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Empirical Paper

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Who gains more from networking? A comparative study of Polish exporting and non-exporting SMEs

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Abstract:
Paper's objectives: The paper aims to identify differences in the perceived benefits of cooperation in domestic and foreign networks achieved by Polish small and medium enterprise (SME) exporters and non-exporters.
Methods applied: A quantitative study was conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviewing and computer-assisted web interviewing on 240 Polish exporting and non-exporting SMEs. The *t*-test and correlation analysis were used to investigate the phenomena under study.
Findings: While exporting SMEs attach greater importance to networking with foreign partners than non-exporting ones, domestic partners are of equal importance for exporting and non-exporting firms. Exporting SMEs perceive local business partners to have more influence on their market success than foreign ones. Exporting SMEs benefit more from networking than non-exporting companies.
Originality/value: The paper compares the importance of local and foreign network partners for the market success of exporting and non-exporting SMEs, contributing to both internationalization and entrepreneurial literature.

Keywords: exporters, networking, Poland, SMEs
JEL Classification: M16, F23

1 Introduction

Networks are commonly regarded as crucial precursors to business expansion and success [Jones et al., 2013] as they constitute one of the main sources of competitive advantage [Bagozzi, 1981; Dyer and Singh, 1998]. Cooperation between companies and organizations in their business environment has been a subject of scientific consideration for more than half a century. Because there is no single theory related to interorganizational networks, research in this area is entrenched in many diverse theoretical methods (at times entangled) that attempt to explain this phenomenon [Zaheer et al., 2010]. The role and the mutual benefits of cooperation between companies other than those linked by traditional supplier–distributor relationships were explained by Adler [1966, p. 60], who used the term "symbiotic marketing" to describe "an alliance of resources or programs between two or more independent organizations designed to increase the market potential of each". In turn, the importance of long-term seller–buyer relations was underlined

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by Arndt [1979] and further discussed by *The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing* (IMP) Group. The IMP Group's work resulted in the development of the IMP Interaction Model of business-to-business (B2B) marketing [Håkansson, 1982]. The concepts underlying the ability to take advantage of foreign [Johanson and Mattsson, 1988] and local [Johanson and Vahlne, 2009] networks in the internationalization process became one of the foundations of international business studies. Internationalization, according to the network approach, is the result of firms' efforts to build partnerships by improving their network role [Johanson and Vahlne, 2009]. Moreover, the resource-based view [Barney, 1991] provides explanations of interfirm cooperation, although it is primarily focused on the internal development of resources. Resources that are not internal to the company may be bought on the market; however, some of them can be hardly acquired in that way and may be accessed via network partners. The resource dependency theory also shows that access to critical resources can be achieved through relationships with business partners [Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003; Tehseen and Sajilan, 2016]. Finally, the relationship marketing and entrepreneurial marketing theories recognize the importance of networking and its value-creating potential [Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Grönroos Christian, 1996; Rocks et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2013]. Networking capability is perceived as one of the dynamic capabilities that are central to market exploitation and development of knowledge-intensive products [Sullivan Mort and Weerawardena, 2006; Sarwar et al., 2021]. Because there are many theories that explain interfirm cooperation itself, the relationship between cooperation and SME internationalization is discussed in the literature from different perspectives, such as network theory, resource-based view, international entrepreneurship theory, Uppsala model of internationalization, and miscellaneous other theories [Zahoor et al., 2020]. Nevertheless, the network perspective, which draws on the resource-based view and resource dependency theory and which argues that network partners provide resources needed to achieve the company's goals, seems to explain it most precisely. "According to this school of research, internationalisation depends on an organization's set of network relationships rather than a firm-specific advantage" [Coviello and McAuley, 1999, p. 227]. In our following discussion, we apply the network perspective with particular reference to the resource-based view, although we also make use of other approaches when needed.

One of the weaknesses of the network and networking literature is the absence of a generally accepted definition [Gibson et al., 2014; Agostini et al., 2019]. In our study, we understand network as "a set of two or more connected business relationships, in which each exchange relation is between business firms that are conceptualized as collective act" [Emerson, 1981 after Anderson et al., 1994, p. 2]. Activities related to establishing the network position, developing network relationships, and network coordination are referred to as networking [Ahimbisibwe et al., 2020].

As both personal and interorganizational networks are claimed to provide valuable resources contributing to the company's success, we discuss the gains from both types of network partners. The personal networks, referred to also as identity-based [Hite and Hesterly, 2001], social (i.e., Chetty and Wilson, 2003), or informal [Kontinen and Ojala, 2011], comprise relations with family, friends, and colleagues [Chetty and Wilson, 2003]. The interorganizational networks, also referred to as calculative [Hite and Hesterly, 2001], strategic [Chetty and Wilson, 2003], interfirm [Manolova et al., 2010], or business [Bai et al., 2021], are the relationships with direct and indirect competitors, customers, suppliers, intermediaries/distributors, and governmental and local institutions (Chetty and Wilson, 2003) including research institutions and trade associations. Personal networks are built on nonsystematic informal connections between entrepreneurs, employees and their friends, and they provide a unique way of gaining information and resources for business growth [O'Donnell et al., 2001; Agndal and Chetty, 2007; Bai et al., 2021]. The interorganizational networks are in turn formal. They are claimed to be a middle path between a market and a hierarchy, which enables a company to coordinate economic exchanges without abandoning its legal organizing autonomy [Williamson, 1975]. Their major governing mechanism is knowledge exchange [Johanson and Vahlne, 2009; Bai et al., 2021]. In these networks, companies quickly learn not only about their direct partners but also about many organizations outside of their direct business relationships by acting within their network. This depends on how easily knowledge flows through the interfirm networks [Bai et al., 2021]. Cooperation with organizations such as research institutions, local authorities, and trade associations is claimed to contribute to innovative solutions [Turkina, 2018], while governmental support is proven to contribute

