; Chang et al., 2012; Christie et al., 2015; Rezvani & Khosravi, 2019; Rezvani et al., 2019), as well as in protégé-mentor relationships (Chun et al., 2010). The influential role of EI on relationship commitment found in our study is also in accordance with prior research, which

reported that emotionally intelligent consumers do not leave their firms in cases of brand transgressions (Ahn et al., 2016) and that the salesperson's ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in the relationship with business customers increases the latter's commitment levels (Delpechitre et al., 2018). Our results regarding the role of exporter's EI on boosting cooperation in the relationship with the import buyer is in harmony with the results of multiple empirical studies focusing on the favorable effect of EI in buyer-seller negotiations (Cole et al., 2018), professional teamwork (Elfenbein et al., 2007), and project management (Zhang et al., 2018). They are also in accordance with Delpechitre et al.'s (2018) findings, who report that a salesperson's EI increases the likelihood of customer co-creation of value in a business-to-business context. The fact that we found high levels of EI by the exporter to boost satisfaction levels in the relationship with the importer corroborates previous study findings within the services context (e.g., Kernbach & Schutte, 2005; Tsaur & Ku, 2019) that the EI of service providers enhances customer satisfaction.

The positive role of trust in enhancing long-term orientation found in this study is consistent with other earlier studies reporting that trust enhances the likelihood of relationship survival (Payan et al., 2010), whereas breach of trust may lead to relationship termination (Zhang et al., 2006). The fact that commitment was found to be instrumental to long-term orientation is in line with the findings of several studies (e.g., Haugland, 1999; Skarmeas, 2006) stressing the importance of mutually transferring managerial, physical, financial, and other resources in a relationship to be able to further develop it in the future. The beneficial role of cooperation in achieving long-term orientation in exporter-importer relationships also supports earlier findings indicating that cooperative relationships encourage partners to continue its existence in the long run (Yen & Barnes, 2011). Finally, the positive impact of satisfaction on long-term orientation supports Deligonul et al.'s (2006) observation that gaining satisfaction

from a business relationship is critical to decreasing the likelihood of switching to another foreign partner.

With regard to the moderating role of foreign customer's culture on the association between EI and the various elements of relationship quality, our findings resemble those of Miao, Humphrey, and Qian's (2018) meta-analysis, indicating that a leader's EI has a stronger positive effect on the organizational citizenship behavior of subordinates in more collectivistic, more feminine, higher uncertainty avoidance, and high (national) long-term orientation cultures. However, in contrast to our findings, their meta-analytical results indicated surprisingly that in high power distance countries there is a strong positive effect of EI on organizational citizenship behavior.

Study implications

One key implication of our study is that EI is an important construct that can be usefully employed to better understand inter-organizational working relationships in an international business context. Notably, the findings of this study revealed the existence of many consistencies with those of studies examining EI in other business (e.g., leadership) and non-business (e.g., psychology) fields. This implies that various theories, concepts, and ideas developed in these fields (e.g., affective events theory) could also be usefully employed in the study of cross-border inter-firm phenomena (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018). There is also room to further study EI in international business relationships by linking this construct with other issues already successfully examined in these fields, such as positive/negative affect (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018), coping styles (Gabbott et al., 2011), and political skills (Meisler, 2014).

Although extant research on seller-buyer relationships in general and exporter-importer relationships in particular analyzed working relationships at the firm level, only a few studies

(e.g., Gu et al., 2019; Sousa et al., 2010) attempted to stress the role of specific individuals in the interacting organizations in influencing the behavioral and/or economic dimensions of these relationships. This is surprising as inter-firm relationships are formed by people from both seller's and buyer's organizations and always have the personal touch of individuals involved in the interaction process (Ford et al., 2011). Indeed, our findings have shown that EI is one such personal aspect that is pivotal in shaping the quality of the working relationship between the exporting and importing organizations, which ultimately determines its long-term perspective.

