Is partner knowledge equally important for businesses from post-communist countries? – comparative study of Polish and Slovenian companies*[1]

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Abstract

Business relationships are nowadays perceived as the factor of company's success, but there is lack of international comparative studies with regard to effectiveness of relationship-based business resources. This study is oriented at minimizing this gap by comparing the effects of relational resources developed by companies based in two Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries: Poland and Slovenia. Specifically, this study focuses on the partner knowledge as a specific resource that companies from these two countries may use to manage relationships with various partners in the supply chain.

The international survey we conducted illustrates that developing partner knowledge is associated significantly with high quality of customer relationships and indirectly with financial performance, which is not surprising because advanced partner knowledge helps in integrating supply chain towards providing superior value to the customers. However, our study contributes to the literature on partner knowledge by presenting some important country-related contingencies for this path and testing them empirically. Namely, our empirical study shows that Slovenian companies benefit more from partner knowledge than Polish companies. We explain this result through differences in socio-economic aspects of business environment that influence on networking by Polish and Slovenian companies. The managers may use our study as the motivation to enhance the scope of company databases and utilizing such enriched databases in business networking, especially in export markets.

Keywords: partner knowledge, business relationships, relationship quality, cross-cultural, Slovenia, Poland, supply chain marketing.

* Received: 15.09.16, accepted: 15.02.18, 1 revision.

1 The research presented in the paper was sponsored by National Science Centre in Poland (PL – "Narodowe Centrum Nauki") within the project registration no. UMO-2015/19/B/HS4/01699.
„This paper was also supported within Operational Program Education for Competitiveness – Project No. CZ.1.07/2.3.00/20.0296".

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 DOI: 10.5771/0949-6181-2019-1-155

Introduction

Business relationships are perceived as the source of company's success, because they help the company to survive in volatile environment (Zámborský 2012; Zanger et al. 2008). The phenomenon of effective networking in the supply chain has been studied from various perspective, for example supply chain integration (Lazzarini et al. 2001), deficient partner development (Wagner 2006), relational capabilities (Walter et al. 2006), cognitions of network actors (Czakon and Kawa 2018), and business relationship process (Ratajczak-Mrozek 2017; Siemieniako and Mitręga 2018). In this study we approach this phenomenon from the perspective of partner knowledge, which is important aspect of supply chain management (Lavie 2007; Tóth et al. 2015; Walter et al. 2006).

We assume that successful partner selection is rather a process than discrete action and it must be based on appropriate knowledge about existing and available business partners. Thus, we focus our research on "partner knowledge" perceived as a strategic company resource necessary for developing the desirable portfolio of relationships within supply chain. Our empirical study illustrates that such partner knowledge helps the surveyed companies in developing good relationships with their customers. Companies which have adequate knowledge about partners in the supply chain, tend to provide superior value to their customers, which is probably achieved through good alignment with their business partners and minimizing the risk of staying in close but unprofitable collaborations.

Most of prior studies on relationship-based strategies and relational resources were realized in Western countries and the effectiveness of this business philosophy in less developed countries has not been explored enough yet (Jansson et al. 2007; Zatwarnicka-Madura et al. 2019). With just some exceptions (De Wulf et al. 2001; Geyskens et al. 1996) there is also a lack of international comparative studies with regard to effectiveness of relationship-based strategic resources. Our study contributes to this gap by presenting country-related contingencies for utilizing partner knowledge in business networking and testing these contingencies empirically. Namely, our empirical study shows that Slovenian companies benefit more from partner knowledge than Polish companies. We explain this result through differences in socio-economic aspects of business environment that influence on Polish and Slovenian companies.

This paper is organized as follows: first, we introduce main theoretical concepts and hypothesized interrelationships between them. Then, we present similarities and dissimilarities between Poland and Slovenia as business environments. We hypothesize how Polish and Slovenian institutional environment may moderate our research model. Then we present the field research design and research results. Finally, the research results are discussed with regard to previous literature, managerial implications are proposed, as well as research limitations.

Theoretical Framework

There is a consensus in the strategy literature that inter-firm relationships, especially these relationships built and developed within supply chain, may bring competitive advantage or relational rent, including innovations and efficiency improvements highly valued by end customers (Dyer and Singh 1998; Mesquita et al. 2008). The focal company may try strategically manage their partnerships in supply chain through the supply chain management (SCM) by synchronizing intra-firm and inter-firm competencies to provide superior value to end customers (Mentzer et al. 2001). SCM as management philosophy assumes initiating and managing relationships with various external entities treated as business partners, including suppliers, middleman, key customers and other value-contributing organizations, e.g. market research agencies or financial providers.

