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► **To cite this version:**

Afm Jalal Ahamed, Ilias O. Pappas. Revisiting the Trust–Commitment and Export Performance Link: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) Approach. International Working Conference on Transfer and Diffusion of IT (TDIT), Dec 2020, Tiruchirappalli, India. pp.556-568, 10.1007/978-3-030-64861-9_49 . hal-03744791

HAL Id: hal-03744791

<https://inria.hal.science/hal-03744791v1>

Submitted on 3 Aug 2022

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Revisiting the Trust–Commitment and Export Performance Link: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) Approach

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Abstract. This research revisits the role of different foci of trust (interpersonal and inter-organizational), commitment (affective and calculative) and relationship lengths (inter-organizational and interpersonal) then on export relationship performance. 142 Ecuadorian non-oil exporters completed a self-administered questionnaire. This study applies fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) and the findings help to re-establish the need for both trust dimensions and affective commitment in exporter–importer relationships. This research found three possible configurations of achieving high export relationship performance. The managerial implications noted that export managers should nurture trust and affective commitment to ensure improved relationship performance. This research is one of the very few studies to investigate the role of commitment and trust by taking a complexity theoretical turn. Exploring the causation of the relationship lengths on relationship performance also represents a novel contribution.

Keywords: Relationship marketing, calculative commitment, affective commitment, interpersonal trust, inter-organizational trust, FsQCA

1 Introduction

Relationship marketing literature extensively predicts the links of trust and commitment with other performance measures [8, 29, 42] often indicating that trust, whether interpersonal or inter-organizational, leads to commitment between a firm and its overseas customers, which enhances firm performance, including export performance [1, 8].

However, there are some apparent ambiguities and shortcomings in the pertaining literature: First, the dimensionality of trust, Zaheer and colleagues [48], argued that interpersonal trust and organizational trust are closely linked, such that interpersonal interactions of managers of partnering firms are critical to the success of the partnership [27]. However, if we view two trust dimensions as different yet closely linked constructs, then how they would affect the export performance is not explicitly sought in the literature. Further, is one type of trust sufficient to predict the relationship export performance? Or both forms of trust are necessary? We have not found any conclusive findings to the question. The second area is the different dimensions of commitment. Treating commitment as a universal construct risk creating an over-simplified view [20] and thereby prevents an in-depth perspective on how trust-commitment contributes to export performance. The last area is the relational performance outcome of the commitment-trust configuration. Research shows that firms achieve enhanced interactions with committed customers before being able to establish a relationship with them [30].

To enrich the literature in the areas mentioned above, we theoretically develop and empirically test a model that grounded on the conjunctive causation, implying that combinations of various causal conditions (trust, commitment in this case) rather than one alone condition cause the outcome (relationship export performance) [45]. We subsequently propose the research question as, to explore which configurations of trust (interpersonal and inter-organizational), commitment (calculative and affective), the size of the organization, and the length of the relationships (personal and organizational) lead to relationship export performance? We used complexity theory as a theoretical underpinning of the proposed conceptual model and addressed this question with a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). Complexity theory posits that the investigation of the net effects of predictive variables does not provide accurate results that are capable of predicting the causal models that lead to expected outcome conditions. It also postulates that the prediction of behavioral outcomes is a complex process, a set of complex interactions between antecedents (i.e., conjunctive causation) must be considered as a causal model capable of predicting the conditions leading to the desired outcome [40]. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) a method mostly used in political science and sociology [21] is now deemed to be an exciting method in business and management studies [39, 40]. The fundamental attribute of this method is causal asymmetry and capability to deal with smaller sample sizes because causal conditions or their combinations, which can lead to an equifinal outcome are observed [36]. This method is deemed suitable for this research as it can accommodate a high degree of complexity that can be captured through testing theory-based conditions and contextual influences instead of focusing on the single effects of individual variables.