to the international performance of exporting companies by not only providing international knowledge about customers and/or competitors but also referring to regulations in export markets and international trade [Falahat et al., 2020].

We have chosen the networking gains of Polish SME companies as the subject of the study due to several reasons. First of all, internationalization studies mainly focused on large multinational companies, while recent studies on entrepreneurial exporters (especially on born globals/International New Ventures) show the need to study their networking as a key element of their internationalization process [Sharma and Blomstermo, 2003; Weerawardena et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015]. Polish SMEs make a very interesting research context. They employ roughly 70% of the workforce in Poland and produce about 51% of the country's value addition. Although a significant number of SMEs export directly, they account only for approximately 30% of direct exports, which is much less than their share of jobs or value addition [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2020, p. 65]. Although our previous studies show strong networking capabilities among Polish SME exporters [Danik, 2017; Kowalik et al., 2017; Kowalik and Danik, 2018; Kowalik, 2020], according to experts, the growth of Polish SMEs' connections to local, global, and international networks could be bolstered, allowing for even more efficiency and development of the Polish economy [OECD, 2020, p. 65]. Moreover, the low propensity to trust other people (only 22% of Poles agree that most of the people can be trusted – see *Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej* (CBOS) [2020]) and the presence of network partners' abusive behaviors among Polish SMEs [Danik and Kowalik, 2020] may be strong factors hindering the establishment of business relationships and the effective use of networks.

Previous empirical studies on networking show the importance of networks in many different processes, such as internationalization (e.g., Danik and Kowalik, 2015) or innovation (e.g., Sarwar et al., 2021), but comparative studies can hardly be found (exceptions include the study of Chang and Webster [2019], who have shown that access to the professional networks of Australian SMEs increases the probability of exporting). Moreover, the international business research discusses mainly the importance of foreign networks, while only some authors (e.g., Boehe, 2013; Milanov and Fernhaber, 2014; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2014; Zahoor and Al-Tabbaa, 2021) concentrate on the local ones. We do not know which networks contribute more to a company's success and whether internationally operating companies differ from locally oriented ones in their ability to take greater advantage of their network. The purpose of our work is to partially fill this gap and identify differences in the perceived benefits of cooperation within domestic and foreign networks achieved by exporters and non-exporters. To answer the research question, we use quantitative data collected in the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) study on 240 Polish SMEs and analyze them using the SPSS program. The results contribute to the entrepreneurship and international business theory, as they show differences between exporters and non-exporters in their ability to take advantage of network cooperation and verify which network (domestic or foreign) contributes more to their success. The study is also valuable for practitioners, as it indicates which relationships are worth investing in to achieve success.

Our article is organized as follows. The next part presents earlier theoretical and empirical explanations of network cooperation profiting, leading to five research hypotheses. Then, we present the research method and the sample, followed by the research results and discussion. Finally, the research limitations, future study directions, and conclusions are presented.

2 Literature review and hypothesis development

SMEs face three types of constraints to market success: lack of resources, such as limitations on finance, marketing expertise, and time; lack of specialist expertise, as SME managers tend to be generalists rather than specialists and marketing expertise is usually the last of the business disciplines to be obtained by them; and the limited impact on the market place as a result of their small size [Carson, 1985; Danik and Kowalik, 2015; Bakhtiari et al., 2020]. There is a consensus among scholars that networking helps SMEs to leverage these constraints [Jones et al., 2013]. Networks are frequently studied as a source of resources and

capabilities. Resources may originate as a result of the qualities of the relationships and the structure of the network itself. Information is the most frequently cited resource that networks provide [Zaheer et al., 2010].

2.1 Networks' importance for domestic and internationalized SMEs

Studies on entrepreneurship show that network relationships play an important role in each phase of a firm's life; however, the role and nature of the established relationships change over time to adapt to the evolving resource needs and challenges. Networking usually precedes the inception of a new company. In the planning phase, entrepreneurs discuss business ideas with their personal network partners (especially family members) [Greve and Salaff, 2003]. Social capital can contribute to the discovery of opportunities in new venture creation, provide necessary resources, shape entrepreneurs' cognition, facilitate emotional support, and motivate them to form a new venture [Elfring and Hulsink, 2003; de Carolis and Saparito, 2006; Nowiński and Rialp, 2016]. Shortly after establishment, identity-based networks are supposed to prevail. They are based mostly on preexisting relations. As claimed by Hite and Hesterly [2001], such network partners are more likely to provide resources when more distant ties are reluctant. However, as they are usually smaller and less diverse than calculative networks, they may fail to answer the increasing resource needs typical for a growing company. In turn, the calculative networks, based mostly on the expected economic benefits [Williamson, 1993], may provide a broader range of resources and better reduce the environmental uncertainty; therefore, the business networks tend to shift from identity-based to calculative interorganizational networks while the company develops.