The fact that EI at the personal level was found in our study to be a good predictor of inter-organizational relationship quality implies that other types of intelligence at the personal level could also be usefully employed to examine relational phenomena in an international context. For example, there are hints in the sales management literature (e.g., Verbeke et al., 2011) that an individual's IQ plays an important role in effectively performing specific tasks in the working relationship, such as those pertaining to the planning of sales activities. Cultural intelligence is also vital in properly understanding the peculiarities of foreign cultures and how this can affect behavioral interactions between exporters and importers (Magnusson et al., 2013). Creative intelligence, that is, the ability to cope with novel situations, think flexibly, and generate high-quality ideas that are appropriate to a specific task (Sternberg, 2004), can also play an influential role in exporter-importer relationships, particularly as regards the development of new approaches, processes, and products for foreign markets.

Our finding that the influence of the exporter's EI on the quality of the working relationship with the import buyer is moderated by cultural factors implies that there should be a clear understanding of the specific cultural nuances of the importer's country, through, for example, the acquisition of relevant information, participation in educational seminars, and involvement in cultural assimilation exercises. Specifically, exporters are expected to face more

difficulties in effectively applying their EI when operating in countries characterized by high levels of power distance, individualism, and masculinity, but low levels of uncertainty avoidance and (national) long-term orientation. In addition to possessing high levels of EI, it is important for exporters to acquire extensive knowledge on cross-cultural issues, as well as to be familiar with the cultural roots of certain emotions and how these differentiate across countries. These actions would allow exporters to correctly perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions in their interactions with foreign buyers.

Finally, our findings imply that special attention should be given by top management to recruiting in their export departments individuals who are not only competent in effectively and efficiently handling export-related tasks, but also have high levels of EI. This will help them to better perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions during behavioral interactions with people within the importer's organization. It is also important for managers in exporting organizations to realize that EI is not static, but can improve or deteriorate, depending on various controllable and uncontrollable factors. It is therefore wise to set up a monitoring mechanism that would periodically assess the EI levels of those employees who are in direct contact with import buyers. It also implies the necessity to embark on training programs within the exporting organization, aiming to improve the EI levels of people directly interacting with individuals in the importing firm.

Limitations and future research

The above findings must be interpreted within the context of certain limitations, which can be taken into consideration by future research. *First*, the scope of the study was limited in terms of country, type of relationship, and industry group. Thus, for external validity purposes, the study could be expanded into: (a) other country settings with different socio-cultural, economic, and institutional characteristics; (b) other international business relationships, such as those

pertaining to joint ventures, strategic alliances, and franchises; and (c) other industry groups, such as those focusing on services. In addition, although business relationships can take different directions and have a different intensity over time, our study relies on cross-sectional data. Hence, longitudinal research would help to better capture the dynamics of these relationships, particularly in light of the fact that long-term orientation is a time-sensitive construct.

Second, the fact that the study data were collected only from the perspective of the exporter makes our analysis one-sided. Ideally, to make the analysis more complete, it is also necessary to have the views of the import buyer on how s/he perceives the exporter's EI, each of the four dimensions of relationship quality and long-term orientation. Although collecting information from both relational parties is practically difficult (due to geographic disparity, confidentiality issues, and fear of offending the partner), this would help to provide valuable insights as to whether they perceive aspects in their relationship in the same way (or not) (Skarmeas & Robson, 2008).

Third, it would be useful to assess the EI of the import buyer and investigate whether the degree of compatibility to that of the exporter affects relationship quality. In fact, there are indications from the psychology literature that various positive atmosphere dimensions, such as closeness, commitment, and satisfaction, are favorably influenced by the concurrent use of high levels of EI possessed by both interacting parties (Schröder-Abé & Schütz, 2011). In relation to this, it would be interesting to see how different combinations of EI possessed by each party in the working relationship will affect different quality dimensions. There is also a need to explore the possibility for the experience gained from a long-term oriented relationship with a foreign partner to provide a positive feedback that would further enhance the individual's (or group of individuals') EI.

