

# EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN REQUIRES LEVERAGING UNCERTAINTY: A REAL OPTIONS PERSPECTIVE ON THE PATTERN AND PROCESS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL FIRMS' INTERNATIONALIZATION



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## ABSTRACT

Uncertainty plays a major role in entrepreneurship and international business. Yet, prior literature has not fully accounted for the nature of high and changing host country uncertainty when predicting entrepreneurial firms' internationalization patterns and outcomes. By applying real options theory, we re-conceptualize firms' internationalization patterns and outcomes as the result of active uncertainty-management in the face of elevated and ever-changing host-country uncertainty. Utilizing a representative sample of 680 new U.S.-based exporting firms, we find that host country uncertainty positively relates to firms' choice of "real option" entry. Real options entry enables firms to achieve relatively faster entries, enter more distant destinations, and allows flexibility for market exit. Moreover, firms using such "real options" entry can achieve superior performance.

## INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty is central to both entrepreneurship (Knight, 1921; McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Schumpeter, 1934) and internationalization (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Schweizer, Vahlne, & Johanson, 2010). With respect to the entrepreneurship, both the perceived amount of uncertainty and willingness to bear uncertainty fundamentally influence entrepreneurial decisions and actions (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). International Business (IB) scholars, particularly those focused on large multinational corporations (MNC), have also generally treated uncertainty as something to avoid because it increases transaction costs in cross-border contexts (Brouthers & Nakos, 2004; Walker & Weber, 1984; Williamson, 1981, 1996). Thus, due to increased uncertainty, firms tend to choose entry modes with high degrees of integration or control (e.g., greenfield investment ) rather than more flexible or collaborative entry modes (Morscheit et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2004), and firms often delay or avoid foreign investment due to high uncertainty (Brouthers & Hennart, 2007; Walker & Weber, 1984; Zhao et al., 2004).

Yet, as highlighted in the international entrepreneurship (IE) literature, which focuses on "the discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities-across national borders-to create future goods and services" (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005: p7), entrepreneurial firms' internationalization approaches are inconsistent with this theory's predictions. Entrepreneurial firms enter more uncertain foreign markets rather than more certain and stable markets (Deng & Sinkovics, 2018); employ collaborative or flexible entry modes rather than ownership-based entry modes (Liesch, Welch, & Buckley, 2011); and generally prefer to move quickly rather than delaying or avoiding entry (Bingham, 2009). Although opportunity-seeking entrepreneurial internationalization often involves decision-making under uncertainty, our understanding of how uncertainty influences the pattern, process and outcome of entrepreneurial firms' internationalization is limited.

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