

## INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CONSTRUCTION ENTERPRISES: AN OVERVIEW OF MOTIVATION

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### ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, researchers have investigated the international expansion of construction enterprises (IECE) from diverse dimensional issues, including the motivation. Different underlying reasons have been identified; however, attempts to reach a consensus of the motivation for IECE have been overlooked. This research solicits and overviews the motivation of construction enterprises with respect to overseas business expansion. It recommends a conceptual framework of the generic motivation for IECE. Nineteen motives are specified and described in a systematic review of the literature on international construction studies. They are then structured into four categories: the source of motivation (internal or external); the pattern (traditional or emerging); the response (proactive or reactive); and the objective (profit, market, resource or opportunity). Further study of this field is equally important by involving the deterrent factors of motivation. Therefore, this paper advocates an investigation of the factors impeding IECE in further related studies.

*Keywords:* Conceptual framework; Construction enterprise; Generic motivation; International expansion; Overview

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Partly as a result of globalization factors, internationalization has become a global phenomenon for companies. The opportunity for construction companies to obtain projects from cross-national boundary markets has evolved. In terms of the rationale for entering foreign markets, business in the construction industry is not particularly different from other industries, such as manufacturing. Such an initiative can be driven by the same motivation as those found in other industries (Abdul-Aziz, 1994). However, different industries have different business orientations in addressing the needs for information when expanding their markets abroad (Wood & Goolsby, 1987)

Internationalization is a term defined as the expanding process of companies' business activities through a progressive course of actions to expand their participation in international markets

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and perform cross-national boundary transactions (Ahmad & Kitchen, 2008; Maqsoom et al., 2014). The term encompasses the attributes of various strategies within a multifaceted and multiple dimensional setting (Buckley & Ghauri, 1999). Different enterprise internationalization studies have resulted in several theories and models, such as the eclectic paradigm (Dunning, 1980) and network theory (Johanson & Mattsson, 1988).

Much evidence suggests that an international visionary company has several strategic motivation behind its desire to enter foreign markets. Internationalization is believed to increase profitability (Fatemi, 1984); to improve performance (Grant, 1987); to minimize insolvency (Shaked, 1986); and to improve investors' risk-return opportunities (Logue, 1982). In addition, according to Contractor (2012), the needs for the internationalization of enterprises are also underpinned by eight concepts, namely economies of production; global amortization scope; sourcing of cheaper inputs abroad; accessing foreign knowledge; risk reduction advantages of geographical diversification; tax avoidance opportunities; and gaining international experience.

The existing knowledge in this field has been dominated mostly by the domain of general business and economics. Equally important as with other industries, studies of the motivation for the international expansion of construction enterprises (IECE) help to comprehend how such companies counter the rapid changes in the industry. In the context of the construction industry, several studies have been conducted to examine the internationalization of construction enterprises. For instance, using Dunning's eclectic paradigm, Seymour (1987) and Cuervo and Pheng (2003) investigated construction firms in the UK and Singapore respectively. Oz (2001) adopted Porter's Diamond model to examine the internationalization of Turkish companies, while Awil and Abdul-Aziz (2002) studied Malaysia contractors in international markets using stage growth theory.

Although the investigations have substantially contributed to the promotion of the area of international construction business, very little attention has been devoted to understanding the reasons behind the expansion. To date, there has been no attempt to focus on soliciting and classifying expansion motivation in this context. This paper therefore examines the construction industry with a view to understanding the motivation of construction enterprises for expanding their business away from their domestic market. The paper aims to solicit and overview the motivation of construction enterprises with respect to overseas business expansion. Correspondingly, it intends to recommend a conceptual framework of studies on IECE for further investigation.

## 2. METHODS

The study first reviews the research on international construction projects. A set of keyword combinations was entered into selected peer-reviewed journals in construction management identified by Wing (1997), such as the *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management* (JCEM), and *Construction Management and Economics* (CME). Ninety-eight articles focusing on the international construction domain from 1995 to 2014 were then examined by the scanning method. The results obtained from the scanning were five articles from JCEM and CME which explicitly discuss the context of motivation. Since the five articles were not sufficient, other journals, textbooks and conference papers were also added to provide a more comprehensive study. A global publication search engine, *Google Scholar*, was utilized to locate more articles relevant to the topic. Finally, a total of 13 sources encompassing 10 journal papers, two conference papers and one book were used for the study. Careful perusal of the sources resulted in the identification of 19 motivating factors as presented in Table 1, along with their principal investigators.

