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## How does networking stimulate the internationalisation of firms in Poland?

**Abstract:** The study's objective is to verify the relationship between networking and the internationalisation of firms from Poland. Additionally, the relationship is evaluated according to the criterion of the scale and the pace of internationalisation. The article uses field research on the sample of internationalised firms from Poland ( $n = 355$ ). The research methods used in the study are logistic regression and Chi-Square test of independence. Based on the literature review, we assumed that firms participating in formal and informal networks internationalise faster and on a larger scale. Our research confirmed this hypothesis. It means that networking stimulates the scale and the pace of internationalisation of firms from Poland (the case of late comers; post-emerging economy) in the same pattern as indicated in prior studies. Moreover, based on the empirical research we found that resources and entrepreneurial orientation are essential for networking. The study provides necessary focus on the networking and internationalisation for policy and managers. It enforces the creation of certain preconditions for network development and underlines the necessity of penetrating various types of networks (formal and informal).

**Keywords:** born globals; entrepreneurial orientation; international business; international entrepreneurship; internationalisation; networks, Poland; resources

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## INTRODUCTION

There are various theoretical approaches explaining the process of the business-level internationalisation, such as stages models, resource-based view, networking perspective, strategic perspective, international entrepreneurship perspective or integrative approach (Wach, 2018). Networking, based on the extant literature and prior studies, is one of the key factors stimulating the internationalisation process of firms. From the perspective of international entrepreneurship the role of the entrepreneur is essential

in the internationalisation process in general (Wach, Głodowska, 2021; Głodowska, 2019), but also in any international networks, which help recognising opportunities in international markets (Gallego-Roquelaure, 2020). Many empirical research studies support the argument that networks have a significant impact on the business-level internationalisation, especially the pace (speed), the scale (degree, level), as well as its basic features such as the pattern, market selection and entry mode (Gil-Barragan et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2018).

The objective of the study is to verify the relationship between networking and internationalisation of firms from Central Europe – Poland. Additionally, the relationship is evaluated according to the criterion of the scale and the pace of internationalisation. This article tries to answer the following three research questions:

**RQ1:** Which factors determine the networking of internationalised firms in Poland?

**RQ2:** How does networking impact the scale of the internationalisation of firms in Poland?

**RQ3:** How does networking impact the pace of the internationalisation of firms in Poland?

There is numerous empirical evidence from well-developed economies as well as from emerging economies showing and proving the role of networking in internationalisation (Bai et al., 2022). The novelty of this article lies in selecting Poland as a post-emerging economy, and these countries as being late comers to international business are still not well explored in the literature. We follow the replication of empirical research in Polish context, which is postulated by various authors and editors (Eden, 2002; Hensel, 2019). What is more, the article uses own primary data based on a survey questionnaire, which is becoming more and more unique in the international business literature (Cerar, Nell, Reiche, 2021).

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND PRIOR STUDIES

The entrepreneurial ecosystem and the various and multidimensional relationships in the business environment are the accelerators for domestic and international growth of firms, especially new ventures or startups (Shetty et al., 2020; Dorożyński et al., 2020; Maciejewski, Wach, 2019). It can stimulate the internationalisation or cause the de-internationalisation (Wójcik, Ciszewska-Mlinaric, 2020). The network approach, developed since the end of 1980s, although in its assumptions relies on the bases of the process approach, it articulates links among firms as the most important factor of their internationalisation process. The approach is based on the network organisation concept, considerably developed in the management theory (Ayegba, Lin, 2020; Lin, Ayegba, 2020). The network approach to internationalisation discusses this process in the aspect of interorganisational and interpersonal relations in the context of mutual dependence on resources and mutual learning as the effect of the mechanism of socialisation (Maciejewski, Wach, Głodowska, 2022). According to Johanson and Vahlne (1992: 12), in comparison with a unilateral process in the representation of stages models, the network approach relies on “more multilateral elements”. We can assume that the general premise of the network approach boils down to the acceleration of internationalisation as a result of network links (Hollensen, 2017). In consequence of sharing knowledge and experience within formal or informal partnership in the network, the acceleration of the internationalisation process takes place, which has special meaning to small and

medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), since common learning may help them overcome their limitations, particularly the ones related to concerns about markets (psychic distance). Among numerous network models, two are most often quoted – the model developed by Johanson and Mattsson (1987, 1988), and recently the model of Johanson and Vahlne (2009), being a revised version of their primary Uppsala model.

