Commitment to exporting as an antecedent of organizational skills and firm performance

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Abstract
This study proposes the role of leader’s commitment to export activities as an antecedent of specific organizational skills. In particular, this research investigates whether the leaders’ commitment to exporting affects firm performance, through the mediating effect of entrepreneurial orientation, network competence, and dynamic capabilities of a firm, using survey data collected from 976 companies in Portugal. Results from the structural equation model show that leaders’ commitment to exporting, defined as a positive attitude towards the internationalization of their firms, acts as an antecedent of entrepreneurial orientation and network competence. Additionally, we conclude that the relation between this commitment and firm performance is mediated through entrepreneurial orientation, network competence, and dynamic capabilities. This study contributes to the understanding of the mediating effect of these specific organizational skills in the proposed relationship between leaders’ commitment to exporting and firm performance and provides a new insight into the important role of the entrepreneur or top manager.

Keywords Dynamic capabilities · Network competence · Leaders’ commitment to exporting · Entrepreneurial orientation · Performance · Structural equation model

JEL Classification L20 · L25 · L26 · M20

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1 Introduction

In a globalized economy, firms find themselves competing both national and across borders. The search for factors which enhance the overcoming of barriers and exploring opportunities leading to achieve success in national and international markets, has become of paramount importance in management (Javalgi and Todd 2011). The literature regarding international strategic management recognizes the importance of internal firm capabilities, which includes entrepreneurial orientation, dynamic capabilities, market orientation, network ties, among others, to improve firm performance, to expand abroad and compete internationally.

Entrepreneurial actions with an innovative, proactive and risk-taking behavior allow firms to identify and to explore opportunities in different markets (Dai et al. 2013; Oviatt and McDougall 2005). Hence, entrepreneurial orientation can provide firms a better preparation to foster international new market entry and to increase firm performance (e.g., Jin et al. 2018; Covin and Slevin 1989; Rauch et al. 2009). Given the current pace of change, firms need to continually develop skills to sustain competitive advantage, i.e. they need to develop dynamic capabilities, which contribute to a better adaptation of firms (Zahra et al. 2006), lead to competitive advantage (Fainshmidt et al. 2019) and to sustain a better performance over time (Teece et al. 1997; Wilden et al. 2013).

Nowadays, networking is a key skill in social and business life. This is an important facilitator of business opportunities and has been emphasized in the entrepreneurship literature. Networks are useful to acquire the resources to a better adaptation in markets (Ibeh and Kasem 2011), being the management of these a key issue. It has been shown that the higher the level of environmental uncertainty and hostility, the greater is the dependence that firms have on their networks to adapt to the environmental changes, and in the context of international operations, to influence the internationalization process (Musteen et al. 2010). In 1999, Ritter introduced the concept of network competence (Ritter 1999). This competence allows intensifying firm external relationships and influences firm performance (Ritter and Gemünden 2003; Ritter et al. 2002; Ritter 1999). Additionally, networks may facilitate the development of new capabilities by promoting a constant flow of information from external and internal sources, and in turn affect performance.

In recent years, several firms faced a context of financial crisis which has demanded quick responses and adaptations by firms. Opportunities are hand with hand with risks and internationalization is no exception either. In Portugal, and to minimize the impact of economic crisis on activity stagnation and firms’ bankruptcy, the Portuguese Government developed an export promotion strategy to boost firm’s performance. In this context, international expansion has become a strategic response for many firms, which increasingly look to international market as an opportunity. In fact, the international competitiveness of a country reflects the ability of its organizations to achieve success in the markets. Nevertheless, for that success, the firm leadership or manager may play a significant role.

Despite these insights, the interrelation between the individual level and the organizational level and its relationship with firm performance deserves
additional research. In this study, we focus on the effect of individual level through leaders’ commitment to exporting, which reflects the importance that decision makers attribute to the firm’s international operations, their intention to increase the exporting activities and to actively explore international market opportunities (Cadogan et al. 2001). This commitment may induce the development of organizational skills, such as entrepreneurial orientation and network competence, to achieve a better firm performance.

In this way, we explore the intersection of two strands of research. On the one hand, studying the firm’s skills (entrepreneurial orientation, dynamic capabilities, network competence) and its direct and/or indirect effects on firm performance. While these skills provide directions for organizations pursue new opportunities, their effective implementation requires someone’s commitment in implementing this culture (Wobodo 2019). On the other hand, we introduce the role of the leader (at the individual level) in the development of each of these organizational skills (at the firm level). Thus, in line with recent literature, which began to introduce individual components along with organizational skills, our research aims to take the individual-level perspective on firm’s behavior and performance (e.g., Ensley et al. 2006; Ling et al. 2008; Engelen et al. 2015; Pureta and Pureta 2018). Additionally, this paper contributes to the management literature by extending the available conceptual models that explain firm’s performance by adding leaders’ commitment to exporting as an antecedent of organizational skills. This approach is timely and relevant, given recent studies that consider the top manager characteristics (Miller and Le Breton-Miller 2011; van Doorn et al. 2017) as drivers of entrepreneurial orientation. Additionally, the development of trust relationships with business partners is improved, while the international commitment increases (Johanson and Vahlne 2009) and, with a perspective of knowledge acquisition, the international commitment improves the network relationships (Zhou et al. 2012). This commitment can lead to the development of entrepreneurial behavior and to develop relationships with other firms as his/her entrepreneur’s values, tendencies, and orientation have impacts on the entrepreneurial orientation of the organization (Covin and Miller 2014). Therefore, this study investigates the importance of leaders’ commitment to exporting role in the formation of organizational skills, such as entrepreneurial orientation and network competence, and its effects on performance using data collected from 976 companies in Portugal.