Table 1 Motivation for international expansion

No	Motivating factor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	Increasing profitability				√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√		
2	Balancing/sustaining growth				√	√	√	√			√	√		√		√	√
3	Optimizing the use of resources	√	√	√		√	√	√	√				√	√		√	
4	Increasing turnover						√	√	√								
5	Responding to project sponsor invitation													√	√	√	
6	Responding to home government encouragement			√						√		√		√	√		
7	Maintaining shareholders' interest	√						√									
8	Diversifying market/activities										√						
9	Avoiding/countering saturation in the domestic market			√		√	√	√	√		√		√	√		√	√
10	Diversifying company risks		√					√	√				√			√	√
11	Expanding/enlarging the market	√	√						√			√	√				
12	Generating economies of scale		√														
13	Gaining competitive advantage		√		√					√	√						
14	Capitalizing on a booming market			√		√				√	√		√				
15	Actualizing the company vision	√										√	√	√			
16	Capitalizing on globalization/free trade								√			√					√
17	Harnessing company expertise		√							√	√					√	√
18	Gaining international experience				√				√				√			√	√
19	Being an anchor player in the host country								√	√			√				

Source: <sup>1</sup>Neo (1976)\*; <sup>2</sup>Seymour (1987); <sup>3</sup>Quak (1989)\*; <sup>4</sup>Giritli et al. (1990); <sup>5</sup>Kaynak and Dalgic (1992)\*; <sup>6</sup>Abdul-Aziz (1994); <sup>7</sup>Crosthwaite (1998); <sup>8</sup>Abdul-Aziz and Wong (2010); <sup>9</sup>Chen and Orr (2009); <sup>10</sup>Teo et al. (2007); <sup>11</sup>Awil and Abdul-Aziz (2002); <sup>12</sup>Maqsoom et al. (2014); <sup>13</sup>Abdul-Aziz et al. (2012); <sup>14</sup>Pheng and Hongbin (2004); <sup>15</sup>Isa et al. (2006); <sup>16</sup>Mutti and Flanagan (2008).

\*Adopted from Awil and Abdul-Aziz (2002).

There are two types of approach commonly employed for the purposes of document analysis: meta-analysis and content analysis. The former is defined as “the statistical analysis of a large collection of analysis results from individual studies for the purpose of integrating the findings” (Glass, 1976, p.3). In other words, the meta-analysis method analyzes the analysis of studies using statistical techniques to result in new outcomes. On the other hand, content analysis is a systematic method of analysis of documents to assign sets of data to a main domain by counting the regularity of themes that arise (Fellows & Liu, 2008).

The purpose of this paper was not to make a statistical count, but to summarize and overview the motivation for IECE. Therefore, the content analysis technique was ascertained to be the appropriate approach to addressing the objective. In addition, this method was chosen because of its flexibility in analyzing the content of articles (Elo & Kyngas, 2008).

To perform content analysis, the subject concerned is first identified and followed by determination of the type of content analysis (Fellows & Liu, 2008; Utama et al., 2018). In quantitative content analysis, script data are encoded into explicit cohorts and then interpreted by statistical techniques. On the other hand, qualitative content analysis tends to intuitively analyze the content of script data and then methodologically code and group these data based on topic (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Therefore, this study employs qualitative content analysis by undertaking an in-depth study of the content of the chosen articles.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Overview of the Internationalization Motivation of Construction Enterprises

As shown in Table 1, each motivation is grouped into four related motives: profit, market, resource and opportunity.

### 3.1.1. Profit-related motives

According to Han et al. (2007), a primary reason why firms participate in transnational markets is to secure their financial situation. Regarding this aspect, the motivation to pursue overseas markets is triggered by an eagerness to increase profitability, increase turnover, sustain or balance growth, and maintain shareholders' interests.

The pursuit of international profit is the main motivation for companies to operate globally. It is believed that undertaking projects abroad is more profitable than local ones. Table 1 indicates that "to increase profitability" is one of the principal motives (supported by eleven studies) which encourages construction firms to export their services. A study of the nine largest American and Japanese contractors found general agreement that long-term profitability was their major concern (Abdul-Aziz, 1994). In line with this research, British construction firms represented by ten contractors highlighted the same motive as their prime reason for internationalization (Crosthwaite, 1998). Both studies clearly support the finding of previous research by Seymour (1987).