Fourth, our study used self-reported, perceptual data to measure EI, which may incorporate subjectivity bias. To alleviate this problem, future research could employ objective measures of EI by asking respondents to take the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso EI test (Mayer et al., 2003). Also, in the case of firms where more than one individual is directly involved in the working relationship with the foreign partner, it would be more appropriate to evaluate the EI of the group of these individuals. This can be done by using the Workgroup Emotional Intelligence Profile, which is a self-report measure assessing abilities in relation to own-emotions and group members' emotions (Jordan & Lawrence, 2009).

Fifth, we measured the moderating role of culture on the association between an exporter's EI and the various quality constructs describing its relationship with the import buyer, using Hofstede and Hofstede's (2005) dimensions at the national level. Although combining subjective data obtained at the personal level with objective data derived at the country level has been repeatedly used in prior research (e.g., Ju et al., 2014), future research could evaluate the cultural characteristics of importers at the personal level, using subjective measurement scales (Leonidou, Kvasova et al., 2019). This is particularly important in light of the fact that there is evidence (e.g., Lenartowicz et al., 2003) showing that, even within the same country, there are variations in cultural traits among individuals.

Finally, psychic distance has been extensively used in the exporting literature (e.g., Skarmeas et al., 2008) as having a predicting role on exporter-importer relationships, and, as such, it would be illuminating to examine its moderating effect on the association between EI and relationship quality. This is because apart from culture, it incorporates differences between interacting parties in terms of economic, political-legal, institutional, business systems, and other factors (Evans et al., 2008; Obadia et al., 2017; Stöttinger & Schlegelmilch, 1998). These can be operationalized using objective (e.g., World Bank Governance Indicators) and/or subjective (e.g., self-reported input by key informants) measures.