This article is organized as follows. After the introduction section, Sect. 2 surveys the relevant literature to this study that supports the theoretical framework and hypotheses to be tested and concludes with the conceptual model. Section 3 describes the methodology of data collection, sample characteristics, measures of variables and procedures for reliability verification of instruments measuring constructs. Section 4 presents the results of our research; and a discussion of the theoretical and management implications can be found in Sect. 5.
2 Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

2.1 Entrepreneurial orientation

The entrepreneurship or entrepreneurial behavior is an important way to explore new opportunities (Covin and Slevin 1989, 1991), since firms with this behavior can be better prepared to deal with obstacles (Zahra 1993; Zahra and Covin 1995) and will take more risks. Being a relevant topic of research in the field of entrepreneurship and strategy for several decades (Covin and Lumpkin 2011; Simsek et al. 2010; Wales 2016), the roots of research in the field of entrepreneurial orientation (EO) are attributed to the work of Mintzberg (1973) who considers that firm’s entrepreneurial orientation is based on active search for new opportunities. For Covin and Slevin (1989), when managers are entrepreneurial orientated that is reflected on the strategic decisions of firm and on its management philosophy. Firms need to innovate and look for market leadership, whereby entrepreneurial orientation occurs simultaneously with three dimensions (Miller 1983): innovativeness, risk-taking, and proactiveness. The innovativeness dimension is related to the ability of the company to create new products or transform the existing ones, new services or technological processes in order to satisfy the demand of current and future markets. Risk-taking refers to the will of the company allocate resources to projects, whose results can be highly uncertain, which allow increasing its ability to identify and exploit market opportunities before competitors. Finally, proactiveness dimension refers to processes of acting in anticipation of future demand and of future needs, with which companies size opportunities for initiative and strong emphasis on leadership. Additionally, Anderson et al. (2009) provide a definition of EO as a firm-level strategic orientation, which captures an organization’s decision-making practices, managerial philosophies, and strategic behaviors that are entrepreneurial in nature. EO has generally been conceived of as an organizational decision-making proclivity favoring entrepreneurial activities (Lumpkin and Dess 1996).

2.2 Network competence

The role of networking has been recently considered one of the most relevant topics in the entrepreneurship literature. Firms facing difficulties, e.g. the lack of the necessary resources (Knight and Cavusgil 2004), may use network relationships to minimize them by accessing necessary resources such as knowledge, technology, and capital that are needed for international expansion (Ibeh and Kasem 2011). The lack of studies on the definition of the relationship between the organizational capabilities and the networking led to the development of the concept of network competence (Ritter 1999; Ritter et al. 2002). Despite the progress in networking research, the organizational network-level competences have not been widely studied. Network competence (Ritter 1999) is the firms’ ability to develop and manage relationships with business partners and deal with the interactions between them effectively (Ritter 1999; Ritter et al. 2002). It is a relational core competence that organizations develop (Ritter et al. 2002), i.e., an internal organizational ability that allows
reconfiguring the relationship activities in specific situations (Knight and Cavusgil 2004).

2.3 Leaders’ commitment to exporting and its relationship with entrepreneurial orientation and network competence

Commitment is the attitude underlying decision makers. In the international context it relates to the degree of commitment that managers put on the internationalization process and increase of activities in foreign markets (Cadogan et al. 2001; Zhou et al. 2012). According to Gencturk et al. (1995) the favorable management attitudes towards internationalization leads to greater commitment to foreign marketing activities. This commitment is an important indicator of leaders’ willingness to act in international markets and on the activity of their firms’ internationalization. The firm’s owners or managers that develop a positive attitude towards international expansion and think outside the domestic market are more likely to succeed (Javalgi and Todd 2011).

In addition, international operations involve risks due to the higher probability of failure in a competitive and generally unknown environment (Ripollés-Meliá et al. 2007). To minimize the probability of failure and achieve success, the search for opportunities, in general, and international opportunities, in particular, requires an entrepreneurial orientation, since firms that opt for internationalization face more risks and need to be more proactive and innovative (Santos and García 2011; Knight and Cavusgil 2004), and such behaviors facilitate the entry into new markets.