Turnover can be described as the gross income obtained by a company as a result of its business activities over a certain period. Table 1 shows that this motive is not a major factor (found in only three studies) in motivating construction firms to enter foreign markets. Crosthwaite (1998) observed the overseas operation of British contractors during the period 1990-1996 and found that these companies were enjoying high overseas turnover in terms of both revenue and shares. Although the British firms enjoyed increasing returns from overseas operations, they did not acknowledge this as the primary motive for expanding internationally. Conversely, the Japanese and American international contractors confided that overseas projects offered good prospects of increasing turnover (Abdul-Aziz, 1994).

In economics, "sustainable growth is the realistically attainable growth that a company could maintain without running into problems" (Goswami & Sarkar, 2014). To maintain such a situation is not easy, either for those running small companies or large businesses. According to Joshi (2009), a company which mainly relies on the domestic market may face problems when the market declines or becomes saturated, while for large businesses, operating in a small market can affect their investment return. Therefore, combining both domestic and foreign operations can be one way to tackle such a business atmosphere.

Maintaining dividend remittances to shareholders is a notion used by Seymour (1987) to accentuate the maintenance of shareholder return. A study by Neo (1976) identified that maintaining dividend remittances to shareholders constituted one of the foremost reasons for the involvement of British construction companies globally in the 70s. Crosthwaite (1998) discovered that shareholders have an influence on companies' decisions to invest abroad, notably their opinion on the choice of overseas market. He indicates that this motive arises because most of the companies operating overseas were registered on the stock market affected by stock trading. The 16 studies in Table 1 indicate that this motive is not a dominant reason for expanding abroad.

### 3.1.2. Market-related motives

These motives relate to survival in an uncertain situation, such as saturation in the domestic market or regional economic turmoil, and are an opportunity to test new markets. Such motives include expanding the business; diversifying the market/activity; avoiding saturation in the domestic market; capitalizing on a booming market; and capitalizing on globalization/free trade.

Finding markets overseas is one of the strategies to expand a business when activity in the traditional market has become stable. This motivation is found in five studies, as indicated in Table 1, meaning that it is a quite an important reason for venturing on overseas projects. In

relation to the construction business, Gunhan (2003) argues that expanding a business is an aggressive strategy, which could be undertaken by employing three approaches. The first is by conducting construction-related business such as property and equipment rental. The second is by expanding into a neighboring country, and the third is by entering the overseas market with a one-off project approach.

Diversification is a strategic option for a company to broaden its main business by varying product markets (Pandya & Rao, 1998). Teo et al. (2007) argue that exporting construction services abroad motivates the development of a different mix of related activities for small and medium sized Singaporean contractors. In the other words, international diversification is a strategic motive, which can be adopted to swiftly enter foreign markets by making a change to the company's core activity. Table 1 indicates that this motive is not a main objective in the expansion of construction enterprises.

When domestic markets are not able to raise a firm's income, foreign markets can be an alternative possibility. Table 1 shows that out of the 16 studies, this motive is mentioned in 10 of them, indicating that it is among the main reasons. "Maintain profit at the time of low home demand" was a phrase used by Seymour (1987) to indicate such a market condition, and was the second major factor motivating British contractors to develop projects in overseas markets. Looking for foreign markets elsewhere would be a better option when faced with a stagnant domestic market (Gunhan, 2003). Contractors from relatively small domestic markets need to consider overseas projects to avoid domestic market saturation (Pheng & Hongbin, 2004).

Economic booms in foreign markets can encourage a company to leave its traditional market. For instance, the rise in oil prices in the 1970s created an economic boom in the Middle East and North Africa, attracting foreign firms to enter these markets (Ofori, 2003). In Table 1, finding an opportunity in a booming market is supported by six studies. An investigation into the objectives of internationalization of British construction enterprises affirms that they prioritized tapping into new and booming markets to aid expansion (Crosthwaite, 1998). Market booms abroad coinciding with a downturn in the domestic market can be the right time for enterprises to penetrate overseas markets and at the same time position themselves amongst foreign competitors.