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Fig. 1 The conceptual model

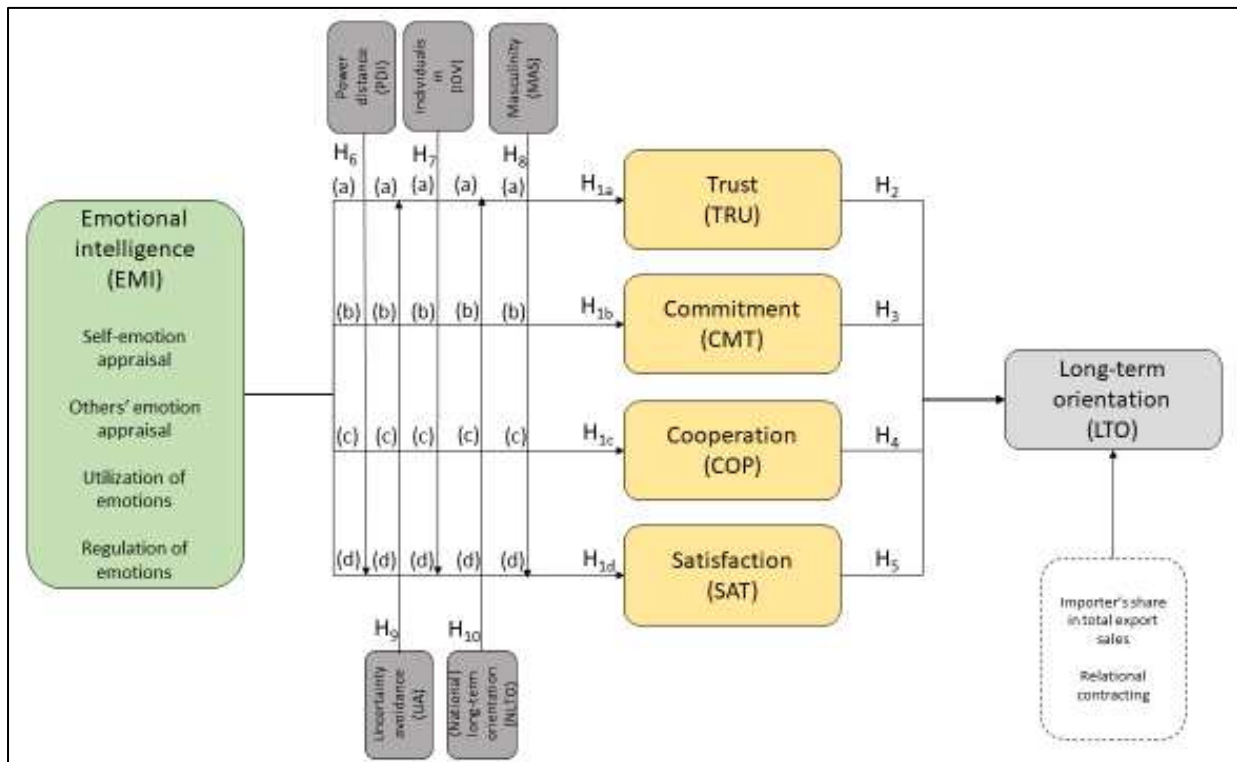


Table 1 Measurement model results

Scale Items	Constructs	Standard loadings	t-values
First-order constructs			
Trust ($\alpha = .85, \rho = .79, AVE=.60$)			
TRU3	We believe the information that this importer provides us with	.72	*
TRU4	This importer is genuinely concerned that our business succeeds	.70	6.84
TRU5	When making important decisions, this importer considers our welfare and its own	.80	7.77
TRU6	We trust this importer to keep our best interests in mind	.87	8.47
Commitment ($\alpha = .73, \rho = .70, AVE=.65$)			
CMT4	We are willing to make any effort to ensure that the relationship with this importer functions well	.95	*
CMT5	We have dedicated whatever people/resources are necessary to develop our working relationship with this importer	.63	4.65
Cooperation ($\alpha = .88, \rho = .82, AVE=.59$)			
COP1	This importer is conscientious and responsive about maintaining a cooperative relationship	.77	*
COP2	This importer is willing to collaborate with our firm regarding the smooth operation of the relationship	.66	6.86
COP3	This importer always acts in ways that promote mutual interests and welfare		
COP4	This importer is interested in assisting our company to achieve its business goals	.87	9.46
COP5	There is a team spirit in tackling common problems in our working relationship with this importer	.80	8.63
		.71	7.55
Satisfaction ($\alpha = .87, \rho = .79, AVE=.60$)			
SAT1	We are delighted with our overall relationship with this importer	.88	*
SAT2	We wish more of our importers were like this one	.71	8.53
SAT3	We would like our relationship with this importer to continue in the coming years	.68	7.98
SAT4	It is a pleasure to deal with this importer	.82	10.84
Long-term orientation ($\alpha = .90, \rho = .84, AVE=.56$)			
LTO1	We believe that continuing our relationship with this importer will be profitable	.69	*
LTO2	Maintaining a long-lasting relationship with this importer is important to us	.88	8.15
LTO3	We always have a long-term perspective in our relationship with this importer	.74	7.01
LTO4	We are willing to make sacrifices in order to continue our relationship with this importer	.60	5.72
LTO5	We would like to develop an enduring relationship with this importer	.86	8.04
<u>Model fit indices: $\chi^2 = 292.62, p = .000, df = 160; NFI = .94; NNFI = .96; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .07$</u>			
Second-order construct			
Emotional intelligence with first-order factors			
*Self-emotion appraisal ($\alpha = .77, \rho = .72, AVE=.56$)			
SEA1	I have a good sense of why I have certain feelings most of the time	.64	*
SEA2	I have a good understanding of my own emotions	.84	6.17
SEA3	I really understand what I feel	.76	6.00
Other's emotion appraisal ($\alpha = .82, \rho = .77, AVE=.65$)			
OEA1	I always know my friends' emotions from their behavior	.82	*
OEA2	I am a good observer of others' emotions	.80	8.30
OEA4	I have a good understanding of the emotions of people around me	.81	8.36
Utilization of emotion ($\alpha = .80, \rho = .74, AVE=.50$)			
UOE1	I always set goals for myself and then try my best to achieve them	.70	*
UOE2	I always tell myself I am a competent person	.73	6.21
UOE3	I am a self-motivating person	.64	5.59
UOE4	I would always encourage myself to try my best	.72	6.18
Regulation of emotion ($\alpha = .87, \rho = .81, AVE=.64$)			
ROE1	I am able to control my temper so that I can handle difficulties rationally	.78	*
ROE2	I am quite capable of controlling my own emotions	.84	8.98
ROE3	I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry	.71	7.45
ROE4	I have good control of my own emotions	.87	9.32
<u>Model fit indices: $\chi^2 = 143.31, p = .000, df = 77; NFI = .93; NNFI = .94; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .08$</u>			
Emotional intelligence as a second-order factor ($\alpha = .86, \rho = .74, AVE=.51$)			
SEA	Self-emotion appraisal	.77	*
OEA	Other's emotion appraisal	.67	3.86
UOE	Utilization of emotion	.74	3.78
ROE	Regulation of emotion	.63	3.77
<u>Model fit indices: $\chi^2 = 122.19, p = .000, df = 73; NFI = .93; NNFI = .94; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .07$</u>			