The top management team plays a key role in values formation and in firm orientation, being the main driving force into this direction (Javalgi and Todd 2011). According to Covin and Miller (2014), the entrepreneur or "key manager" is the reason that explains the entrepreneurial behavior of a firm. Studies suggest that the CEO, the decision-making styles and practices of managers, as well as their commitment influence the firm and its entrepreneurial orientation (Grühn et al. 2017; Navarro-García et al. 2017). To Lumpkin and Dess (2001), internationalization is seen as a form of entrepreneurship and Ripollés-Meliá et al. (2007) consider that, due to the identification and exploitation of new opportunities in a new environment, international activity is an entrepreneurial act. Therefore, we explore how the commitment of managers towards exporting influences the entrepreneurial orientation of the firm, since international operations require an entrepreneurial behavior. As entrepreneurial orientation is important in the search for new opportunities (Covin and Slevin 1989, 1991), we believe that the leaders’ commitment to exporting will contribute to the development of this entrepreneurial behavior. Thus, we set out first hypothesis:

**H1: Leaders’ commitment to exporting promotes the formation of the firm’s entrepreneurial orientation.**

The lack of resources (Knight and Cavusgil 2004) and cultural differences between countries of origin and destination (Johanson and Vahlne 1977) impose constraints to the growth of international operations. In this context, many authors
have suggested that network relationships can provide access to key resources, such as knowledge, technology, and capital, which facilitate firm internationalization (Ibeh and Kasem 2011), without taking much risk (Covin and Miller 2014; Lee et al. 2012). Knight and Cavusgil (2004) and Torkkeli et al. (2012) emphasize the possession of internal organizational competences, such as network competence, in order to support the international expansion into other markets. Given the importance of networks, firms with higher degree of international commitment have a greater capacity to develop trust relationships with business partners and overcome obstacles (Johanson and Vahlne 2009). Thus, commitment to international markets facilitates the acquisition of knowledge, since this can be acquired through relationships (Zhou et al. 2012). Consequently, given the importance of the networks for the firms’ internationalization, it is expected that top managers committed to exporting will be concerned with the firm’s network competence development. Based on this preposition, we test whether leaders’ commitment to exporting is an antecedent of network competence, i.e., a greater commitment to international activity can lead to the development of this important competence for current or future internationalization processes. Hence, our second hypothesis is:

**H2: Leaders’ commitment to exporting positively influences network competence development.**

### 2.4 Dynamic capabilities

The Resource Based View (RBV) of Barney (1991) aims to explain how firms can achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, given their resources and capabilities (Lin and Wu 2014). The utilization of resources that are unique, i.e., valuable, rare, difficult to imitate and non-substitutable (VRIN), allows the firm to obtain sustainable competitive advantages over time against other firms (Barney 1991). In this line of arguing, Teece et al. (1997) proposed the concept of dynamic capabilities as an extension of RBV. This framework is relevant, since dynamic capabilities refer to the ability to anticipate changes and react to them in a systematic way, referred to as dynamic capabilities (Teece et al. 1997), being a way for firms to sustain superior performance over time (Wilden et al. 2013).

### 2.5 Entrepreneurial orientation and dynamic capabilities

In a recent meta-analysis, Eriksson identified key antecedents of dynamic capabilities that can be either of external or internal nature (Eriksson 2014). The internal antecedents of dynamic capabilities of social nature contain many orientations such as entrepreneurial orientation that is an individual orientation (Jantunen et al. 2005). Given the importance of management style, Teece (2007) defines the entrepreneurial component as an antecedent to dynamic capabilities. Indeed, entrepreneurial managers more easily shape firm management and, consequently, better sustain dynamic capabilities (Teece 2007). It is important that managers seek innovation in order to sustain and renew the competitive advantage across borders by combining dynamic capabilities with motivation to innovate (Michailova and Zhan 2015). Thereby, we
proposed to test the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and dynamic capabilities. Thus, our third hypothesis follows:

\[ H3: \text{Entrepreneurial orientation positively influences dynamic capabilities.} \]

2.6 Network competence and dynamic capabilities

In a competitive and changing environment, firms need capabilities that enhance innovation, anticipate changes, and provide a quick response to threats. These capabilities can be developed internally or externally in cooperation with the network partners (Lew et al. 2013). According to Hessels and Parker (2013) firms which do not possess unique resources and capabilities can alternatively establish external relations or cooperate with other firms in order to access them. Thus, network relationships between firms may strengths their resource base, which positively influences organizational performance. Johanson and Vahlne (2003, 2009) consider essential to be in relevant networks, because it is within relationships that parties interact by learning and improving their dynamic capabilities. Indeed, entrepreneurs can employ the necessary resources across networks as a basis for the generation and promotion of dynamic capabilities. Therefore, we hypothesize that network competence is an antecedent of firm’s dynamic capabilities, i.e.,

\[ H4: \text{Network competence contributes to the development of dynamic capabilities.} \]

2.7 Entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance

It has been suggested that entrepreneurial orientation positively influences the firm performance (Covin and Slevin 1989; Lee et al. 2019; Miller 1983; Rauch et al. 2009; Rezaei and Ortt 2018). In fast-changing environments, an entrepreneurial orientation facilitates firms in seeking new opportunities (Rauch et al. 2009), as a result of the proactive nature and willingness to take risks (Ripollés-Meliá et al. 2007). Lumpkin and Dess (1996) argue that the impact of entrepreneurial orientation on firm performance depends on the specific context of the firm. The strength of the relation between the two constructs may vary (Rauch et al. 2009): firms with higher entrepreneurial orientation tend to be more successful. Nevertheless, Li et al. (2005) failed to find any relation and Tang et al. (2008) found a nonlinear one. Su et al. (2011) attribute the explanation for these different results to the existence of other factors that mediate this relation. The lack of control of mediator factors may explain the negative relation between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance found by Hart (1992). Given that most of studies support a positive influence, we hypothesize direct and indirect effects between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. Thus, our fifth hypothesis is:

\[ H5: \text{Entrepreneurial orientation positively influences the firm performance.} \]
2.8 Network competence and firm performance