The key contribution of this research is to provide a fine-grained view on the mechanism of the commitment and trust by uncovering the non-linear and asymmetric effect of trust and commitment dimensions on export relationship performance. Further, the use of QCA will facilitate a different perspective of the trust-commitment based rela-

relationship marketing as we are using asymmetric analysis instead of the symmetric analysis and null hypothesis significance tests, which are to date is dominating in export marketing research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing

Relationship marketing is a dominant paradigm in marketing literature, and commitment-trust theory [29] is central to relationship marketing; it postulates that commitment and trust are essential determinants of long-term relationships. Originating from social exchange theory [7], this theory predicts how businesses organize their activities to establish, develop, and maintain successful relations. It suggests that trust and commitment facilitate relational exchanges by creating a compliant environment, such that they enhance interfirm relationships [29]. In this research we use Mayer and colleagues [24] definition of trust – "trust is the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). Trust directly influences relationship commitment by reducing the vulnerability that two parties perceive when they commit to an exchange relationship. Trust, and commitment also are key factors in exporter–importer relationships and are the most frequently cited antecedents of export performance [42].

In international marketing literature, there are two traditions of viewing trust and commitment. The first one is to view them as mediating variables [29, 42] and the other is to view them as energizing forces [8]. Despite being of the most researched concept in international marketing, most of the research in this research stream is heavily focused on the symmetric approach and the 'null-hypothesis' testing; which can be criticized by not capturing the full spectrum of complexities in the relationships [46]. The critics advocating of 'seeing both the trees and the forest' and argued that the symmetric analysis could be potentially a mismatch in testing case-based identification models, whereas, in behavioral and management science most theory constructions are case-based proposals [12, 13, 46]. In the subsequent sections of this research, we will discuss the complex association of trust commitment then will move to the conceptual model of this research.

2.2 Association among different dimensions of trust and commitment

Commitment, a multifaceted construct, is defined as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship [28]. Of the various types of commitment cited in marketing and organizational science literature [26], affective and calculative commitment appear most frequently and seem to be the most relevant for inter-organizational relationships

[16]. Although both types of commitment reflect relatively stable attitudes and beliefs, their motives differ, and they evoke different psychological states about a relationship [16]. Affective commitment implies a desire to maintain the relationship due to positive feelings; calculative commitment reflects a need to maintain the relationship, due to pragmatic considerations [5]. In this research conceptualize affective commitment as the exporter's understanding, belief, and willingness to exert effort to maintain a relationship with an importing organization. This willingness to continue the relationship results from positive sentiment and attitudes toward the trading partner [43] which creates a sense of unity between the exporter and overseas importer. The calculative dimension of organizational commitment instead relates to extrinsic rewards, such as pay, status, promotions, and other benefits that encourage an employee to commit to the organization because these benefits would be lost were this employee to leave [6].

A typical conceptualization of commitment in the literature indicates that the two forms of commitment are independent; affective commitment does not determine the degree of calculative commitment, and vice versa [16]. Following the conceptualization of Zaheer and colleagues [48], we define inter-organizational trust as the extent to which members of one *organization* hold a collective *trust orientation* toward another *organization*. Research also has sought to establish a link between trust and commitment [15, 28, 29, 43]. To avoid any potential bias associated with using unidimensional trust and commitment constructs, we include different dimensions [20]. Accordingly, we leverage previous research to view that exporters' trusts and commitments are intertwined and extract a combined effect on the relationship performance.

2.3 Association of trust and commitment to relationship performance

Commitment is related to export performance outcomes, as is well established by prior research [11]. We also seek to test the effect of commitment and trust on exporter–importer relationship performance. Relationship performance defined as the perceived economic performance of the jointly acting relationship parties, relative to expectations in that network [25] can be instrumental for sales growth, superior market positions, better marketing support, or qualified services for the parties involved. Successful inter-organizational relationships are critical to firms' financial performance because most firms must leverage partners' capabilities and resources to compete effectively. Not only do strong interfirm relationships directly enhance sales and profits [30], but because they encourage increased cooperation and reduced conflict, they also can benefit innovation efforts, expand markets and reduce costs [9, 38]. Marketers' and researchers' efforts to uncover the drivers of inter-organizational relationship performance are necessary because managers can develop suitable strategies to leverage these causal drivers only if they understand the precursors of performance. Thus, the critical question is, what are the key drivers of inter-organizational relationship performance? To answer this question, researchers usually employ four theoretical perspectives: (1) commitment–trust, (2) dependence, (3) transaction cost economics, and (4) relational norms [19, 29]. We conceptualize commitment and trust as key drivers of organizational relationship performance. In short, our basic premise is that if trading partners commit to

each other, they invest more in the relationship to gain more mutual benefits and thus achieve better relationship performance [31].