* Item fixed to set the scale

Table 2 Correlations and descriptive statistics

Constructs	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.
1. Emotional intelligence	1														
2. Self-emotion appraisal	.69	1													
3. Other's emotion appraisal	.68	.42	1												
4. Utilization of emotion	.75	.44	.41	1											
5. Regulation of emotion	.72	.27	.25	.30	1										
6. Trust	.19	.10	.21	.19	.05	1									
7. Commitment	.28	.12	.26	.24	.17	.39	1								
8. Cooperation	.28	.20	.25	.18	.18	.55	.42	1							
9. Satisfaction	.29	.15	.29	.27	.13	.50	.52	.53	1						
10. Long-term orientation	.30	.28	.20	.24	.15	.46	.48	.45	.53	1					
11. Power distance	-.01	.04	.03	-.03	-.04	-.16	-.10	-.09	-.14	-.16	1				
12. Individualism	.02	-.01	-.07	.03	.06	-.12	-.10	-.07	-.12	-.16	-.48	1			
13. Masculinity	-.06	-.14	-.06	-.07	.04	-.07	-.11	-.11	-.08	.01	-.28	.26	1		
14. Uncertainty avoidance	-.03	.03	-.05	.03	-.08	.16	.10	.13	.13	.17	.45	-.43	-.24	1	
15. (National) long-term orientation	.07	.00	.05	.13	.01	.17	.02	.10	.05	.03	-.07	-.06	.01	.07	1
Mean	5.49	5.84	4.95	5.82	5.29	5.13	5.55	5.28	5.67	5.61	59.2	53.2	53.4	73.5	59.6
Standard deviation	.63	.79	.88	.82	.99	1.09	1.12	0.98	1.04	1.01	20.9	22.8	15.2	20.3	18.9

Note: Correlations greater than $|\pm 0.23|$ are significant at the .01 level
Correlations greater than $|\pm 0.17|$ are significant at the .05 level