In this study we correspond with this relational view of company strategy and with *the concept of the value system / the strategic net* (Jüttner and Werbli 1995; K. Möller and Svahn 2003; Normann and Ramirez 1993), where companies, connected usually within the supply chain, combine their distinct and complementary capabilities to develop superior value to customers. In this concept, the successful collaboration between given company and other business partners enable customer loyalty, because end customers are much more satisfied with products that are developed cooperatively though matching skills and resources of various partners. Such collaboration is very visible in many international supply chains, including automotive, mobile telephones or retailing. However, from the perspective of the focal company, there are some prerequisites for effective inter-firm collaboration, because inter-firm relationships are not business panacea and may even work as a Trojan Horse for a company (Hennart et al. 1999). In fact, prior research has provided rich evidence for risks connected with relational strategies (e.g. Chowdhury et al. 2016; Das and Rahman 2010). Such risks are well documented in case of institutionalized mergers and acquisitions (Lahovnik 2011), and they are even more serious in case of informal inter-firm cooperation, where partner opportunism can be not easily controlled. Therefore, each company should control the partnering risk (Szczepański and Światowiec-Szczepańska 2012), though developing some special relational competencies (Mitrega et al. 2017; Ritter 1999).

In this study we focus on *partner knowledge* as a specific company resource which is important for effective partnering in the supply chain and delivering superior value to final customers. Corresponding with the resource view of the company (Barney 1991; Newbert 2007; Peteraf 1993), we treat this knowledge as intangible asset firms use to develop and implement their relational strategies (Ray et al. 2004). We define **partner knowledge** as *the knowledge about resources, activities and intensions of external companies partnering the focal company within supply chain*. The partner knowledge is a strategic resource that

may be used in various stages of business relationship process (Ford 1993). First at all, the focal company may use it at the stage of selecting new promising partners and initiating collaborative projects. Corresponding with the value system concept (Normann and Ramirez 1993), we assume here that this knowledge should concern various partners, not only suppliers, but rather all external organizations and individuals that can have an influence on the company success. Such knowledge should also comprise partners in distribution channel or key customers, because delivering superior value to end customers is frequently based on co-creation initiatives (Payne et al. 2008; Vargo et al. 2008). Secondly, we assume that partner knowledge helps the focal company, while the cooperation is already initiated and partners ty to manage it, e.g. by resource adjustments and handling conflicts. If the focal company does not have up-to-date information about existing partners, the communication with partners and attempts to increase efficiencies in the cooperation may be very difficult (Joshi 2009; Wagner 2006). Thus, we believe that partner knowledge as defined here is a prerequisite and specific safeguard for the focal company in their attempts to combine resources with other supply chain partners and deliver superior value to end customers.

Thus, we generally hypothesize here that:

H1: The more developed partner knowledge of the given company (KNOW), the higher quality of customer relationships this company maintains (QUAL).

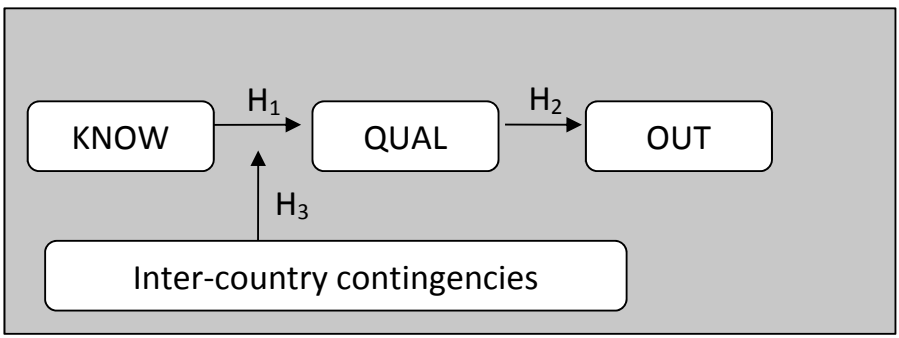
The customer relationship quality is the multidimensional construct referring to the emotional tone of customer relationships (affective dimension) along with perceived customer inclination to stay in relationship (behavioural dimension). Increasing customer relationship quality is treated as a key objective in marketing strategies, because such quality is the main non-financial indicator of company performance (O'Toole and Donaldson 2002). The positive influence of strong customer relationships on company financial performance is very intuitive and emphasized by relationship marketing concept. (De Wulf et al. 2003; Palmatier et al. 2008). Hibbard et al. (2001) supported empirically that the quality of customer relationships has a positive impact on a company's profitability. High relationship quality increases the likelihood that customers may invest further resources in the relationship with the given brand and decreases the likelihood of switching (Mitrega 2006; Volery and Mansik 1998).

Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2: The higher quality of relationships between company and its customers (QUAL), the higher company performance (OUT).

The research model that we just derived from prior literature on business networking is graphically presented on fig. 1. The model assumes that partner knowledge as a company resource is the antecedent of successful partnering in the supply chain and it connects such resource with non-financial performance in downstream relationships and, indirectly, with financial performance achieved by the focal company. We are aware that this model leaves aside some other relational resources that are important for supply chain partnering (e.g. relational investments, technology integration), however partner knowledge is treated here as a multi-functional strategic resource that helps in partnering at various stages of relationship process. Moreover, in this research we hypothesize some inter-country contingency effects for the research model (fig 1). The next paragraph will elaborate on these contingencies.