This scheme works both for domestic and internationalized companies, although some aspects of networking are particularly emphasized in internationalization studies. In international business, personal networks are claimed to help recognize foreign market prospects, support the initiation of exports, provide knowledge about international business practices, and promote managerial openness, which is so important in the process of shaping the global vision of enterprise development [Zhou et al., 2007]. Particularly for small businesses, personal networks can affect the process of obtaining and recombining the knowledge necessary to choose whether, when, and how to enter and survive in a foreign market [Masiello and Izzo, 2019]. Personal networks are supposed to be extremely important at the beginning of the internationalization process, as they can be used to recognize internationalization opportunities [Vasilchenko and Morrish, 2011], mobilize the necessary resources, and finally, to extend the networks [Johanson and Vahlne, 1990].

As shown by Eduardsen et al. [2021] in their study on new ventures, network affiliation benefits new exporting ventures only if it provides access to international interfirm networks, thereby compensating for outsidership and newness liabilities in foreign markets. In these instances, networking serves as a significant source of resource capital, supplementing the somewhat-limited financial resources available for SME internationalization.

2.2 Domestic vs foreign networks

According to the literature, embeddedness in domestic networks is very important for a firm's success, but local communities undergo isomorphism over time [Desrochers et al., 2008]. To develop new ideas and innovate, links to foreign partners and involvement in international networks are needed [Turkina, 2018], even if the company's target is the domestic market. The foreign network gains even more importance in the case of internationalization. If the company aims to expand in foreign markets, it must acquire and develop new network relations in that market. It may establish new business networks in this particular market or use existing networks [Johanson and Mattson, 1988]. In the network model of internationalization [Johanson and Mattsson, 1988], the internationalization process is explained by the building of links to foreign networks, which help companies to enter a foreign market. However, as domestic networks may well extend beyond the borders, they can be also used as bridges to foreign ones or may even force the firm to join foreign networks [Sharma and Johanson, 1987; Johanson and Vahlne, 1990; Chandra et al., 2009]. Since, at the beginning of the internationalization process, companies usually do not have the capital of connections on individual international markets, they can acquire them from local and foreign partners

[Deszczyński et al., 2017]. Moreover, the influence of domestic partners on the firm's internationalization can be explained by vicarious learning. Having domestic partners with international experience enables SMEs to gain a better understanding of how to conduct international business, ultimately boosting the confidence of ventures in the context of internationalizing by mitigating process-related uncertainty or lowering the perceived cost of serving foreign markets in general [Milanov and Fernhaber, 2014].

Ratajczak-Mrozek [2014] points out that local personal networks promote SMEs' internationalization process and growth. Embeddedness in local personal networks is conducive to recognizing the potential for SMEs to internationalize and to plan its implementation. It is possible to overcome the obstacle of lack of international reputation through domestic relationships, which allow also the first touch with foreign partners. Domestic business networks are critical for SMEs to take advantage of international opportunities by learning about the local market and consumers, as well as for removing obstacles unique to SMEs, such as lack of expertise, skills, or capital. The results obtained by Ratajczak-Mrozek in the qualitative study are similar to the quantitative study results on Brasilian SMEs conducted by Boehe [2013], who has proven that collaboration with local partners positively influences the intensity of exports.

As the studies on internationalized firms cited above provide arguments for the high relevance of both domestic and foreign networks for exporters and do not indicate that either of them is more important, we hypothesize the following:

H1. Domestic and foreign networks are of equal importance for exporters.

However, as foreign networks gain importance during the internationalization process, we posit as follows:

H2. Foreign networks are more important for exporters than for non-exporting companies.

Companies operating in the domestic market can also take advantage of the foreign network, as underlined by Ratajczak-Mrozek, who casts doubt on the distinction between domestic and international business operations, demonstrating that in the B2B industry, there are no solely domestic businesses that are not directly or indirectly linked to foreign entities [Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017]. However, as non-exporting companies are – by their nature – more embedded in the local network, we hypothesize as follows:

H3. Domestic networks are more important than foreign ones for non-exporting companies.

Access to domestic networks is as easy for the non-exporters as for the exporters. Therefore, both groups can take advantage of them. It leads to the following hypothesis:

H4. Domestic networks are of equal importance for exporters and non-exporters.