2.4 Relationship lengths and performance

Social exchange theory viewed the development of a cooperative relationship is analogous to a marriage relationship, and a stable relationship is closely related to the development of trust [22], and the tendency to remain in the same relationship over time is an important component of commitment [41]. In the organizational context, Cao and Lumineau [10] defined relationship length as "the number of years firms have been dealing with each other" (p. 21). The length of the export relationship is always considered crucial for export performance literature. Usually, in marketing literature, relationship length is being used as a control variable [10]. However, some studies also call for more research on the moderating effects of relationship length [10]. Although prior researches have been prioritized the linkage between the long-term relationship and the affective quality of a relationship and that may foster mutual interest, trust, and good partnership [2]. However, when talking about the length of the relationship, researchers took the opportunity to talk about the inter-organizational relationship length; the inter-personal relationship length mainly between two boundary spanners is vastly ignored. In this research, we wanted to tap both the personal relationship length and inter-organizational relationship length as a causal condition for predicting export relationship performance.

2.5 Size of the organization and performance

Previous researches [44] articulate that firm size is has a direct positive influence on export performance. However, the findings are mixed; hence, to have a better understanding, we conceptualize the firm size as a causal condition to have higher export relationship performance.

2.6 The conceptual model

Based on the above discussions, we explain relationship export performance by identifying configurations of causally related sets of factors, and posit that a synergy exists among different dimensions of trust, commitment, organization's size and the length of the relationships (personal and organizational) in explaining relationship export performance. The conceptual model is developed as, the outcome of interest is relationship export performance, and the three sets of causal conditions are trust (i.e., interpersonal and inter-organizational trust), commitment (affective and calculative), relationship length (personal and organizational relationships) & size. The intersections represent factor configurations, which are higher-level interactions.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection procedure

142 responses were collected from active, Ecuadorian, non-oil exporting companies. We checked for nonresponse bias by following the guidelines suggested by Armstrong and Overton [3] and tested for any significant differences between early and late responses. Harman's one-factor test [34] in SPSS shows, with exploratory factor analysis, that the first factor represents only 39 percent of the total variance. Thus, we found little threat of common method bias. Their average exporting experience was about 18 years (SD = 11.38), with an average of 191 employees (minimum 4, maximum 1500). The average length of the focal organizational relationship was more than ten years, and for interpersonal relationships, the average was higher than eight years. Among the respondents, 43 percent are presidents, 16 percent are chief financial officers, and 18 percent are export managers or executives. Similar to other exporters in the region [34], the United States was the most targeted export destination (37%) for the Ecuadorian exporters, followed by Colombia (22%), while, the European Union (12.6%) was the third attractive destination and followed by Russia (9.2%).

3.2 Measurement instruments

The construct operationalization were based on established scales. Relationship performance uses four items derived from Luo and colleagues [23]. To measure inter-organizational trust and interpersonal trust, we used ten and five items, respectively, from Zaheer and colleagues [48]. Affective commitment was measured with a five-item scale [18], and calculative commitment was measured by a three-item scale [17]. All items, but the length and size variables measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 7 = *strongly agree* to 1 = *strongly disagree*.

3.3 Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA)

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is an innovative approach suitable in situations with multilevel explanations and influences [45]. QCA facilitates a detailed analysis of how causal conditions contribute to a particular result and draws on a configurational understanding of how a combination of causes leads to the same series of results. Fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), which integrates fuzzy set and fuzzy logic with QCA will be used in this research [35]. FsQCA uses analyzing combinations of conditions (i.e., configurations) in a systematized manner [35]. Two main benefits of the fsQCA sought as i) suitability to work with medium-sized samples, ii) suitable for analyzing high levels of causal complexity [37, 47]. In this research, we used the statistical software package fsQCA 3.0 for its analysis [31]. FsQCA expresses causality in terms of necessity and sufficiency. A condition will be considered as necessary if an outcome cannot be produced without it. A condition is sufficient if its presence always produces the outcome (but the outcome may also occur without the condition). These conditions can combine in various ways. Thus, causality in fsQCA is configurational (combinations of conditions produce the outcome), equifinal (different combinations may produce the outcome), and multifinal (a condition can play a different role in different configurations) [31].