Figure 1. Hypothesized research model



The Specific Features of Poland and Slovenia as Moderating Factor

Inter-firm relationships occur within an external environment, so exogenous factors influence the performance of relationship-based strategies (Palmatier et al. 2007). Prior studies discussed the moderating influence of various factors such as: environmental uncertainty, the intangibility of the exchanged product, the directness of the exchange, the role of individuals' performance in the exchange, interaction frequency, industry relational norms and partner's relationship orientation (Palmatier et al. 2006 b; Palmatier et al. 2006 a; Palmatier et al. 2008). The vast majority of prior empirical studies on the effectiveness of relational business strategies was conducted in most developed countries, so the effects such strategies make in less developed countries has not been explored enough yet (Jansson et al. 2007). With just some exceptions (De Wulf et al. 2001; Geyskens et al. 1996), there is a lack of international comparative studies with regard to effectiveness of relationship-based business resources. However, observation of business practices in various countries and our knowledge about inter-cultural differences suggest that the effectiveness of relational strategies and resources

may vary depending on the exchange context. For example, prior research have provided strong evidence of some specific features of business relationships in post-communist countries, where one could observe context-specific forms of business relationships such us "guanxi" in China, "blat" in Russia or "kolesiostwo" in Poland (Gadowska 2005; Michailova and Worm 2003).

In this study we correspond with this contextual gap by testing research hypotheses using the dataset acquired from two countries: Poland and Slovenia. We believe that the contribution of our study is two-dimensional. Firstly, we enrich prior research on partnering in supply chain by confronting it with empirical data gathered in post-communist economies. Secondly, we compare how hypothesized effects of partner knowledge as a strategic resources differ in two post-communist countries. We found Poland and Slovenia as distinct representatives of post-communist countries that might be quite similar in terms of their language (they are both Slavic countries) and XX-century historical paths (they both became part of so-called Eastern Block after WW2), but nowadays they are also significantly different in terms of socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

Poland is much bigger country with almost 39 million inhabitants (in comparison with about 2 million Slovenes), but Slovenia is much more economically developed than Poland with almost 50% higher GDP per capita, quite close to the average of all 15 Euro zone countries. It is also important to indicate that Slovenian economy is much more export-oriented (with almost 3 times higher export value per capita) than Poland and with most economic transactions involving other members of EU
Comparing some features of Slovenian economy with the EU average, Čater and Čater (2010) concluded that Slovenia finished the transformation period and can be considered now a typical representative of EU.

. Considering economic complexity index (Hausmann et al. 2014) that indicates the diversity of a country's export and their sophistication, Slovenia has almost two times higher rank than Poland. Such advantage of Slovenian companies in terms of their export activities is connected with relatively small domestic market in Slovenia, whereas Polish companies operate in relatively big domestic market and do not have originally "born – global" approach.

We believe that relatively strong export orientation of Slovenian companies favour the partner knowledge as a driver of their success in supply chains. This is because entering foreign markets usually demands some relational skills and resources (Ratajczak-Mrozek 2017; Zhou et al. 2007) and, in general, the internationalization process is usually based on ties built with partners from abroad (e.g. Ambler et al. 1999; Johanson and Vahlne 1993). Corresponding with resource based view (Barney 1991), the partner knowledge seems to be more unique and more difficult to copy while dedicated to foreign markets, because

building knowledge about foreign partners demands some additional skills (foreign language, inter-cultural competencies), in comparison with building knowledge about partners in domestic market and domestic supply chain. For example, the situation on the domestic market may be to large extent screened by media analysis, but in case of export markets, the relevant information may be available only in foreign language or not available at all due to very different institutional environment.

According to Marody and Kochanowicz (2007) and Czernek and Czakon (2015) among EU members Poland might be distinguished by strong distrust towards people remaining outside their acquaintances. It correlates well with differences found by Koopman et al. (1999) in cultural scores between Poland and Slovenia. The "*in-group collectivism*" seems to be much higher in Poland than in Slovenia (among all European countries Poland was found as the most collectivistic country with the global rank of 16, which is very different to Slovenia with the ranking score of 34). Indeed, similarly to some other post-communist countries, there are some specific forms of business relationships observable in Poland, which are based more on personal benefits than any corporate strategies. Therefore, as "partner knowledge" is studied here as the strategic resource institutionalized at corporate level rather than personal level, we believe that in case of Polish companies informal institutions may hamper development and utilization of partner knowledge in supply chain networking. Simply, even if such partner knowledge is well developed in some Polish companies, these companies may still have relatively high inclination to make supply chain decisions, especially with regard to potential new partnerships, on the basis on inter-personal connections (i.e. building new ties only, if new partner fits existing social network).

Summing up, Slovenia and Poland might be treated as two European countries which share common recent history (transformation from communism started about 25 years ago) but are also different in terms of their institutional environment. In comparison with Polish companies, Slovenian companies work in the environment that more intensively favours developing and utilizing partner knowledge as a corporate resource. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H3: The partner knowledge (KNOW) drives more strongly the quality of customer relationships (QUAL) of Slovenian companies than Polish companies.

Research Approach and Measures Development

This study assumes that each research hypothesis should be formulated after careful review of existing theories on the topic under investigation and such hypothesis should be later tested through empirical data, so its main method of scientific reasoning is deduction (Dubois and Gadde 2002). Thus, the starting point

in here was the assumption that the *Relational View* is one of important theoretical frameworks explaining success/failure of today companies (Dyer, & Singh, 1998) and the companies oriented at partnering in the supply chains should develop partner knowledge as a strategic resource useful in various stages of business relationship development (Mitrega 2012; Mitrega and Pfajfar 2015). We also formulated hypothesized research model that included inter-country moderation effects for the link between partner knowledge and customer relationship quality. Therefore, in this project we used the results of international comparison survey as the main data source to test our research hypothesis.