The internationalization process requires usually more resources and expertise than for serving the local market; therefore, networking is claimed to have a positive impact on internationalization success [Musteen et al., 2010; Ghauri and Elg, 2018]. Collaboration within the networks allows SMEs to use partners' resources without owning them, which can not only be crucial in the event of financial constraints but also provide the company with great flexibility in disposing of resources of less strategic importance [Reuber and Fischer, 1997]. Moreover, cooperation with wide networks makes the company less dependent on a single partner [Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2013]. Meetings with potential foreign business partners and customers, intermediaries, and ordinary citizens enable SMEs to get a feel for the market, gain a sense of business, show interest, and start building trust [Wilson and Mummalaneni, 1990]. Collaboration enables joint scheduling of production and continuous monitoring of production processes, both of which improve small enterprises' manufacturing productivity and their ability to compete on a global scale [Mesquita and Lazzarini, 2008]. Finally, mimicking the network partners may be an additional driver of SME internationalization [Mikhailitchenko, 2021]. Studies on SMEs show that the networking capability is an important mediator between entrepreneurial orientation and superior performance in foreign markets [Karami and Tang, 2019].

As shown in the study of Havnes and Senneseth [2001], firms with strong networking consistently outperform other firms in terms of market extension. Exporting companies must have both domestic and

international networks well developed, and to be successful, they should put more importance on their networks in general and benefit from them more compared to non-exporting companies. Therefore, we also hypothesize as follows:

H5. Exporters perceive network benefits as having a greater impact on their success than non-exporting companies.

3 Research method and sample

The data were collected in June 2019 using the mixed-mode method comprising CATI (telephone interview) and computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) (web interviews). The Bisnode database containing information about companies operating in Poland served as the sampling frame. Disproportionate stratified random sampling was used to select companies participating in the study and to obtain two equally and sufficiently numerous groups of companies (exporters and non-exporters) in our sample. After answering the screening questions, the firms were assigned to one group or the other. Once the appropriate group size was reached, we did not add additional companies meeting the criteria. A total of 1,038 firms invited to participate in the study did not meet the reqired criteria, and 1,691 companies refused or did not finish the interview. The final sample comprised 240 companies. A total of 33 interviews were carried out using the CAWI technique, and the remaining interviews, i.e., 207, were conducted using the CATI.

Enterprises meeting the following criteria were accepted for the research sample: existing and active manufacturing companies (Section C in NACE, the Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community, Rev. 2) employing 10–249 employees; established after 2003; not being a result of a merger or takeover, never being a subsidiary of a foreign company. These criteria allowed us to obtain a relatively homogeneous sample of companies, founded by Polish entrepreneurs, whose history does not extend beyond 2003 (which could be the case in companies created as a result of mergers or takeovers). The sample included 120 highly internationalized SME enterprises (hereinafter referred to as "exporters") and 120 non-internationalized SME enterprises (hereinafter referred to as "non-exporters"). The group of exporters included entities whose exports accounted for at least 25% of the total sales value.

The respondents in the survey were primarily persons responsible for cooperation with foreign and domestic partners, mainly sales/export/marketing directors or firm owners. Secondarily, the sales/export/marketing managers were interviewed. These respondents were chosen as they were expected to possess the most comprehensive knowledge about the issues under study. Such recruitment of key decision-makers is widely adopted in studies on international entrepreneurship, e.g., Rialp et al., 2005; Sullivan Mort and Weerawardena, 2006.

The final research sample included 240 SMEs. Almost 67% were small companies with 10–49 employees. In terms of the average annual value of sales, the largest part of the research sample (almost 59%) was constituted by companies with annual sales volume up to 2 million EUR, another 29% declared value of sales between EUR 2 and 10 million, and 12% reported annual sales of EUR 10–50 million. The research sample includes firms operating in both the B2B and business-to-consumer (B2C) markets (44% of the sample), exclusively in the B2C market (30%), and exclusively in the B2B market (25%). A more thorough description of the sample showing the differences between exporters and non-exporters is presented in Table 1.

The majority, i.e.,almost 73% of exporters, started exporting >3 years after inception, and 16% (19 companies) began exporting within the first year of their establishment. A total of 34% of them needed <3 years from the first export transactions to achieve 25% of exports in their sales volume, while 66% needed more time. In the batch of 67% of exporting companies, the export share in the total income was between 26% and 49%. For 21% of exporters, export sales amounted to 50%–70% of income. In the case of 12% of exporters, the export share in total income was >70%

Respondents were asked to assess the importance of their interorganizational network partners, including direct and indirect competitors, customers, suppliers, intermediaries, research institutions, state

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N=240)

		Exporters		Non-exporters		Total	
	Sample characteristics	**No. of companies**	**% of the sample**	**No. of companies**	**% of the sample**	**No. of companies**	**% of the sample**
No. of employees	10–49	63	26%	97	40	160	67
	50–249	57	24%	23	10	80	33
Annual sales volume	0–2 million Eur	53	22%	88	37	141	59
	2–10 million Eur	47	20%	23	10	70	29
	10–50 million Eur	20	8%	9	4	29	12
Type of market	B2B	37	15%	24	10	61	25
	Both B2B and B2C	50	21%	56	23	106	44
	B2C	33	14%	40	17	73	30

Note: B2B, business-to-business; B2C, business-to-consumer.