The reason "to capitalize on globalization" as an expansion motivation can be found in three studies, as summarized in Table 1. The World Trade Organization and Regional Trade Agreements have brought in a reality that there is no demarcation of home and foreign markets. Ofori (2000) stressed the general development of the economic sector and the effect of foreign companies' operations in developing countries as a globalization trend. This phenomenon lowers international barriers and offers the opportunity for local firms to enter foreign markets (Gunhan & Ardit, 2005).

Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by globalization has been shown to be among the motives for the internationalization of Malaysian contractors (Isa et al., 2006). Previously, Awil and Abdul-Aziz (2002) had also reported that globalization was one of the motivating factors determining the internationalization of Malaysian contractors. This finding was then strengthened by Ahmad and Kitchen (2008), who investigated the same country. In the globalization era, countries' borders may be imaginary, and initiatives taken to capitalize on this will bring advantages.

According to Griffin (2010), spreading a company's risk across countries gives exposure to the fastest-growing markets and helps to withstand the risk of loss in foreign market. Construction companies, which depend highly on domestic demand, are likely to be exposed to high risks when a crisis affects the economy. Brazilian contractors, for example, decided to expand internationally as a way of spreading company risk after the country experienced an economic

crisis at the beginning of the 1980s (Mutti & Flanagan, 2008). Earlier, Quak (1989) and Crosthwaite (1998) argued that the diversification or spreading of company risk was a critical factor pushing enterprises towards internationalization.

### 3.1.3. *Resource-related motives*

This refers to a company's reasons for perceiving their resources as capital for international expansion. The motives include optimization of the use of resources; the benefit of competitive advantages; utilization of company expertise; vision actualization; and generation of economies of scale.

Ten studies in Table 1 identify that optimization of resource use is a core reason for expanding into the construction market abroad. A study by Abdul-Aziz (1994) evidences that this motive was a concrete reason behind the internationalization of American and Japanese companies. He states that although the US domestic market is huge, too many large contractors in the market had created saturation because of the finite number of large-scale projects. Although this motive also applies to British contractors, it is not their major concern (Crosthwaite, 1998).

Company resources must be operated or employed in a constant workload in order to optimize their function and productivity (Gunhan, 2003). However, it is difficult to reach and maintain such constancy in the domestic market, where the number of projects available is much lower than a company's capacity to handle several projects at the same time. Consequently, the company should consider seeking projects abroad to optimize the use of its resources. The motivation to do this by securing project overseas was validated by Abdul Aziz (1994), who studied American and Japanese contractors, and by Crosthwaite (1998), who investigated British firms. The results of their studies indicate that this motive was very important for American companies and moderately important for Japanese and British firms.

Similarities in religion and culture with the host target countries can be one form of competitive advantage for competing firms, allowing them to be accepted more easily into markets. Turkish enterprises enjoy entering and conducting projects in Islamic regions such as the Middle East and North Africa. Cultural and language proximity and close geographical distance make Singaporean and Hong Kong firms favor working in the Chinese market (Gunhan, 2003). These companies were motivated to explore certain markets where they could exploit their competitive advantages such as religious identity and similarity in culture and language.

Similar to asset optimality and competitive advantage, a company's expertise or specialization is one of its strengths affecting decisions to penetrate foreign markets (Gunhan & Arditi, 2005). This special proficiency reflects the ability of a company to master advanced technology. According to Teo et al. (2007), regarding market diversification abroad contractors were motivated to put their competencies to greater use, while Awil and Abdul-Aziz (2002) stress the provision of specialist expertise and technology. By and large, advances in management and technology and mastery of information technology enable developed economies to occupy the markets of less developed economies.

The international vision of management manifests a desire to expand the coverage area of business. Awil and Abdul-Aziz (2002) emphasize that part of the motivation vision reflects the ambitions of companies and individuals in relation to strategies, resources and capabilities. Abdul-Aziz and Law (2012) report that top management decisions directed by the company mission were a top motivation for the internationalization of companies. For an organization, vision is an inspiration and motivation to look ahead to future prospects.