4 Analysis and results

4.1 Measurement model evaluation

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) using AMOS 23, performed on all multi-item scales, produce results with sufficient overall model fit all fit indexes meet the conventional cut-off values. The overall chi-square for the model is 420.73 ($p < .001$) and the CMIN/DF is 1.91, comparative fit index (CFI) = .91, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .90, incremental fit index (IFI) = .91, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .08. We note strong convergent validity, with four exceptions (three inter-organizational trust items and one interpersonal trust item) (all other loadings $\geq .50$), and those items are excluded from further analysis. We establish discriminant validity by observing the construct inter-factor correlations that differ significantly from 1. The average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeds the square of its largest inter-factor correlation [14]. Table 1 contains the correlation matrix and further confirms discriminant validity because, for all constructs, the diagonal elements are greater than the off-diagonal elements. With regard to reliability, all the constructs achieve desirable levels of composite reliability (CR) and exceed the .60 minimum recommended by previous researches [4]. Regarding the AVE, all constructs achieved scores above .50. Therefore, we conclude that the indicators are sufficient and adequate for specifying the measurement model.

Table 1 Summary data for the conditions and outcome

Statistics	<i>reltion-ship</i>	<i>calcomit</i>	<i>affcomit</i>	<i>orgtrust</i>	<i>pertrust</i>	<i>orgrel</i>	<i>perrel</i>
N	142	142	142	142	142	142	142
Mean	5.14	4.15	5.9	5.7	5.52	10.57	8.13
SEM	0.12	0.13	0.08	0.09	0.09	0.52	0.48
Median	5.5	4.33	6	6	5.75	10	6
SD	1.38	1.58	0.94	1.01	1.04	6.2	5.68
Minimum	1	1	3	1	1	1 year	1 year
Maximum	7	7	7	7	7	30 years	30 years
<i>Calibration value at</i>							
95%	6	6	6	6	6	25	25
50%	4	4	4	4	4	15	15
5%	2	2	2	2	2	5	5

Note: *relationship* = Relationship performance, *calcomit*= Calculative commitment, *affcomit* = Affective commitment, *orgtrust* = Inter-organizational trust, *pertrust* = Inter-personal trust, *orgrel* = Length of inter-organizational relationships, *perrel* = Length of interpersonal relationships. SD= Standard deviation, SEM = Standard error of mean.

Table 2 Construct reliability and validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	1	2	3	4	5
1. <i>Calcomit</i>	0.89	0.73	0.05	0.89	0.85				

2. <i>Relationship</i>	0.87	0.63	0.28	0.88	0.16	0.80		
3. <i>Orgtrust</i>	0.90	0.58	0.54	0.94	0.07	0.31	0.76	
4. <i>Pertrust</i>	0.87	0.63	0.33	0.88	0.23	0.46	0.44	0.79
5. <i>Affcommit</i>	0.92	0.71	0.54	0.94	0.20	0.53	0.73	0.84

In this research, the outcome is ‘export relationship performance’ (*fz_relationship*). The antecedents examined, following the calibration procedure, are a series of characteristics of interfirm relationships: ‘calculative commitment’ (*fz_calcommit*), ‘affective commitment’ (*fz_affcommit*), ‘inter-organizational trust’ (*fz_orgtrust*), ‘interpersonal trust’ (*fz_pertrust*), ‘length of the inter-organizational relationship’ (*fz_orgrel*) and ‘length of the interpersonal relationship’ (*fz_perrel*). The analysis process first requires a calibration to transform the raw data into fuzzy categories or conditions [48]. Calibration assigns the variables a value between 0.0 and 1.0, depending on their degree of membership [47]. We employed the same procedure for converting Likert scales into fuzz sets, as followed by previous researches [31, 32]. First, the three thresholds are based on the questionnaire scale (7-point Likert scale) as such - the full membership threshold is set at the value of 6; the full non-membership is set at value 2, and the crossover point is set at value 4. All values are calibrated on a logistic function to fit into the three thresholds. In fsQCA, cases exactly on 0.5 are dropped from the analysis which makes it difficult to analyze the conditions that are set exactly on 0.05 (i.e., intermediate-set membership) [35]. To overcome this issue, Fiss [13] suggests adding a constant of 0.001 to the causal conditions below full membership scores of 1. To do this, we have added 0.001 in all conditions after the calibration has been done.