Ritter (1999) emphasizes the importance of network competence to explain firm performance, since the ability of firms to sustain their networks becomes a core competency and a skill that can determine their performance (Ritter et al. 2002). This competence enhances external relationships of firm, which may impact measures of performance such as survival and growth, sales volume, and competitive position (Ritter and Gemünden 2003). Thus, we test the hypothesis:

\[ H6: \text{Network competence contributes to improve firm performance.} \]

2.9 Dynamic capabilities and firm performance

To Lin and Wu (2014), firms can improve their performance whenever they accumulate VRIN resources and develop their dynamic capabilities. According to Widén et al. (2013), the dynamic capabilities positively influence the firm performance. As an RBV’s extension, dynamic capabilities are a critical source of superior performance (El Akremi et al. 2015), which explain performance differentials between firms (Wang et al. 2015). As the dynamic capabilities allow firms to reconfigure its resource base and promote the search of opportunities (Jantunen et al. 2005), firms are endowed with new decision options with potential to increase performance (Eisenhardt and Martin 2000; Teece 2007). Thus, dynamic capabilities are important antecedents, and are positively related to firm performance (Drnevich and Kriauciu纳斯 2011; Eisenhardt and Martin 2000; Hung et al. 2010; Knight and Liesch 2015; Monteiro et al. 2017; Zahra et al. 2006). Thus, we test this hypothesis in our overall conceptual model:

\[ H7: \text{Dynamic capabilities positively influence the firm performance.} \]
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The conceptual model is summarized in Fig. 1. It defines leaders’ commitment to exporting as an antecedent of entrepreneurial orientation and network competence, the influence of these last two variables on the development of dynamic capabilities and ultimately of these constructs on firm performance, evaluating the associated mediator effects.

We also test for control variables such as firm age, size, sector or industry, and location, as they have the potential to influence performance of firms and are widely used in the strategic management literature (e.g. Dai et al. 2013; Lechner and Gudmundsson 2014; Karami and Tang 2019).\(^1\)

### Table 1  Sample characteristics

|                          | Results                                                  |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Industry                 |                                                          |
| Productive activities    | 24.8% of firms, of which 16.8% correspond to the manufacturing sector |
| Commerce                 | 25.5% of firms                                           |
| Services                 | 46.1% of firms, of which 16.9% correspond to consulting activities, scientific, technical and similar, 10% to accommodation, catering and similar, and information and communication activities and the remaining to other services |
| Size (number of full-time employees) |                                                          |
|                         | 59.7% of firms have less than 10 employees               |
|                         | 30.7% have between 10 and 49 employees                   |
|                         | 9.5% have 50 or more employees                           |
| Turnover                 | 13.1% of firms have a turnover of less than 50,000€      |
|                         | 31.7% have between 50,000€ and 250,000€                  |
|                         | 28.6% have between 250,001€ and 1,000,000€              |
|                         | 26.6% of firms have more than 1 million €                |
| Age                      | 20.5% of firms are less than 10 years                    |
|                         | 23% of firms are between 11 and 15 years                 |
|                         | 29.9% are between 16 and 25 years                        |
|                         | 26.6% are more than 25 years                             |
| Geographical location    | North of Portugal: 31.8% of firms                        |
|                         | Lisbon area: 31.4%                                       |
|                         | Center of Portugal: 20.4%                                |
|                         | South and Portuguese islands: 16.5%                      |

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### 3 Data and methodology

Data was collected through an application of a structured questionnaire, which was pilot tested to check for clarity of the questions and easiness to filling in. Firms were selected using a population representative database designed for this specific purpose. Geographical strata were set to respect the regional distribution of Portuguese

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\(^1\) We note that the relationship between these variables might be endogenous (see Coad 2018). However, this is not the focus of this study, as it lies in another strand of literature.
firms. Firm managers or decision makers were contacted as they had the decision power and knowledge to fill in the questionnaire. Data collection was conducted online using an online platform. We obtained 976 validated responses and the data analysis was conducted using SPSS and MPlus software.

Table 1 presents the main sample characteristics of the firms in the sample: firm age, firm size, turnover, industry, and geographical location. Concerning firms’ age, 27% of firms in our sample have more than 25 years, 30% are aged between 16 and 25 years, 23% between 11 and 15 years, and 21% are younger firms with less than 10 years. In terms of size measured by the number of employees, 60% of firms have less than 10 employees, 31% between 10 and 49 employees, and only 10% have 50 or more employees. Regarding the amount of turnover, 13% of firms have a turnover inferior to 50,000€, 32% between 50,000€ and 250,000€, 29% between 250,001€ and 1,000,000€, and 27% of firms have more than 1 million €. Almost half of the firms operate in the Services sector, 26% in the Commerce sector, and 25% dedicates to Productive activities. In terms of location, 32% of firms are in the North of Portugal, 31% in Lisbon area, 20% in the Center of Portugal and 17% are distributed by the South region and Portuguese islands.