At the beginning of the research process we have made some preparatory steps to make sure that our quantitative study is well prepared. Firstly, we conducted personal interviews with managers of companies in Poland and Slovenia to gain in-depth understanding about the ways business practitioners use to develop knowledge about their partners in supply chain and, as a consequence, prepare some rear life "wording" for further research instrument. For these interviews we screened websites of companies and selected only these companies that reported various collaborations with external parties to achieve excellence in product quality. We also tried to select companies of various size (i.e. employment, turnover) and various industries (i.e. manufacturing, service and retailing), so that we were able to get insights into variation of forms of partner knowledge development. As the result, we conducted interviews with managers of 20 companies: 10 in Poland and 10 in Slovenia. These interviews suggested that companies try to use various manners to develop their knowledge about business partners. In developing this knowledge they use both: word of mouth through existing social ties and more general information sources such as industry database and social network websites. The managers reported also that they use "passive monitoring" many times, which refers to analysing information provided by potential business partners themselves, e.g. offers provided by representatives of suppliers which tend to replace existing key supplier. The managers suggested that partner knowledge is used by them in order to identify new promising partners but they also suggested that they use it to identify existing business ties which are not profitable anymore and should be replaced. Thus, the results of in-depth interviews were treated by us as the initial support for the validity of our main research construct and its importance in supply chain management.

The scales for KNOW (partner knowledge) were adapted from previous studies about network capability (Walter et al. 2006, Human and Naudé 2009) and validated with regard to results of initial personal interviews. The scales for QUAL (customer relationship quality) were consistent with previous studies in this area (Lages et al. 2009; Mitrega and Katrichis 2010).

We have screened available secondary data to check, if we can find some appropriate financial records for the companies we surveyed. We find such records

only in case of few companies, but even in that cases data was either outdated or aggregated in the way that was not relevant (i.e. as the record for the whole transnational organization, without reflection on performance of the business unit on local market). Therefore, corresponding with studies that demonstrated correlation between perceptual performance measures and objective financial performance measures (Dess and Robinson 1984; Venkatraman and Ramanujam 1987), we used the perceptual measures of company performance (OUT). The OUT items corresponded with previous studies (Fonfara 2001; Hooley et al. 2005), and they were adjusted to the results of pilot interviews, where managers of companies operating in Poland and Slovenia were asked about the way they understand scales derived from the literature. Specifically, our scales are generally consistent with scales used by Hooley et al. (2005) for "market performance" and "financial performance" in the context of various marketing resources, but we have eliminated some scales that were pointed as too difficult by our interviewees (i.e. *"return on investment compared to competitors"*, "*profit margins compared to competitors*"). Additionally, instead of using "competitors" as reference point we decided to use "key competitors" which was more intuitive to mangers we interviewed.

During the personal interviews all scales derived from the literature were presented to managers and they were asked to reveal doubts and comments with respect to them. They were also asked to express in their own words the meaning standing behind particular scales. Thus, the interviews we conducted functioned as the pilot study for our main survey. The most important problem faced by respondents concerned using the general term "*business partners*" in most scales of KNOW. When asked about the first association connected with term "*partner*", respondents usually identified some expressions which were conceptually close to "business customers", "agents" or "intermediaries". Despite explaining to them the wide meaning of the term "partner" as it was proposed by Walter et al. (2006) and the variety of external entities the focal company may potentially network with (Rudawska and Błoch 2016), respondents usually found it impossible to assess "the average" company's attitude or relationships with regard to different stakeholder types: customers, intermediaries, suppliers, professional service companies or other influence groups. They suggested that their companies behave sometimes differently with regard to particular groups. Taking these observations into consideration, using the term "partner" was decided to be too general and not valid. In the final questionnaire, scales were modified to use more specific and easily associated expressions as: suppliers, influential persons/ institutions, key customers. The final version of items we used for our main research constructs is presented in table 1.

Taking into consideration early stage of theory development in the field of networking within supply chain (Capaldo 2007; Ritter et al. 2004), all scales have gone through explorative (EFA), as well as confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Table 1. Scales measuring main research constructs

Symbol	Item	Factor loading
PARTNER KNOWLEDGE **(KNOW) –** the knowledge about resources, activities and intensions of external companies partnering the focal company within supply chain **Cronbach's Alpha = 0.67, AVE = 0.60**		
P423	We know intentions of persons and organizations which have influence on the success of our company	**0.77**
P422	We have substantial knowledge about activities of our suppliers	**0.71**
P424	We have complete knowledge about our key customers	**0.83**
CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP QUALITY **(QUAL) –** composite measure of perceived emotional tone of relationships between the company and its customers **Cronbach's Alpha = 0.67, AVE = 0.61**		
P415	We have better relations with customers than our competitors	**0.82**
P410	Customers are more satisfied with us than with our competitors	**0.84**
P49	In practice, customers more frequently stop purchasing from us than from our competitors (*recoded*)	**0.67**
COMPANY PERFORMANCE **(OUT) –** composite measure of market and financial performance of the company **Cronbach's Alpha = 0.78, AVE = 0.70**		
P414	We achieve rather higher profits that our key competitors	**0.84**
P413	We achieve rather higher sales that our key competitors	**0.89**
P46	We have rather more customers that other firms on our market	**0.78**