Source: Own study.

and local governmental institutions, and trade associations. They also assessed their personal networks, which included family, friends, and colleagues (question asked was as follows: "Using a seven-point scale, where "1" means no importance at all, "2" – very low importance, "3" – low importance, "4" – average importance/difficult to say, "5" – rather high importance, "6" – high importance, and "7" – very high importance, please assess the importance of each partner in the network for the company's success in the most important sales markets"). The respondents were also asked to assess the benefits of cooperation, which contributed to the success of the company in both domestic and international markets (question asked was as follows: "Using a seven-point scale, where "1" means no importance at all, "2" – very low importance, "3" – low importance, "4" – average importance/difficult to say, "5" – rather high importance, "6" – high importance, and "7" – very high importance, please indicate the most important benefits of cooperation with the above-mentioned partners for the company's success on the most important sales markets"). The list of benefits (see Table 6) was based partially on the resource categories used in the study of Chetty and Wilson (2003); however, we have modified it to put more stress on the resources and activities supporting market success.

The sample size allowed us to use a parametric test (*t*-test), to compare exporters and non-exporters (for a sample of this size, it has an asymptotic normal distribution). A nonparametric test was not used as such tests are less powerful.

4 Research results

The perceived importance of foreign and domestic partners is presented in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

Comparison of the responses regarding foreign partners revealed significant differences ($p<0.001$) in the case of the most important network partners: the exporters attached greater importance than non-exporters to direct competitors, indirect competitors, customers, suppliers, and intermediaries than did non-exporters. However, personal networks and supporting institutions (research institutions, governmental institutions, and trade associations) had similar importance for both groups of firms. The *t*-test for independent samples did not reveal any statistically significant differences in the responses of exporters and non-exporters regarding the impact of domestic partners on the company's success. Thus, the hypotheses H2 and H4 are supported by the data, as the key foreign network partners are more important for exporters than for non-exporting companies, and domestic networks are of equal importance for exporters and non-exporters.

The network partners perceived to make the greatest contribution to the success of the companies from both groups were customers, suppliers, direct competitors, intermediaries, and indirect competitors.

Table 2. The perceived importance of foreign network partners in achieving market success

Type of partner	Non-exporters (n = 20)		Exporters (n = 120)		Overall (N = 240)	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Direct competitors	3.09*	1,820	4.97*	1.685	4.03	1.986
Indirect competitors	3.04*	1.784	4.44*	1.560	3.74	1.813
Customers	2.99*	1.747	5.38*	1.427	4.19	1.992
Suppliers	3.04*	1.727	4.78*	1,885	3.91	2.002
Intermediaries	2.94*	1.667	4.21*	2.016	3.58	1.952
Research institutions	2.78	1.589	2.88	1.818	2.83	1.704
State and local governmental institutions	2.83	1.647	2.78	1,826	2.80	1.735
Trade associations	2.87	1.660	2.77	1.823	2.82	1.740
Family	2.86	1.687	2.92	1.973	2.89	1.832
Friends	2.87	1.690	2.85	1.930	2.86	1.810
Colleagues	2.88	1.693	2.86	1.920	2.87	1.806

Notes: Scale: "1" – not important at all to "7"-very important.

*Significant differences in the evaluation of the importance of foreign partners between exporters and non-exporters (*t*-test for independent samples).

Source: Own study.

Table 3. The perceived importance of domestic network partners in achieving market success

	Non-exporters (n = 120)		Exporters (n = 120)		Overall (N =240)	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Direct competitors	4.71	1.637	4.86	1.667	4.78	1.650
Indirect competitors	4.24	1.501	4.28	1.641	4.26	1.569
Customers	5.41	1.381	5.36	1.538	5.38	1.459
Suppliers	5.08	1.524	5.33	1.490	5.20	1.509
Intermediaries	4.15	1.943	4.56	1,882	4.35	1.920
Research institutions	3.25	1.893	3.30	1.964	3.28	1.925
State and local governmental institutions	2.95	1.772	3.22	1,879	3.08	1.828
Trade associations	3.06	1.812	3.03	1,863	3.04	1.834
Family	3.79	1.995	3.60	2.072	3.70	2.032
Friends	3.61	1.946	3.50	2.021	3.55	1.980
Colleagues	3.64	1.939	3.52	1.996	3.58	1.965

Note: Scale: "1" – not important at all to "7" very important.

Source: Own study.

The lowest perceived significance was that of institutions supporting business – research institutions, state and local governmental institutions, and associations (average: 3.04–3.28 on the scale of 1–7 points for domestic partners and 2.8–2.83 for international ones). The perceived importance of personal networks was only slightly higher than that one of business-supporting institutions.

The next step in our analysis was comparing the importance of domestic and foreign partners from the given partner category separately for exporting and non-exporting companies. In the case of exporters for all partner categories, there was a positive significant correlation between the importance attached to the cooperation with both domestic and foreign partners. The highest degrees of correlation were observed in the assessment of the importance of domestic and foreign trade associations and personal networks.