Additionally, as regards the firms operating markets, 56.1% of firms operate only in the domestic market and 43.9% have international activities (34.6% exporters and 9.3% making direct investment and/or direct investment and export). Of exporting firms, 39.4% export up to 10% of its production, 38% exports up to 50%, and 22.6% export more than 50%. Regarding the scope of internationalization, about 17% of overall sample firms export to up to two countries, 12% export to 3–4 countries, and 14% export to five or more countries. Indeed, for a large proportion of exporting firms (47.7%), two or more countries of destination of their exports is outside the European Union (EU). These firms export on average to 6.6 countries, of which 3.1 are outside the EU. The average speed of internationalization—difference between the years of first entry into the international market and firm creation—is 9.5 years.

3.1 Measures and variables

3.1.1 Leaders’ commitment to exporting

Leaders’ commitment to exporting was measured by the scale of Cadogan et al. (2001) with three items that focus on the manager’s commitment to the importance of international activities (importance of exporting activities, intention to increase this activities, and an active exploration of opportunities in international market). We replace the term “senior management” by “those responsible for making management decisions”, because Portuguese firms, mostly SMEs, tend to lack a formal structure with senior management.

3.1.2 Entrepreneurial orientation

Entrepreneurial orientation proposed by Miller (1983) is measured by nine items developed by Covin and Slevin (1989). In line with other studies (e.g., Moreno
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and Casillas 2008), we used the semantic differential method. Respondents classified their firms’ orientation towards two opposing statements that are graded on a 7-point scale. This measurement scale has been applied in other studies (e.g., Covin and Slevin 1989; Ripollés-Meliá et al. 2007) and allows the characterization of the degree of firm entrepreneurial orientation with high levels of reliability and validity. However, the meta-analysis study by Rauch et al. (2009) shows that most of the studies use an one-dimensional scale to measure entrepreneurial orientation.

3.1.3 Network competence

The concept of network competence has been conceived as a two-dimensional construct related to the degree of network management task execution and to the degree of network management qualification possessed by those who handle firm’s relationships (Ritter et al. 2002). The original scale consists of 22 items that measure two dimensions. This study focuses on the first dimension—task-execution from relationship-specific to cross-relational tasks—that was measured by 11 items. The second dimension—social and specialist qualifications possessed by the networking management team—was not included in the model, because the population at study is characterized mostly by Portuguese SMEs, whose management skills are concentrated in the owner given the lack of managerial team supporting him/her.

3.1.4 Dynamic capabilities

Dynamic capabilities are measured by the scale of organizational dynamic capabilities of Hung et al. (2010). It contains 11 items: 4 evaluate the organizational strategic capability; 3 measure the R&D innovative capability; and 4 assess the organizational management capability.

3.1.5 Firm performance

Firm performance is measured by six items, focusing on changes in terms of competitive advantage, market share, profits, costs, sales, and customer satisfaction (Hung et al. 2010). Since this construct takes the main competitor into account, it reflects the relative advantage of the firm. The 7-point Likert scale from 1–completely disagree to 7–completely agree was used to measure all items used to evaluate all constructs of the study, with the exception of entrepreneurial orientation.

3.1.6 Control variables

A set of control variables associated with performance that were identified in previous studies (Dai et al. 2013; Ge and Wang 2012; Zahra and Garvis 2000; Zhou and Wu 2014) are included: firm size (measured by the number of employees and
turnover), age, industry, and location. Some of these variables were categorized to facilitate data collection and analysis.

3.1.6.1 Firm size The firm size was controlled because large firms have more resources, which influences its willingness and capability of internationalization, innovation, opportunities detection (Chen et al. 2012; Ge and Wang 2012; Zahra and Garvis 2000; Zhou and Wu 2014), the dynamic capabilities development (Drnevich and Kriauciunas 2011), and their relationship with competitive advantage (Li and Liu 2014). Regarding the number of employees (Ge and Wang 2012; Wilden et al. 2013), the study categorizes firms into 3 groups: less than 10, between 10 and 49, and 50 or more employees. The turnover variable, which can also be used to measure the firm size, is divided into 4 groups: less than 50,000€, between 50,000 and 250,000€, between 250,001 and 1 million €, and more than 1 million €.

3.1.6.2 Firm age Firm age is likely to influence the level of international operations and entrepreneurial activity (Zahra and Garvis 2000). Additionally, younger firms tend to have access to limited resources, which can affect their capability for opportunities exploration and the relationship between dynamic capabilities and results (Li and Liu 2014). The sample was classified into four groups: up to 10 years, between 11 and 15 years, between 16 to 25 years, and more than 25 years.