procedures, which is standardized procedure of testing construct validity (Pennington 2003; Górniak 2000). The results of EFA met acceptable criteria. Also CFA procedure resulted in good fit of the model to the data: Chi-Square = 48,883; Chi-Square/d.f. = 1.75; p = 0.09; RMSEA = 0.036; GFI = 0.981; CFI = 0.982. All measures used for variables from our main research model (fig. 1) have been found as generally reliable and valid. The measures for KNOW and QUAL fall little bit below standard threshold of 0.7 for Cronbach's Alpha, but we decided to treat them as reliable considering relatively early stage of development of theory (Churchill Jr and Peter 1984; Hair et al. 2011; Nunnally et al. 1967). Moreover, we tested our measurement model using Fornell-Larcker Criterion (Fornell and Larcker 1981) and this test confirmed the discriminant validity of our all main measures (Hair et al. 2006).

The Sample and Data Collection

Random sampling was treated as not suitable, because of the lack of adequate sampling frame, containing companies characterized by intensive partnering in supply chain networking in Poland and Slovenia. As a result, there was a quota

sample of companies built on the basis of a dominant profile of business activity and number of employees of researched companies. In case of both countries the initial sample size amounted to 500 companies, but final sample size equalled 264 in Poland and 304 in Slovenia. The relatively high response rate (more than 50% in both countries) was accomplished mostly by inviting calls, which were repeated at least 2 times in case of every company in database. Early and late answers were compared, revealing no significant differences, indicating non-response bias would likely not be a problem. The main characteristics of companies researched in Poland and Slovenia are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of companies surveyed in Poland and Slovenia

Country	Dominant profile of business activity	Number of employees	Export sales ratio	Informants
Poland	36.4% – manufacturing 29.5% – retailing 34.1% – services	up to 49 -83,3% 49 to 249 – 9,5% 250 or more -7,2%	up to 25% – 78,6% 26% to 50% -5,7% 51% to 75% – 2,7% 76% or more – 13%	CEO or owner – 33,3% Marketing or sales manager – 38,3% Sales rep – 15,1% Other – 13,3%
Slovenia	31.6 % – manufacturing 25.7% – retailing 29.6% – services	up to 49 -76,5% 49 to 249 – 10,5% 250 or more -13,0%	up to 25% – 46,6% 26% to 50% – 11,8% 51% to 75% – 13,5% 76% or more -28,1%	CEO or owner – 23,0% Marketing or sales manager – 45,7% Sales rep – 9,2% Other – 22,1%

The table 2 suggests that samples gathered in two countries are very similar with regard to dominant business profile, number of employees and informants' position within firms and are significantly different in terms of percent share of export sales in total sales. We argue that these 2 samples are comparable and mirror characteristics of Polish and Slovenian economy, because Slovenian companies are generally much more export oriented than Polish companies (as discussed in earlier part of this paper).

Face to face interviewing is usually not used in scientific research due to the high costs associated with this technique, however, as it was suggested by Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) we used the opportunities of relatively cheaper primary data gathering in post-communist countries and we decided to use interviews. We believe that this technique allowed us to target more relevant informants, because each interview was proceed by telephone conversations. These conversations were used to identify person responsible for dealing with business partners explained by interviewers as suppliers, subcontractors and allied com-

panies. Consequently, as presented in table 2, in case of both countries, the vast majority of informants were people employed at top managerial position, either CEOs/owners or marketing/sales managers. In case of both countries significant percentage of informants referred to sales representatives (15.1% in Poland and 9,2% in Slovenia). These representatives, especially in case of small companies that we surveyed, had wide area of responsibilities not only with regard to key customers but also with regard to other business partners (e.g. middleman or suppliers). For sample control each informant was asked to evaluate his/her individual impact within the company on company's' activities towards business partners. The majority of all respondents claimed that they have strong or very strong influence on companies' activities towards business partners (56%). About 30% of respondents found it difficult to evaluate their influence on these issues and less than 15% declared small influence on companies' activities towards business partners.

Control Variables

The model presented in figure 1 was treated as a baseline model to be tested in our survey-based study. However, we tried to control for the influence of some other factors on the quality of customer relationships, so that we were able to minimize the risk of spurious statistical associations. Considering the limited space in the questionnaire, we controlled only few factors, namely company size, company export and the internal relationship quality. First two controls were single-item ordinal measures. Company size was measured with regard to number of employees and company export with regard to export sales ratio. In contrast, internal relationship quality was measured as the multi-item latent variable consisted with scales used previously by Mitrega (2012) and adapted initially from Walter et al. (2006). We decided to include this control variable, because we wanted to check combined effect of company strategic skills with regard to external partnering ("partner knowledge") and internal partnering/internal communication ("internal relationship quality") on the quality of customer relationships.