Table 4. Correlations between the importance of domestic and foreign partners and the paired-samples *t*-test results for exporters

Type of partner: domestic vs. foreign	Correlations for dependent samples		Paired differences					*t*	df	Sig. (two-sided)
	Correlation	Sig.	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error of the mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
						Lower	Upper			
Direct competitors	0.357	0.000	–0.108	1.900	0.173	–0.452	0.235	–0.625	119	0.533
Indirect competitors	0.496	0.000	–0.158	1.609	0.147	–0.449	0.132	–1.078	119	0.283
Customers	0.477	0.000	–0.025	1.520	0.139	–0.300	0.250	–0.180	119	0.857
Suppliers	0.418	0.000	0.550	1.851	0.169	0.215	0.885	3.255	119	0.001
Intermediaries	0.582	0.000	0.350	1.785	0.163	0.027	0.673	2.148	119	0.034
Research institutions	0.512	0.000	0.425	1.873	0.171	0.086	0.764	2.486	119	0.014
State and local governmental institutions	0.560	0.000	0.442	1.738	0.159	0.127	0.756	2.783	119	0.006
Trade associations	0.658	0.000	0.258	1.526	0.139	–0.017	0.534	1.855	119	0.066
Family	0.629	0.000	0.683	1.744	0.159	0.368	0.999	4.292	119	0.000
Friends	0.674	0.000	0.650	1.596	0.146	0.361	0.939	4.460	119	0.000
Colleagues	0.662	0.000	0.658	1.611	0.147	0.367	0.950	4.475	119	0.000

Note: df, degrees of freedom; sig., significance; std., standard.

Source: Own study.

In the group of exporters, only the importance of domestic and foreign direct and indirect competitors and customers did not differ significantly. For all the other groups, the domestic network partners were perceived to be significantly more important than the foreign ones (see Table 4). The data obtained do not support H1, whereby we assumed that domestic and foreign networks are of equal importance for exporters.

For companies operating mainly in the domestic market, no type of foreign partner was perceived to have a major impact on the market success (the average evaluation did not exceed 3.09 on the scale of 1–7 points) (see Table 2). In the majority of cases, they assigned significantly higher importance to domestic than foreign partners ($p<0.001$ for all the partner categories, except for research institutions($p=0.007$) and state and local governmental institutions as well as trade associations, for which the observed differences were not significant). Given that domestic companies applied low importance to supporting institutions in general (2.78–3.25 on the seven-point scale), it can be safely claimed that domestic networks are more important than foreign ones for non-exporting companies, and H3 is supported by our data. However, it is worth mentioning that except for customers, the perceived importance of local and foreign network partners was significantly correlated (see Table 5).

In the further part of the survey, respondents were asked to evaluate on a scale of 1–7 the benefits of cooperation with partners that contributed to the company's success in the most important markets. Respondents perceived all the benefits of cooperation listed in the questionnaire as quite important, giving them a significance >4 on a seven-point scale. In the group of domestic enterprises, the cooperation benefits perceived to be most crucial for market success in the network was improving the image, reaching an average of 5.63. The second place was occupied by organizing supplies (5.38), and the third was gathering information on clients' needs (4.99). The last place was taken by acquiring resources (financial and other) (4.03). The internationalized companies generally put more weight on the benefits of cooperation than the domestic ones, and the differences were statistically significant in all categories of benefits (the *t*-test for independent samples showed significant differences, with $p=0.044$ for organizing supplies, $p=0.002$ for acquiring resources, and $p<0.0001$ for all the other benefits). The first place was taken, as in the group of domestic companies, by image benefits, which reached an

Table 5. Correlations between the importance of domestic and foreign partners and the paired-samples *t*-test results for non exporters

Type of partner: domestic vs. foreign	Correlations for dependent samples		Paired differences					*t*	df	Sig. (two-sided)
	Correlation	Sig.	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
						Lower	Upper			
Direct competitors	0.382	0.000	10.617	1.928	0.176	1.268	1.965	9.185	119	0.000
Indirect competitors	0.555	0.000	1.200	1.570	0.143	0.916	1.484	8.375	119	0.000
Customers	0.075	0.418	2.417	2.144	0.196	2.029	2.804	12.346	119	0.000
Suppliers	0.302	0.001	2.033	1.927	0.176	1.685	2.382	11.559	119	0.000
Intermediaries	0.506	0.000	1.208	1.810	0.165	0.881	1.535	7.314	119	0.000
Research institutions	0.429	0.000	0.467	1.878	0.171	0.127	0.806	2.722	119	0.007
State and local governmental institutions	0.504	0.000	0.117	1.706	0.156	–0.192	0.425	0.749	119	0.455
Trade associations	0.461	0.000	0.192	1.807	0.165	–0.135	0.518	1.162	119	0.248
Family	0.261	0.004	0.933	2.252	0.206	0.526	1.340	4.540	119	0.000
Friends	0.401	0.000	0.742	2.002	0.183	0.380	1.104	4.058	119	0.000
Colleagues	0.403	0.000	0.767	1.995	0.182	0.406	1.127	4.210	119	0.000

Note: df, degrees of freedom; sig., significance; std., standard.

Source: Own study.