3.1.6.3 Firm industry We used industry variable as firms from different sectors show differences in entrepreneurial activities. Moreover, different industries face distinct competitive challenges, which can explain different views on the commitment of their managers regarding internationalization and unequal opportunities and hence distinct levels of firm performance (Dai et al. 2013; Zahra and Garvis 2000; Zhou and Wu 2014). The industry variable was divided into three categories: services, manufacturing, and commerce.

3.1.6.4 Location This variable encompasses the four Portuguese statistical regions: NUTS II North, NUTS II Lisbon, NUTS II Center, and South and Portuguese islands that includes Alentejo, Algarve, Azores, and Madeira.

3.2 Scale validation

Confirmatory factor analysis was applied to assess the reliability and validity of the scales of measurement used in this study. A threshold of 0.5 was set as minimum for the standardized factor loadings. Thereby, it was necessary to eliminate items with low factor loadings, indicating poor reliability of the item as measurement of the construct (a factor loading of 0.5 means that the construct only explains 25.0% of the variance of the item). As a result, the final selection of retained items was: three for the scale of leaders’ commitment to exporting; seven for the one-dimensional scale of dynamic capabilities; six for the network competence; five for the one-dimensional scale of entrepreneurial orientation; and five for the firm performance. The list of items kept in the analysis is provided in the “Appendix”.
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Reliability of the measures is assessed by the Cronbach’s alpha, the composite reliability (CR), and the average variance extracted (AVE). CR and AVE were evaluated as described by Fornell and Larcker (1981). A good consistency, acceptable consistency, and weaker consistency is reached for a Cronbach’s alpha greater than 0.80, between 0.60 and 0.80, and below 0.6, respectively (Hair et al. 2010).

Table 2 summarizes the results on reliability. Almost all Cronbach’s alpha and CR values exceed 0.8 and AVE exceeds the 0.5 value, suggesting that the indicators of each variable have good internal consistency, except entrepreneurial orientation that has an acceptable consistency (Cronbach’s alpha between 0.6 and 0.8). Overall, constructs are measured by the retained items.

| Variable                         | Number of items | Cronbach’s Alpha (α) | CR   | AVE   |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|------|-------|
| Dynamic capabilities             | 7               | 0.887                | 0.895| 0.550 |
| Leaders’ commitment to exporting| 3               | 0.945                | 0.946| 0.854 |
| Network competence               | 6               | 0.826                | 0.872| 0.533 |
| Entrepreneurial orientation      | 5               | 0.759                | 0.830| 0.501 |
| Performance                      | 5               | 0.916                | 0.851| 0.535 |

4 Results

We estimated the structural equation model (SEM) by the maximum likelihood method in order to test the hypotheses and the impact of the five control variables on performance. The fit of the structural equation model is checked using the chi-square test. As it is sample size sensitive, the following fit indices were also applied: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA).

Results show that the model has a very good fit to the variance and covariance structure of the analyzed items: $\chi^2 (663) = 61,849.693$, $\chi^2/df = 93.288$, Comparative fit index [CFI]=0.988, Tucker-Lewis index [TLI]=0.987, RMSEA=0.035, P[RMSEA ≤ 0.05]=1.000, and a 90% confidence interval of 90%[0.033;0.038]. Indeed, the CFI and TLI are well above the threshold of 0.95 and the RMSEA is well below the threshold of 0.05 that defines a good fit (Hu and Bentler 1999).

Table 3 reports the estimates of the structural equation model. Most of the items are statistically significant (p < 0.05) with factor loadings above 0.5 (see “Appendix”).

Overall, our study shows that of the seven potential relationships, six are statistically significant. First, our H1 predicts that the leaders’ commitment to exporting favors the formation of entrepreneurial orientation. We find evidence supporting this hypothesis, identifying a positive and significant influence of leaders’ commitment

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2 The model fit measures show the parsimony of the model without extra associations between errors and covariates. Thus, there is no indication of endogeneity in the model and potential biased estimates of the structural parameters.
### Table 3  Estimates of the structural model coefficients

| Variables                  | Dynamic capabilities | Entrepreneurial orientation | Network competence | Performance    |
|---------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Entrepreneurial orientation | 0.281*** (0.335; 0.037) |                            |                     | 0.134*** (0.169; 0.039) |
| Dynamic capabilities      |                       | 0.428*** (0.453; 0.041)     |                     |               |
| Network competence        | 0.580*** (0.675; 0.032) |                            | 0.059 (0.073; 0.047) |               |
| Leaders’ commitment to exporting | 0.261*** (0.222; 0.020) | 0.359*** (0.256; 0.023)    | 0.276*** (0.202; 0.023) | 0.176*** (0.158; 0.016) |