Data Analysis Procedures

We tested hypothesized model with partial least square structural equation modeling technique (PLS-SEM). There are some advantages of PLS-SEM that we followed deciding not to use CB-SEM (covariance-based SEM). Specifically, we took into consideration that the main variables we focus on do not have normal distribution, and PLS-SEM does not presume that the data are normally distributed (Hair et al. 2011). We were aware that similarly to other structural equation modeling techniques, PLS-SEM provides path coefficients on the basis of which inferences can be made about the strength of relationships between a set

of constructs and explained variance. We preferred PLS-SEM also because SmartPLS 3.0 software allowed us for direct testing moderation effects connected with inter-country comparison. Although we did not hypothesise any more moderation effects, our reasoning with regard to inter-country comparison was driven to large extent by export advancement of companies in these two countries, so we wanted to test, if inter-country moderation works while combined with another interaction based solely on export ratio. Such combined moderation effects are able to be tested directly in PLS-SEM (Hair et al. 2013; Hair Jr et al. 2017) and are not easily approachable in CB-SEM statistical packages (e.g. AMOS). We also made sure that we have a "green light" for using PLS-SEM by assessing the quality of reflective measurement model we used. Considering all latent variables (including internal relationship quality as a control), all basic criteria for reliability and validity were met (Hair et al. 2011), so we proceeded with testing structural model.

The model was estimated using SmartPLS 3.0 software package (Ringle et al. 2018) following Hair et al. (2013). We used bootstrapping to assess the path coefficients' significance. The number of bootstrap samples was 5,000, and we used Bias-Corrected and Accelerated (BCa) Bootstrap as the most stable method for estimating nonparametric confidence intervals.

Results

The figure 2 presents the results of PLS algorithm estimation for the hypothesized model with all control variables. The main variables (KNOW, QUAL, OUT) are presented by larger ellipses and control variables (INTERNAL, SIZE, INTERNATION) are presented by smaller ellipses. All three hypothesized paths appear to be statistically significant (see detailed path coefficients in table 3) providing support for hypotheses 1 and 2. As control variables are concerned the significant paths were found only in case of the influence INTERNAL on QUAL and SIZE on OUT. Thus, we conclude that our empirical test provided adequate support for the importance of partner knowledge as the strategic resource, because this resource seems to be significantly associated with customer relationship quality, while considering combined influence of this resource with influence of quality of relationships within company structure.

The multi-group moderation with regard to inter-country differences was also tested using SmartPLS 3.0 (Ringle et al. 2018), because this package contains PLS-MGA algorithm proposed by Henseler et al. (2009). The results of this algorithm for all paths under discussion are presented in Table 4. The difference for the main hypothesized link KNOW -> QUAL between Slovenian sub-sample (coefficient = 0.39) and Polish sub-sample (coefficient = 0.19) amounts to 0.20, which is statistically significant in case of two tailed significance test (p>0.95). As the conclusion, Hypothesis H3 receives empirical support in our dataset.

Figure 2. The results of PLS algorithm for hypothesized model

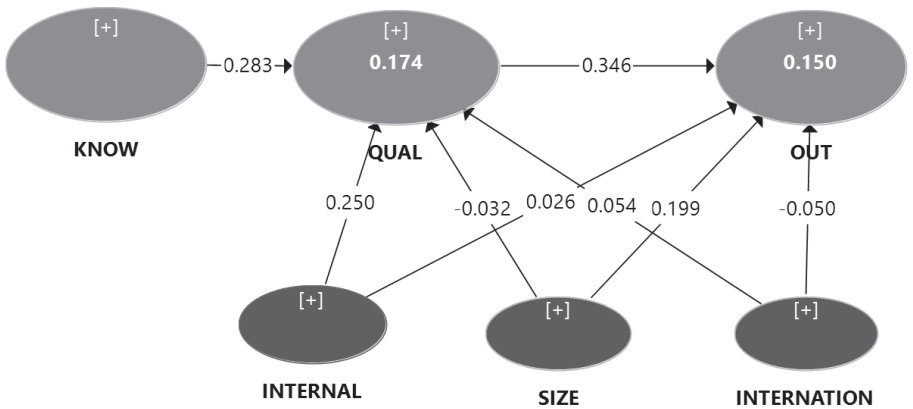


Table 3. Path coefficients for the main model and control variables

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values
Main hypothesized paths					
KNOW -> QUAL	0.283	0.287	0.040	7.044	0.000
QUAL -> OUT	0.346	0.349	0.042	8.337	0.000
Control variables					
INTERNAL -> OUT	0.026	0.026	0.043	0.601	0.548
INTERNAL -> QUAL	0.250	0.250	0.043	5.764	0.000
INTERNATION -> OUT	-0.050	-0.051	0.047	1.066	0.286
INTERNATION -> QUAL	0.054	0.054	0.044	1.216	0.224
SIZE -> OUT	0.199	0.199	0.049	4.072	0.000
SIZE -> QUAL	-0.032	-0.031	0.046	0.681	0.496

Critical t-values for a two-tailed test are 1.65 (significance level = 10 percent), 1.96 (significance level = 5 percent), and 2.58 (significance level = 1 percent).