Table 3 Structural model results

H	Hypothesized path	β -value	t-value	p-value
Direct effects:				
H1a	Emotional intelligence → Trust	.71	1.93	.05
H1b	Emotional intelligence → Commitment	.66	2.04	.04
H1c	Emotional intelligence → Cooperation	.73	2.14	.03
H1d	Emotional intelligence → Satisfaction	.76	2.26	.02
H2	Trust → Long-term orientation	.16	1.70	.09
H3	Commitment → Long-term orientation	.40	2.62	.01
H4	Cooperation → Long-term orientation	.28	1.83	.07
H5	Satisfaction → Long-term orientation	.54	3.27	.00
Moderation effects:				
	Power Distance → Trust	-.35	-4.77	.00
H6a	Power Distance × Emotional intelligence → Trust	-.59	-7.00	.00
	Power Distance → Commitment	-.23	-5.71	.00
H6b	Power Distance × Emotional intelligence → Commitment	-.25	-5.05	.00
	Power Distance → Cooperation	-.27	-5.32	.00
H6c	Power Distance × Emotional intelligence → Cooperation	-.37	-6.17	.00
	Power Distance → Satisfaction	-.34	-7.43	.00
H6d	Power Distance × Emotional intelligence → Satisfaction	-.46	-8.39	.00
	Individualism → Trust	-.26	-3.62	.00
H7a	Individualism × Emotional intelligence → Trust	-.30	-4.20	.00
	Individualism → Commitment	-.56	-9.76	.00
H7b	Individualism × Emotional intelligence → Commitment	-.55	-9.69	.00
	Individualism → Cooperation	-.45	-7.65	.00
H7c	Individualism × Emotional intelligence → Cooperation	-.50	-8.17	.00
	Individualism → Satisfaction	-.46	-8.95	.00
H7d	Individualism × Emotional intelligence → Satisfaction	-.47	-8.99	.00
	Masculinity → Trust	-.36	-4.28	.00
H8a	Masculinity × Emotional intelligence → Trust	-.30	-4.30	.00
	Masculinity → Commitment	-.38	-7.64	.00
H8b	Masculinity × Emotional intelligence → Commitment	-.35	-7.89	.00
	Masculinity → Cooperation	-.30	-5.20	.00
H8c	Masculinity × Emotional intelligence → Cooperation	-.30	-5.77	.00
	Masculinity → Satisfaction	-.36	-7.04	.00
H8d	Masculinity × Emotional intelligence → Satisfaction	-.33	-7.29	.00
	Uncertainty Avoidance → Trust	.10	1.51	.13
H9a	Uncertainty Avoidance × Emotional intelligence → Trust	.37	5.05	.00
	Uncertainty Avoidance → Commitment	.14	2.46	.01
H9b	Uncertainty Avoidance × Emotional intelligence → Commitment	.03	.61	.54
	Uncertainty Avoidance → Cooperation	.15	2.07	.04
H9c	Uncertainty Avoidance × Emotional intelligence → Cooperation	.40	8.52	.00
	Uncertainty Avoidance → Satisfaction	.06	1.50	.13
H9d	Uncertainty Avoidance × Emotional intelligence → Satisfaction	.02	.44	.66
	(National) long-term orientation → Trust	.24	4.95	.00
H10a	(National) long-term orientation × Emotional intelligence → Trust	.29	5.73	.00
	(National) long-term orientation → Commitment	.30	7.08	.00
H10b	(National) long-term orientation × Emotional intelligence → Commitment	.44	9.52	.00
	(National) long-term orientation → Cooperation	.33	6.33	.00
H10c	(National) long-term orientation × Emotional intelligence → Cooperation	.43	7.86	.00
	(National) long-term orientation → Satisfaction	.40	7.28	.00
H10d	(National) long-term orientation × Emotional intelligence → Satisfaction	.52	9.68	.00
Control effects:				
	Importer's share in total export sales → Long-term orientation	.08	1.76	.08
	Relational contracting → Long-term orientation	.03	.98	.33

Model fit indices: $\chi^2 = 175.69$, $p = .000$, $df = 112$; NFI = .93; NNFI = .93; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .08

Table 4 Mediation analysis

Testing for indirect effects					
Predictor Variable	Mediator variable	Dependent variable	Predictor variable → Mediator variable	Mediator variable → Dependent variable	Indirect effect
Emotional intelligence	Trust	Long-term orientation	b= .33* 95% CI = (.025, .628)	b=.37* 95% CI = (.234, .509)	b= .14* 95% CI = (.015, .252)
Emotional intelligence	Commitment	Long-term orientation	b= .50* 95% CI = (.189, .802)	b=.46* 95% CI = (.330, .583)	b= .23* 95% CI = (.062, .401)
Emotional intelligence	Cooperation	Long-term orientation	b= .44* 95% CI = (.170, .702)	b= .40* 95% CI = (.244, .558)	b= .18* 95% CI = (.053, .312)
Emotional intelligence	Satisfaction	Long-term orientation	b= .48* 95% CI = (.202, .767)	b= .60* 95% CI = (.470, .739)	b= .29* 95% CI = (.099, .477)
Testing for type of mediation					
	Full mediation model (indirect effects only)		Partial mediation model (direct and indirect effects)		
df	112		111		
Δdf to full mediation model	-		1		
χ^2	175.69		171.79		
Δ χ^2 to full mediation model	-		3.90*		

*p < .05

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