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05. Between brackets: (coefficient of non-standardized solution; standard-error)
to exporting on entrepreneurial orientation (where the standardized coefficient ($\hat{\beta}_{std}$) is 0.256, $p<0.001$). Furthermore, the results also indicate a positive effect of leaders’ commitment to exporting on network competence, supporting our H2 ($\hat{\beta}_{std}=0.202$, $p<0.001$). Both results confirm the existence of a relationship not yet studied in the literature. H3, which defines a positive influence of firm entrepreneurial orientation on its dynamic capabilities, is also supported by the data ($\hat{\beta}_{std}=0.335$, $p<0.001$). H4 assumes a positive contribution of the firm’s network competence for the development of firm’s dynamic capabilities, which was supported by our results ($\hat{\beta}_{std}=0.675$, $p<0.001$). H5 states that the firm performance is positively affected by entrepreneurial orientation. As expected, the data also supports this assumption ($\hat{\beta}_{std}=0.169$, $p<0.001$), in line with previous studies (Covin and Slevin 1991; Miller 1983; Rauch et al. 2009). However, contrary to our expectations, H6, which hypothesizes that firm’s network competence contributes to improve firm performance, is not supported by the data ($\hat{\beta}_{std}=0.073$, n.s.). H7 defines a positive influence of dynamic capabilities on firm performance, and it is confirmed, as it was expected ($\hat{\beta}_{std}=0.453$, $p<0.001$).

Given the estimates of indirect relations and once confirmed, it is found that entrepreneurial orientation, network competence, and dynamic capabilities mediate the relationship between leaders’ commitment to exporting and firm performance ($p<0.001$). We also confirmed that dynamic capabilities mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and performance (H3 and H7: $p<0.001$) and the relationship between network competence and performance (H4 and H7: $p<0.001$). Additionally, the relationship between the leaders’ commitment to exporting and dynamic capabilities exists indirectly through the mediation of entrepreneurial orientation ($p<0.001$) and the mediation of network competence ($p<0.001$).

From all the control variables, only size and age show a statistically significant impact on firms’ performance (see Table 4). Firms with a number of employees between 10 and 49, firms with turnover higher than 1 million €, and younger firms are those that perform best.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This paper contributes to a better understanding of key antecedents of firm performance, being the first to confirm that leaders’ commitment to exporting may develop entrepreneurial orientation and network competence. The key finding of this research is the positive role of leaders’ commitment to exporting as an antecedent of entrepreneurial orientation and network competence and an indirect antecedent of dynamic capabilities. In addition, we show that encouraging some of these organizational behaviors and competences can generate higher firm performance.
For a firm that intends to start or strengthen its internationalization, it is important to promote the commitment of their managers toward these activities as it develops entrepreneurial behavior and improves the firm’s relationships. Companies run by managers who demonstrate greater commitment to exporting can better develop their organizational skills and to create conditions to sustain a higher firm performance.

Previous studies suggested that entrepreneurial orientation may contribute to the development of dynamic capabilities (e.g. Jantunen et al. 2005; Teece 2007), which is also verified in our study. This shows that firms must cultivate an entrepreneurial attitude, because then they will be better prepared to anticipate and face problems, to adapt to changes in their environment, and to reconfigure their resource base, which is important for the exploitation of opportunities.

Our results also reveal the importance for firms to participate in networks and to promote a good organizational management of their relationships, given that they facilitate the development of innovation and other capabilities. Thus, entrepreneurs should employ their resources through networks by learning and creating the basis for the generation of dynamic capabilities.

We also analyze the direct relationship between entrepreneurial orientation, dynamic capabilities, and network competence, and performance of firms. In fact, firms with an entrepreneurial orientation are more able to face an adverse context, dealing with obstacles, taking more risks and being aware of new business opportunities. Previous studies suggested that the entrepreneurial orientation will positively influence firm performance (Covin and Slevin 1991; Miller

| Table 4 | Estimates of the structural model coefficients (effects of control variables) |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Control variables | Performance |
| Firm size (ref: less than 10 employees) | |
| Between 10 and 49 employees | 0.229 (0.079)** |
| 50 or more employees | 0.102 (0.121) |
| Turnover (ref: less than 50,000€) | |
| Between 50,000 and 250,000€ | 0.036 (0.090) |
| Between 250,001 and 1,000,000€ | 0.180 (0.094) |
| More than 1,000,000€ | 0.297 (0.112)** |
| Age (ref: up to 10 years) | |
| Between 11 and 15 years | − 0.239 (0.083)** |
| Between 16 and 25 years | − 0.315 (0.082)** |
| More than 25 years | − 0.453 (0.084)** |
| Industry (ref: services) | |
| Productive activities | − 0.021 (0.075) |
| Commerce | − 0.002 (0.074) |
| Location (ref: Lisbon) | |
| North | 0.097 (0.072) |
| Center | 0.154 (0.083) |
| South and Portuguese islands | 0.016 (0.084) |

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05. Standard-error between brackets
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…(1983; Rauch et al. 2009; Su et al. 2011), which is empirically confirmed in this study. Combining that with dynamic capabilities, it allows to a better adaptation to environmental changes, and to the improvement of firm performance and to sustain it for a long time.

This paper enriches the literature in the context of networks and firms’ performance, taking the organizational skills of networking into account. However, the direct relationship between network competence and firm performance suggested by Ritter and Gemünden (2003) and Ritter et al. (2002) was not confirmed. A possible explanation for the absence of this direct link may be the fact that the network competence by itself is not sufficient to ensure a better performance, as was also found by Sajilan and Tehseen (2019) in the context of Malaysian Chinese firms. In line with the study of Pinho and Prange (2016), whose results show that social network relationships have strong impact on firm performance whenever dynamic capabilities are in place; our study demonstrates that network competence can help the development of those capabilities, which can contribute directly to improve firm performance.