To control robustness of our inter-country comparison results, we conducted additional post-hoc analysis, where we checked, if these results stand significant, when combined with the impact of export orientation (INTERNATION) as the additional moderator in our model. Therefore, we have incorporated additional interaction effect (INTERNATION x KNOW -> QUAL) and we run another MGA-PLS algorithm for inter-country comparison. The results are presented in Table 5 and they clearly suggest that there is still statistically significant difference for the main hypothesized link KNOW -> QUAL between Slovenian subsample and Polish sub-sample (p>0.95).

Table 4. MGA-PLS algorithm results

	Path Coefficients-diff (Poland – Slovenia)	p-Value (Poland vs Slovenia)
INTERNAL -> OUT	0.016	0.426
INTERNAL -> QUAL	0.030	0.634
INTERNATION -> OUT	0.049	0.287
INTERNATION -> QUAL	0.057	0.733
KNOW -> QUAL	0.199	0.995
QUAL -> OUT	0.120	0.925
SIZE -> OUT	0.167	0.034
SIZE -> QUAL	0.024	0.596

Table 5. MGA-PLS algorithm results with interaction effect related to export advancement (INTERNATION)

	Path Coefficients-diff (| Poland – Slovenia |)	p-Value (Poland vs Slovenia)
INTERNAL -> OUT	0.016	0.424
INTERNAL -> QUAL	0.032	0.644
INTERNATION -> OUT	0.049	0.288
INTERNATION -> QUAL	0.066	0.761
KNOW -> QUAL	0.194	0.993
INTERNATION x KNOW -> QUAL	0.043	0.289
QUAL -> OUT	0.120	0.923
SIZE -> OUT	0.167	0.033
SIZE -> QUAL	0.021	0.587

Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to our understanding of relationship-based competitive advantage (Dyer and Singh 1998) combined with resource-based competitive advantage (Barney 1991) by supporting empirically the link between the partner knowledge (strategic resource) and company's quality of customer relationships. This research corresponds particularly with one emerging stream of research, which assumes that company's ability to benefit from supply chain partnering is dependent on company's ability to choose the right alliance partners (Lavie 2007; Mitrega 2012). By developing the knowledge about potential business partners the company is more effective in selecting partners who provide complementary competencies and have adequate behavioural approach (for example, minimize their opportunism). This study corresponds with the literature on the connections between relational and resource view of company strategy (Mesquita et al. 2008) and it suggests that these two schools are complementary as some

company resources may work as prerequisite for the development of business relationship portfolio. In that sense, this study complements recent study by Mitrega and Pfajfar (2015), where partner knowledge (embedded in "partner selection") was found as an antecedent to business relationship process management.

Our research corresponds with study by Skinner et al. (2008) by providing empirical insights into cultural heterogeneity in Central Europe. These insights contrast with treating whole Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as the homogenous cluster of post-communist countries, an approach which is usually utilized (e.g. by transnational corporations fully standardizing their products in this region). The research results suggest that Slovenian companies make better use of partner knowledge that Polish companies do: the influence of partner knowledge on customer relationship quality is significantly stronger in case of Slovenian companies than in case of Polish companies. This difference results probably from the fact that Slovenia is one of the most developed parts of former communist East Block and it is the most developed country among the whole CEE region. Comparing some features of Slovenian economy with the Euro Zone countries, Čater and Čater (2010) recently concluded that Slovenia finished the transformation period and can be considered now a typical representative of developed European economies.

The explanation of inter-country contingency effect that we observed in our Polish-Slovenian dataset is in differences between Polish and Slovenian business environment. By conducting the post-hoc robustness test to our inter-group analysis we have provided the evidence standing behind the thesis that differences between Poland and Slovenia are complex, i.e. these differences cannot be limited simply to more intensive and sophisticated export orientation of Slovenian economy. Indeed, Slovenian companies are more export oriented, so developing partner knowledge may be relatively more important for them, because entering foreign markets works well with some networking skills (Łuczak et al. 2012). It seems that Slovenian companies systematize their knowledge about existing and potential business partners, when they try to develop their activities on foreign markets. In fact, initiating business relationships with foreigners might be sometimes impossible on the basis of existing business ties (e.g. due to language problems), so export oriented companies may need to monitor various sources of information to find appropriate business partners (e.g. Internet, press releases, professional research services). Nevertheless, the relatively small power of partner knowledge in case of Polish companies is probably associated also with specific informal institutional environment observable in Poland. Because Poland is found as strongly collectivistic society with scores in "in-group collectivism", quite similar to Russia, (Koopman et al. 1999), it is possible that relatively weak importance of corporate partner knowledge among Polish companies contrasts with relatively strong importance of partner knowledge built on personal level

(e.g. by some sales reps and purchasing agents) and it can be explained by the strategic importance of interpersonal business networking in general. This idea is in line with some prior studies that emphasize the role of personal ties in implementing relational strategies in non-Western Countries (Gu et al. 2008; Michailova and Worm, 2003; Wang, 2007). However, we would like to emphasize that this study does not question the necessity of developing partner knowledge as a strategic resource to be used in Poland. In fact, developed partner knowledge was also found as significant antecedent of customer relationship quality in case of Polish sub-sample. Our international comparison study illustrates that certain country-specific features work as important contingencies for the effectiveness of relational strategies/resources, so relationship marketing models may demand some adaptations, while considering various formal and informal institutional conditions.