Enhancing a company's market size abroad indirectly generates economies of scale by taking advantage of facilities such as bulk-buying, mass production, ease of financial support, marketing cost efficiency and human resource specialities. As a result, the company may

compete for a lower unit price against its competitors. Unfortunately, as reported in Table 1, this motive is only supported by one study. Such motivation has encouraged Singaporean companies (Quak, 1989) to venture into overseas markets, but there was no further explanation of how internationalization might benefit from economies of scale in OCPs.

#### *3.1.4. Opportunity-related motives*

There are opportunities which are considered by companies for entering specific markets for business expansion. These opportunities include invitations from project sponsors, home government encouragement, acquisition of international experience, and the chance to become as a key player in the market.

Project invitation from abroad can be initiated by the host government, the foreign private sector, as well as local investors doing business in the host country. In certain situations, clients deliberately invite foreign companies to undertake projects due to the unavailability of local expertise (Cattaneo et al., 2010) or the existence of a good relationship with the companies (Menziez and Orr, 2014). Several incentives, such as tax remission and relief on licenses, permits and official clearance, and land utilization often accompany such invitations (Cattaneo et al., 2010). Both the incentives and beneficial consensus can considerably attract companies to enter a foreign market.

The home government also plays a strategic role in supporting local companies to compete in overseas markets. It can take measures to support the overseas expansion of local firms. Strategic coordination involving several selected industries might support local contractors in competing against foreign contractors as a single national entity, while reducing taxes, offering subsidies, and providing funds, credit, bonds and guarantees may enhance the competitiveness of national contractors in the foreign market (Seymour, 1987). Both types of support have been implemented, for instance by the Chinese government (Pheng & Hongbin, 2004; Chen & Orr, 2009) to support Chinese contractors in becoming major world players.

Involvement of companies in overseas markets allows them to have a greater opportunity to develop foreign strategic networking. Past experience may also enhance a company's ability to analyze potential clients and projects for further bidding decision (Jarkas et al., 2014). Mutti and Flanagan (2008) add that the home country might benefit in the form of knowledge and technology by learning from overseas partners. The motive to gain international experience increases in the initial period of operation abroad, and gradually drops with the development of the learning process of firms in overseas projects (Abdul-Aziz & Wong, 2010).

Through foreign aid schemes for developing infrastructure facilities in many Asian and African countries, Chinese construction companies, for instance, have successfully dominated the African market. The insignificant number of Western competitors in this markets has also strengthened the domination of Chinese contractors (Chen & Orr, 2009). Such circumstances provide advantages for Chinese companies as anchor players in the markets. The criticality rate of this motivation is, however, considered to be moderately important by researchers such Abdul-Aziz and Wong (2010) and Maqsoom et al. (2014).

### **3.2. Conceptual Framework of IECE Motivation**

In general business terminology, how companies react dynamically to the ever-changing conditions in business determines their expansion motives. Hence, the motivation are classified as proactive or reactive. Czinkota and Rokainen (2007, p.282) state that "proactive motivation represent stimuli for firm-initiated strategic change" and "reactive motivation describe stimuli that result in a firm's response and adaptation to changes imposed by the outside environment." Based on this textual exegesis, there is an obvious correlation of attributes between the source of motivation and response to it. This means that motivation which are concatenated in internal motivation are similar to proactive motivation, and vice versa.

Referring to the business and economics literature, a conceptual framework for a classification model of the motivation has been designed to consolidate the results, as illustrated in Figure 1. In the development of the framework, the identified motivation were categorized into four main groups based on source, pattern, objective of the motivation, and response to them. Each main group was then divided into two and four relevant subgroups, in which the two subgroups related to the source of motivation (internal or external), the pattern of motivation (traditional or emerging), and the response to motivation (proactive or reactive), while the four subgroups (profit, market, resource and opportunity) relate to motivation objective. Finally, based on the analysis of the nature of motivation, they were classified into appropriate subgroups.