Table 6. The perceived significance of the cooperation benefits for the market success

	Non-exporters (n = 120)		Exporters (n = 120)		Overall (N = 240)	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Improving image	5.63*	1.409	6.25*	0.964	5.94	1.244
Organizing supplies (parts, raw materials)	5.38*	1.421	5.74*	1.381	5.56	1.410
Gathering information on clients' needs	4.99*	1.531	5.69*	1.333	5.34	1.475
Organizing sales and distribution	4.83*	1.648	5.80*	1.234	5.31	1.533
Gathering information on potential markets (e.g., market trends, number of clients)	4.81*	1.573	5.63*	1.402	5.22	1.543
Organizing promotional activities	4.67*	1.662	5.45*	1.608	5.06	1.678
Innovation development	4.37*	1.847	5.47*	1.577	4.92	1.800
Acquiring resources (financial and other)	4.03*	1.801	4.74*	1.678	4.39	1.773

Notes: Scale: "1"- not significant at all; "7"- very significant.

*Significant differences in the evaluation of cooperation benefits between exporters and non-exporters (*t*-test for independent samples)

Source: Own study.

average of 6.25 on a seven-point scale. Organizing sales and distribution came second (5.80), and the organization of supplies came third (5.74). It should be noted that the impact of all other benefits, except for acquiring resources, was rated at least as fairly large, with an average score >5.0. Detailed data are presented in Table 6.

The data presented and analyzed allow us to conclude that H5 is supported by the study, as exporters perceive network benefits as having greater impact on their success than non-exporting companies.

5 Discussion

Consistently with our expectations, both exporters and non-exporting companies did not differ in their evaluation of the importance of domestic network partners for the company's success. As argued by other researchers [Johanson and Vahlne, 1990; Chandra et al., 2009], domestic networks serve companies as a base for reaching foreign markets and for building relations with networks outside their home markets.

Significant differences were observed in the evaluation of foreign partners perceived by both groups of companies as most crucial for the company's success (customers, suppliers, intermediaries, and direct and indirect competitors). The internationalized companies valued them more than domestic firms, which is understandable, as the companies operating mostly in the domestic market – by their very nature – have more intensive local relationships.

The analysis of domestic and foreign networks' importance within each group of companies separately allowed us to draw several conclusions. It is not surprising that non-exporters attach greater importance to local networks than to the foreign ones; however, it is worth underlining that the domestic networks are of greater importance than the foreign ones for exporters also. Only the importance of foreign and local competitors and customers was not perceived by the exporters to be significantly different. It confirms that the domestic network of connections and interdependencies is the cornerstone of the activity on which the competitive advantage of Polish exporting SMEs is based. It may also be an indicator that taking greater advantage of foreign networks may still be out of their reach. Finally, as we have taken 25% of exports in total sales as the difference between exporters and non-exporters, we cannot exclude that exporters also do a significant part of their business in the domestic market. However, in such a case, the perceived importance of one particular type of network – local customers, should be significantly higher than that of the foreign ones, which was not the case. Therefore, we conclude that the SME exporters use the easily accessible local networks to get access to resources and knowledge needed to be successful in international markets. This result is coherent with our previous study conducted on Polish INVs, which showed that domestic partners play a greater role in a company's internationalization than the foreign ones [Danik, 2019].

The correlations between the perceived importance of local and foreign partners observed for the whole sample show that companies that can build local networks are also more competent in profiting from cooperation with foreign partners. Establishing cooperation with a given type of partner is a chance to learn about the value of such cooperation and results in gaining experience within the network, which both triggers and facilitates establishing new relationships with partners of a given type. Therefore, companies should not be afraid that "nurturing local networks and relationships with international clients at the same time is likely to result in a trade-off: the more active the firm becomes in local networks, the less time and managerial resources will be left to nurture international client relationships (e.g., by travelling, communicating and negotiating with international clients) and vice versa" [Boehe, 2013, p. 5].

The relatively high importance of direct and indirect competitors to the success of the companies studied is worth noting. A useful explanation of the relationship between competitor network and competitive advantage was given by Wang and Gao [2021], who argue that competitor network is a source of valuable information about innovative ideas, markets, and related industries, helping to forecast technological changes, sense opportunities, and update the offerings and resource base accordingly. Such critical information can be obtained both by monitoring media outlets, attending public events, studying patents, etc., as well as through informal links formed through friendship, shared customers, or employee exchanges or through formal ties such as industry associations. However, it is still surprising that competitors are perceived to have more influence on the company's market success than some other partner categories, with which the cooperation is not that risky and prone to conflicts. This phenomenon should be further studied with the use of qualitative methods. Intercountry comparisons could also be useful to show whether it is a characteristic of the Polish business relationships.