Then, in the next step, we performed the analysis of necessity, which intended to identify if any of the causal conditions is a necessary (i.e., indispensable) condition for the presence of relationship export performance. For a condition to be necessary, its consistency should exceed the threshold of 0.9 [31, 39]. Consistency is the degree to which the cases in the sample that share a causal condition or configuration agree in displaying the focal outcome [35]. To examine necessity, the dedicated function in fsQCA software is used, which calculates the consistency and coverage scores for every causal condition and their negation. As the following table-3, depicts – affective commitment, inter-organizational trust, and interpersonal trust are the necessary conditions for achieving high relationship export performance, while inter-organizational trust, absence of the length of interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships are the necessary condition for having low/medium relationship performance.

Table 3 Analysis of the Necessary Conditions

Condition	Outcome			
	High relationship performance		~ Low/medium relationship performance	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
<i>Calculative commitment</i>	0.64	0.87	0.67	0.30
~ <i>Calculative commitment</i>	0.49	0.82	0.70	0.39
<i>Affective commitment</i>	0.98 ^a	0.83	0.89	0.25
~ <i>Affective commitment</i>	0.11	0.75	0.38	0.86

<i>Inter-organizational trust</i>	0.95 ^a	0.82	0.90 ^a	0.26
<i>~ Inter-organizational trust</i>	0.15	0.82	0.39	0.72
<i>Interpersonal trust</i>	0.95 ^a	0.84	0.87	0.26
<i>~ Interpersonal trust</i>	0.16	0.80	0.46	0.73
<i>Organizational relation length</i>	0.35	0.92	0.42	0.36
<i>~ Organizational relation length</i>	0.76	0.80	0.91 ^a	0.32
<i>Personal relationship length</i>	0.24	0.96	0.28	0.38
<i>~ Personal relationship length</i>	0.85	0.78	0.97 ^a	0.30

Note: ~ indicates the absence of a condition

^a meets 0.90 consistency benchmark for necessary conditions.

The software then produces a truth table, consisting of 2k logically possible configurations, where k represents the number of conditions that are included in the analysis [35], where each of the combinations is assessed as to whether it is sufficient for the outcome to occur or not. We looked at the consistency statistics to determine whether configuration is necessary and/or sufficiency in terms of set-theoretic relations [31, 32]. We also consider the coverage of the configurations as they are the way in which cases are distributed over these configurations [37]. From table -3, we found that there are three configurations for achieving high export relationship performance; and three configurations for having low/medium relationship performance. However, the overall solution consistency for having low/medium relationship export performance is too low to accept; hence, we will not discuss these condition. Finally, we have the following configuration for achieving export relationship performance, as follows, where C1 = consistency and C2 = raw coverage:

Outcome: High export relationship performance (*fz_relationship*)

i) *fz_calcomit*fz_affcommit*fz_orgt*fz_pert*fz_orgrel* (1a, C1 = 0.94, C2 = 0.25) : A combination of calculative commitment, affective commitment, inter-organizational trust, interpersonal trust and organizational relation length is a sufficient condition for achieving high export relationship performance.

ii) *fz_affcommit*fz_orgt*fz_pert*fz_perrel*fz_orgrel* (1b, C1 = 0.99, C2 = 0.21) : A combination of affective commitment, inter-organizational trust, interpersonal trust, personal relationship length and organizational relation length is a sufficient condition for achieving high export relationship performance.

iii) *fz_calcomit*fz_affcommit*~fz_orgt*fz_pert*~fz_perrel*~fz_orgrel* (1c, C1= 0.91, C2=0.11) : A combination of calculative commitment, affective commitment, interpersonal trust and Low /medium inter-organizational trust, with low/medium length inter-organizational relationships, low/medium length interpersonal relationship is a sufficient condition for achieving high export relationship performance