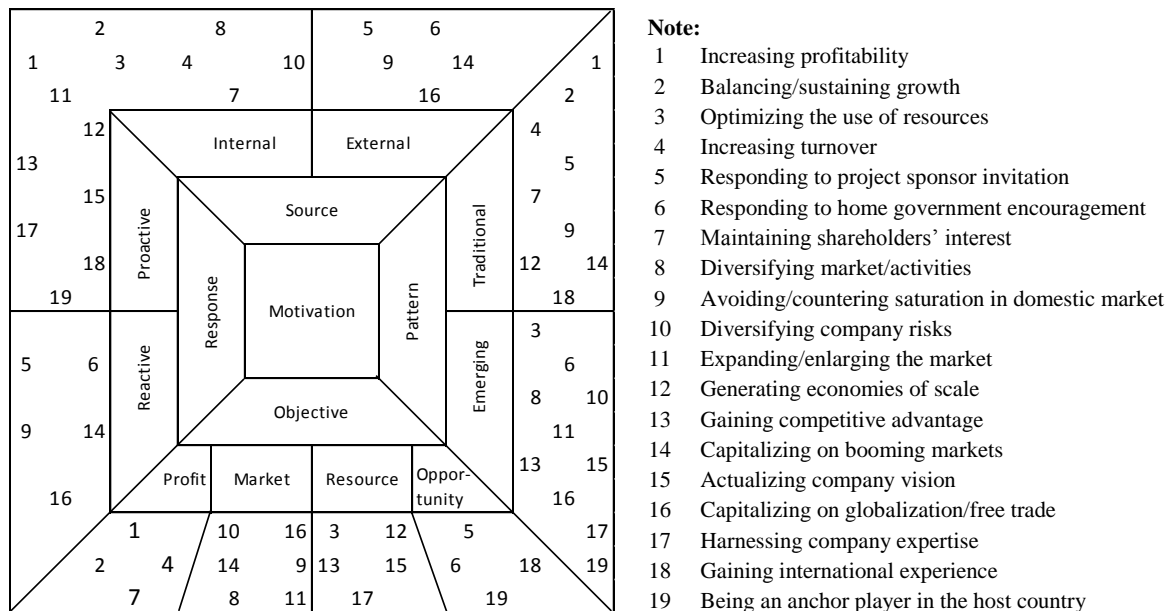


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of IECE motivation

As indicated in Figure 1, the motivating factors based on the sources are grouped into internal and external motivation. Fourteen trigger factors for expansion growing from inside the company’s organization constitute the largest motivation provenance. Included in this branch are motives (1), (2), (3), (4), (7), (8), (10), (11), (12), (13), (15), (17), (18) and (19). Of the remainder, the five attracting aspects from the surrounding company environment are grouped as external motivation, comprising motives (5), (6), (9), (14) and (16).

The motivation patterns change over time. Thus, they are categorized as traditional and emerging reasons. Bartlett and Beamish (2018) believe that the traditional pattern is characterized by opportunistic market and resource seeking. This pattern is represented by motives (1), (2), (4), (5), (7) (9), (12), (14) and (18). Unlike the conservative pattern, emerging motives are indicated by competitive positioning, e.g. (3), (6), (8), (10), (11) and (13), and global scanning, e.g. (15), (16), (17) and (19). Different from pervious categories, Dunning (2014) groups motivation into resource-related, market-related, strategy-related and efficiency-related factors. Borrowing and modifying the ideas of Dunning, the motives for the cross-nation operation of construction enterprises were split into profit-related, market-related, resource-related and opportunity-related motives.

**4. CONCLUSION**

This paper set out to identify and propose a conceptual framework for the international expansion motivation of construction enterprises. A literature search was undertaken to



establish the expansion of motives related to overseas construction business from peer-reviewed journals and other academic publications. Nineteen motives were identified and categorized. A conceptual framework was developed by clustering motivation into four aspects, namely source, response, pattern and objective. Although the paper is based on a small number of sources, the findings offer an important insight into the realm of international construction knowledge.

Each motive has a different level of importance, which depends on the internal and external environment of company. If it is hypothesized that expansion tends to be motivated by multiple reasons instead of a single motive, then the cumulative effect of each relevant motive constitutes the level of a company's intention to penetrate foreign markets. However, the fact should be not ignored that every intention has certain negative factors, which may hinder a company from realizing its intentions. Therefore, a further hypothesis is that the level of expansion intention depends on the degree of company motivation for foreign market expansion, but affected by the factors hampering this motivation.

A limitation of the study lies in the fact that it did not take into account the obstacles to international expansion. It is hypothesized that there are various critical hindrance factors which impede strategic decisions. Empirical studies on these factors are limited, especially for developing countries. Further investigation to identify and measure the deterrent factors in the international expansion of construction enterprises is strongly recommended.

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