Previous studies have underlined the role of networking in innovation processes [Gilsing et al., 2008; Brunswicker and Vanhaverbeke, 2015]. According to the companies under study, the introduction of innovation was one of the least important benefits of cooperation. Moreover, partners such as research institutions, state and local governmental institutions, and trade associations, which – in the more

developed markets – play an important role in introducing innovations, attracting other network partners (i.e., financiers), and providing other resources facilitating the success [Lundberg and Andresen, 2012], were not perceived to be important partners in achieving success on neither the local nor the international markets. This can be explained in several ways. Firstly, Polish companies are not innovative compared to other European Union states [Hollanders et al., 2020]. Their market success is rather based on lower labor costs [OECD, 2020], so they do not see the need to enter into intensive cooperation with research institutions. Secondly, they seldom depend on external organizations for scientific and technical solutions [Jasiński, 2020]. They may regard real support from government institutions and associations as so difficult to obtain that they prefer to rely on business relationships. Moreover, those institutions may be more interested in cooperation with big companies, not SMEs. The low level of trust between companies and scientific institutions in Poland negatively influences the willingness for innovation cooperation [Jasiński, 2020]. Finally, the low level of innovation cooperation in Poland (confirmed also by the Global Innovation Index, 2020) may also be explained by the Polish culture, which does not support innovation cooperation [Danik and Lewandowska, 2021].

Previous studies show that companies strategically coordinating networking activities and capturing network-related knowledge better evaluate their alliance performance [Kale and Dyer, 2002]. Since exporting companies are proven to put more importance on their networks in general than local firms, they will also report greater benefits from the network cooperation, which has been confirmed by our study. These results stay in line with the results obtained by Ratajczak-Mrozek (2017) on the sample of Polish companies (small, medium, and big ones), which also showed that companies active in foreign markets are more aware of the networking benefits.

Our results regarding the types of benefits achieved by enterprises show interesting insight. In both groups surveyed, companies derived primarily reputational benefits from the network cooperation, while the least-valued benefit was the tangible one – acquiring resources. This points to a relational role of the networks being the leading one for the surveyed companies, where factors such as reputation and closely related trust and loyalty are the starting points for creating a competitive advantage based on tangible resources [Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Vargo and Lusch, 2004].

As an input for business, the analysis undertaken allowed us to identify the areas development in which may contribute to the strengthening of the competitiveness of Polish companies.

The study showed that the networks of Polish exporters are located primarily in the home country. The intensification of cooperation in foreign networks by Polish exporters is one of the areas to be improved, which would allow these companies to be firmly rooted in foreign markets and strengthen their competitive position in international markets.

Because the most important network partners were those from the closest business environment – customers, suppliers, and intermediaries, entering into deeper relations with them and dedicating attention to managing these relations would help Polish SMEs to build a lasting market advantage. The negligible role of personal networks in both groups of the surveyed companies is noteworthy. Since these kinds of relations are crucial in recognizing internationalization opportunities and network extension (Vasilchenko and Morrish, 2011), it is necessary to look at potential barriers to initiating such relations for exporting firms. Lowering them would accelerate the process of building foreign networks in this group of enterprises. Other studies indicate the existence of language and cultural barriers [Danik, 2017]. Decreasing these barriers seems to be an important task for exporters, but also for domestic companies, especially in times of mass migrations of people and dynamic economic shifts caused by the recent geopolitical turbulences.

The very poor cooperation of both surveyed groups of companies with research institutions, trade associations, and local authorities also seems disturbing. As mentioned earlier, this part of network cooperation is linked to the innovativeness of the economy (Turkina, 2018). In the Polish market, this may be due to the passivity of the above-mentioned institutions and the lack of attractive offers tailored for business (Jasiński, 2020). However, this does not have to be true for similar institutions in foreign markets. Exporting companies should focus their attention on strengthening ties with these entities in foreign markets and treat them as a potential for building a competitive position.

6 Limitations and future research directions

The paper is not free from limitations. Regarding the sampling procedure, we have used disproportionate stratified random sampling. Our results are limited to the Polish context. The results referring to exporters and non-exporters and the comparisons between them are representative of the Polish SMEs as both our subsamples are representative. However, the results calculated for the overall sample are not representative, as the sample does not reflect the structure of the whole population. Moreover, the questions used in the questionnaire provided only general knowledge about the relationships with partners in the networks and the perceived benefits of cooperation. Although, in our study, we have observed many interesting phenomena, more in-depth research is needed to explain them, showing – for instance – the influence of networking experience on the networking gains. A set of follow-up qualitative studies could help to better understand the reasons for the differences in network benefits between the exporting and non-exporting SMEs. It should be noted that the study was performed shortly before the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic developed and left its mark on all areas of economic activities including internationalization and network cooperation. Longitudinal studies (both qualitative and quantitative) could be extremely useful in investigating the network building process in a highly turbulent environment.

7 Conclusions

This paper aimed to explore foreign and local networks that the Polish SMEs consider important for building a strong position in their main markets. The comparison of exporters with non-exporting firms filled the gap in research and proposed a matrix layout of the analysis, whereby each group of companies is studied from two network perspectives: foreign and local. For that purpose, a comprehensive questionnaire was prepared and a field study was undertaken. In the research, the importance of 11 different types of network partners (see Table 2) – both domestic and foreign – was measured among two groups of Polish SMEs: exporters and non-exporters. Moreover, eight different types of network benefits were checked for their significance in relation to the success of each group of companies. We have shown that exporting SMEs gain more from networking than non-exporting firms. The local partners play a more crucial role in the market success of both types of firms than the foreign ones.

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