Managerial Implications

In general, this study emphasizes the importance of partner knowledge as the strategic resource, so companies which already introduced or aim at introducing CRM (customer relationship management) or SRM (supplier relationship management) systems may use the result of this study as the suggestion to enhance the scope of information gathered in the databases. Apart from information concerning various features of key and promising customers, it is justified to gather up-to-date information about business partners including suppliers and organizations which may be treated as opinion leaders in the industry.

Inter-country moderation effect, identified in this study, suggests that managers (especially those from multinational corporations) should take into consideration that different markets operate according to different underlying principles and the practices related to business networking might have different effect in these markets. Specifically, this study provides the evidence that Central and Eastern European countries should not be treated as homogenous in the context of implementation of relationship-based business strategies. It should be especially taken into consideration by international companies entering some selected CEE markets, because they approaches towards business networking in these countries cannot be fully standardized. While initiating partnerships in these countries, the international companies should take into consideration specific business cultures developed there and specific forms of business relationships that are context-embedded and may bring both: opportunities and threats as well.

Limitations and further Research

The interest in managerial aspects in business networking is fairly new and therefore there is no consensus among scholars regarding what factors exactly constitute the company's ability to deal with business relationships (Ford and

Hakansson 2006; K. K. Möller and Halinen 1999). Our study corresponds with one stream of research, which assumes that company's ability to benefit from business relationships is dependent on company's ability to generate partner knowledge and make informed decision with regard to selection of alliance partners (Lavie 2007; Mitrega 2012). Including some other important aspects of networking such as structural holes (Burt 2001), business routines oriented at various stages of relationship cycle (Halinen et al. 1999; Ritter and Geersbro 2011) or network sense-making (Corsaro et al. 2011) would provide more nuanced view of supply chain networking in CEE countries. Further studies may try to incorporate insights from various research streams into one complex structural model and test it empirically on larger sample of surveyed companies.

One may argue that more compelling results might be acquired by combining datasets acquired in CEE with dataset acquired from one of HICs or high-income countries (e.g. UK or USA). We argue that such study might be further extension of our work, but we argue that by current study we contributed to marketing theory by incorporating more insights from non-most developed countries (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006). Our selection of two countries significantly different in terms of their institutions follows the criteria of contingency studies proposed by Burgess and Steenkamp (2006).

Even if we did not incorporate explicitly social capital as the research construct in our model, we believe that our study might be treated as the suggestion that phenomena related to social capital should be at least discussed in further studies on business networking in developing economies. We anticipate the special importance of social capital in strategies based on business networking in the context of developing countries with high cultural scores on in-group collectivism and low tendency to avoid uncertainty, e.g. CIS (The Commonwealth of Independent States) and Latin America. We suggest that further studies should test, if such constructs as Guanxi which refers originally to specific forms of social capital in China can be fruitfully employed to other economies, e.g. CEE countries. In general, future studies may incorporate more "outside-in-perspective" to this research area, e.g. by checking how international companies may network effectively with local partners while entering countries scoring high in in-group collectivism.

The social research methods used in this study have some advantages and disadvantages as well. The face to face interview technique applied here has some advantages in relation to a postal survey used in prior studies, because it resulted in quite a high response rate and allowed for more elastic selection of respondents based on initial calls to identify the most knowledgeable persons. On the other hand, the interview research method is exposed to social desirability phenomenon (Malhotra, 2004), which might have taken the form of overestimating the company attempts to deal with business partners in some interviews. We as-

sume that the tendency of the respondents to give answers, which may be desirable, was reduced because the research project was promoted as fully anonymous and because interviewed managers represented companies which did not compete in terms of operating in purely the same industry. Thus, they probably did not feel the strong need to promote their companies to 'look better" in comparison with competitors in a research report. Moreover, we used the Harman single-factor test to control for common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The results suggest that common method bias is unlikely to be significant issue with the collected data. However, our international comparison survey is limited in terms of the fact that our measurement model was not totally group invariant for both countries. Specifically, in case of main construct "partner knowledge" in Polish sub-sample one item was relatively most important, namely: "*We have complete knowledge about our key customers*" (P424), while in case of Slovenian sub-sample all three items received quite similar loadings. Further research can overcome this limitation by clear focus only on one type of business partners (e.g. suppliers), however such solution has some disadvantages as well as business networking is rarely restricted only to one partner's type and includes various downstream and upstream connections. The last but not the least, in contrast to our survey, future studies may implement multi-informant survey technique, which seems to be right direction concerning complex phenomena included in our research model. Specifically, future research may incorporate dyadic measurement model, where quality of customer relationships will be assessed by distributing questionnaires directly among customers.

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Appendix.

Table 6. The correlations between all variables included in the research model

	INTERNAL	INTERNATION	KNOW	OUT	QUAL	SIZE
INTERNAL	1.000					
INTERNATION	-0.231	1.000				
KNOW	0.216	0.100	1.000			
OUT	0.089	0.051	0.206	1.000		
QUAL	0.307	0.008	0.339	0.346	1.000	
SIZE	-0.277	0.525	0.113	0.151	-0.040	1.000