Table 4 Results of the intermediate solution

Condition	Relationship performance					
	fz_relationship			~fz_relationship		
	1a	1b	1c	2a	2b	2c
<i>Calculative commitment</i>	●		●	●		●

<i>Affective commitment</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●
<i>Inter-organizational trust</i>	●	●	○	●	●	○
<i>Interpersonal trust</i>	●	●	●	●	●	●
<i>Organizational relation length</i>	●	●	○		●	○
<i>Personal relationship length</i>		●	○		●	○
Consistency	0.94	0.99	0.91	0.75	0.38	0.42
Raw Coverage	0.25	0.21	0.11	0.28	0.25	0.34
Unique Coverage	0.07	0.05	0.03	0.07	0.02	0.06
Solution Coverage		0.34			0.43	
Solution Consistency		0.93			0.39	
Frequency cutoff		3			3	
Consistency cutoff		0.90			0.90	

Note: Black circles indicate the presence of a condition; empty circles indicate the absence.

5 Discussion

In this research, we analyzed seven conditions as – calculative commitment, affective commitment, inter-organizational trust, interpersonal trust, organization size, length of inter-organizational relationship and length of interpersonal relationships; and set them to explore the necessary conditions and configurations that may lead to export relationship performance. By using FsQCA to analyze the data, this research examines the underlining mechanism of trust and commitments, causing export relationship performance. By doing so, we extend the previous researches on trust, commitment, and export performance, which were predominately focused on a hypothesis based symmetric relationships.

We found three configurations to cause export relationship performance. As it was expected, we identify that a combination of high calculative commitment, high affective commitment, high inter-organizational, and interpersonal trust, and large size organization is a necessary condition for achieving export relationship performance. This finding attests the previous researches and recognizes that both the trust and commitment dimensions are necessary for achieving higher relationship performance. In this connection, this research further reestablished the importance of relational considerations in export marketing. The inclusion of the organizational size is also a significant finding of this research. Worthy of remembering that here, the larger firms are defined with an annual sales of 5 million USD. Our explanation is for a smaller sized exporting firm from a smaller economy like Ecuador might not have enough capability to invest in inter-organizational and interpersonal trust increasing activities; hence, the bigger sized firms might be in a better condition here. The second configuration we identified tells that - a combination of high affective commitment, high inter-organizational trust, high personal trust, larger organizations, less length of inter-organizational and interpersonal relationship is a necessary condition for achieving export relationship performance. This finding also deserves some attention, the inclusion of affective commitment, and both dimensions of trust and the size of the organization is in congruence with the literature. However, the negation of the length of the relationships (inter-or-

ganizational and interpersonal) tells us that relationships are good but how long. This finding points essential aspects of relationships and posits the question of how long the relationships are good in the export-import relationship? The final configuration indicates that a combination of high affective commitment, high inter-organizational trust, high personal trust, larger organizations, high length of inter-organizational and interpersonal relationships is a necessary condition for achieving export relationship performance, which is again in line with the theoretical arguments of previous literature. However, if we look at the three configurations at the same time, we will see that affective commitment, interpersonal trust, inter-organizational trust, and the size of the organization is very crucial for achieving the relationship performance. Attesting the importance of affective commitment and the trust dimensions is one of the significant contributions of this research.

We also explored the combinations that may cause not having higher relationship export performance, and found that a low affective commitment is a sufficient condition for not having export relationship performance. Which, we consider as a significant contribution of this research. In Latin America, in general, the importance of affective commitment is very much crucial. Hence, a foreign company that wants to have a successful business relationship with a Latin American firm must invest in affective commitment. The second configuration is also important, as it says - a combination of low calculative commitment, low affective commitment, high inter-organizational trust, high interpersonal trust, smaller organizations, longer inter-organizational relationships, and shorter interpersonal relationship is a necessary condition for not achieving higher export relationship performances. It implies that the low level of commitments, the shorter interpersonal relationships can also cause low relationship performance for the smaller firms even if they have high trusts and longer inter-organizational relationships. This finding disposes of a closer look at the commitment-trust theory of [30] as it suggests that in the case of the export-import relationship, inter-organizational trust and affective commitment are the key mediating variables.

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