In synthesis, this research shows that leaders’ commitment to exporting is an antecedent of entrepreneurial orientation and network competence; thus, that a positive and committed attitude of managers towards firm’s internationalization can develop organizational skills and ultimately lead to improved firm performance.

Despite the promising outlook of the study, we are aware of specific limitations. This study took a cross-sectional approach by collecting data at a single moment in time. A natural extension of this study is to apply longitudinal design that measures change over time. Besides that, further analyses by different groups of firms can be pursued to find differences, specificities and similarities between them.

We also note that firm performance is defined as a latent variable. Alternatively, observed measures such as accounting and finance indicators could have been used. Although it can be argued that the former may be less reliable, the latter tend to be more difficult to obtain, reflect a partial picture of firm performance, and is more difficult to compare between industries. According to Kitaw and Goshu (2017) it should be noted that current literature lacks of a solid theory that underpins the measurement of performance. Moreover, the use of financial measures is prone to sample bias and sample size reduction as firms tend to refuse to give access to it.

For firms operating in small markets, it is important to have access to external markets, particularly in a weak economic situation. The firm leadership is one of the keys to improve the firm’s orientation in order to develop key competences and behaviors that contribute to enhance firm performance. Thus, it is important to explore this panoply of relationships between variables in a future study, specifically the role of LCE within a different framework, and possible moderating effects, to define specific policies aimed at improving the business activity.
### Appendix: Measurement scales of the constructs

| Construct                          | Estimate | Standard-error | Standardized estimate |
|------------------------------------|----------|----------------|-----------------------|
| **Entrepreneurial orientation**    |          |                |                       |
| Generally, our company prefers to a strong emphasis on R&D, technological leadership, and innovations | 1        | –              | 0.678                 |
| Over the past 5 years the changes of the company’s products/services have usually been quite dramatic | 0.827    | 0.049          | 0.561                 |
| Normally our company takes on a very competitive oriented “beat-the-competitor”-position | 0.874    | 0.049          | 0.593                 |
| Generally, our company has a strong tendency toward getting involved in high risk projects (with a chance for high yield) | 1.104    | 0.051          | 0.748                 |
| We normally take up a fearless, aggressive position, in order to maximize the chance of being able to exploit possible opportunities | 1.113    | 0.048          | 0.755                 |
| **Dynamic capabilities**           |          |                |                       |
| Our organization owns ability that can fast aware new business opportunity or threat possibility | 1        | –              | 0.808                 |
| In our organization, leaders have entrepreneurship characteristics | 0.942    | 0.025          | 0.761                 |
| Our organization has the ability to cohesive employees’ knowledge by visioning | 1.054    | 0.021          | 0.851                 |
| Our organization has the ability to evaluate our own organization’s strength and weakness | 1.016    | 0.022          | 0.821                 |
| Our organization has the ability to know the direction and timing for R&D | 0.900    | 0.025          | 0.727                 |
| Our organization has the flexibility to understand the specific needs of customers | 0.910    | 0.024          | 0.736                 |
| Our organization has the flexibility to communicate and coordinate effectively among departments | 0.842    | 0.026          | 0.680                 |
| **Performance**                   |          |                |                       |
| During the past 3 years, change in competitive advantage relative to our largest competitor has markedly improved | 1        | –              | 0.835                 |
| During the past three years, change in market share relative to our largest competitor has markedly improved | 1.044    | 0.011          | 0.870                 |
| During the past three years, change in profit relative to our largest competitor has markedly improved | 1.063    | 0.017          | 0.885                 |
| During the past three years, change in sales revenue relative to our largest competitor has greatly increased | 1.066    | 0.017          | 0.888                 |
| During the past three years, change in customer satisfaction relative to our largest competitor has greatly increased | 0.935    | 0.020          | 0.783                 |
| **Network competence**            |          |                |                       |
| We evaluate the way our relationship with each partner depends on our relations with other partners | 1        | –              | 0.695                 |
| We organize regular meetings among those in our firm involved in relationships with our partners | 1.061    | 0.038          | 0.738                 |
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|                                                                                     | Estimate | Standard-error | Standardized estimate |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|----------------|-----------------------|
| We assign responsibility to people for each relationship with our partners          | 1.052    | 0.039          | 0.731                 |
| We discuss ways of collaborating with people from our partners                      | 1.088    | 0.041          | 0.756                 |
| We put people from our technical partners in contact with key people in the firm    | 1.020    | 0.037          | 0.709                 |
| We put people in our firm in contact with key people from our technical partners    | 0.858    | 0.037          | 0.596                 |

Leaders’ commitment to export

|                                                                                     | Estimate | Standard-error | Standardized estimate |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Those responsible for making our company’s management decisions consider our exporting activities to be important | 1        | –              | 0.951                 |
| Those responsible for making our company’s management decisions intend to increase the company’s exporting activities | 1.034    | 0.007          | 0.983                 |
| Those responsible for making our company’s management decisions actively explore international market opportunities | 0.938    | 0.007          | 0.892                 |

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**Compliance with ethical standards**

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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