Johanson and Mattsson (1988, 1993) transferred the network theory onto the grounds of the internationalisation theory. In their concept they depicted the dependence of the internationalisation intensity on the activity of businesses in networks, which, in turn, determines the internationalisation level of a given market understood as the sector in which the network operates. Johanson and Mattsson (1993) assume that a firm institutes and then develops its internationalisation in relation to other network participants. It may take place in three ways: (1) by international extension manifesting in an increase in the number of foreign network participants, (2) via penetration, that is the development of network relations, (3) and through international integration focused on establishment and extension of the relationship with foreign networks. The assumed internationalisation strategy from the network perspective arises from (Ruzzier, Hisrich, Antoncic, 2006: 485) such factors as (i) minimisation of the need for the development of knowledge, (ii) minimisation of the need for adjustment, (iii) using the established positions of the network.

Johanson and Vahlne (2009) proposed a modified version of their original stages model, adapting it to the network approach (Wach, 2021). The network-based U model assumes that the firm is embedded in an active network concentrating mutually dependent entities. Just like in the primary model, it includes four mutually related aspects, two state aspects connected with storing knowledge, and two change aspects connected with the flow of knowledge. A significant change in comparison with the primary model consists in the introduction of an element of the entrepreneurship theory manifested in the recognition of opportunities arising from the possessed knowledge (recognition of opportunities to the knowledge). Such opportunities constitute knowledge, being its subset, in addition to needs, competences, strategies and network relations (Johanson, Vahlne, 2009). Because the internationalisation process occurs within the network, thus the new variable “position of the network” was introduced as network relations condition the internationalisation process. Learning by building trust, as one of two change aspects, expresses the result of the current activities. It contributes to an increase in the possessed knowledge. The last aspect of the model was only completed in comparison with the primary concept with “relational” attribute, to emphasise the key role of the network in the decision-making process.

These theoretical models, as the foundations of the network perspective in the internationalisation of the firms, have been tested empirically by many scholars in different places in the world, but mainly in developed economies. Lindqvist (1988) proved that entry mode selection and the speed of internationalisation is influenced by close relationships with customers. Similarly, Coviello and Munro (1995) observed that networking stimulates firms to internationalise faster. Based on the multiple case method, Raats and Krakauer (2020) observed that in the case of Brazilian firms operating in networks, they could endeavour to reach foreign markets. Gil-Barragan et al. (2020) observed that operation in various domestic networks by firms from Peru and Colombia enhances their early internationalisation. Similarly, Gonzalez-Perez et al. (2018) noted that the ability to build networks is crucial for rapid internationalisation. These existing

results from other parts of the globe made it possible to assume the following research hypotheses:

**H1:** Firms from Poland as a post-emerging economy co-operating in any informal and formal networks are more likely to internationalise early.

**H2:** Firms from Poland as a post-emerging economy co-operating in any informal and formal networks are more likely to have larger scale of internationalisation.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The empirical objective adopted by us is to verify the relationship between networking and the pace and scale of internationalisation of Polish firms, using the survey questionnaires and adequate statistical calculations to test hypotheses. The research sample was selected on the basis of businesses registered in Poland in the REGON database, from which 7100 companies were drawn to whom the questionnaire was addressed. Of these businesses, only 355 agreed to take part in the survey (5%). A stratified random sampling was applied according to the following criteria (Głodowska, Maciejewski, Wach, 2019; Głodowska, Pera, Wach, 2016):

- the sample contains only internationalised businesses (which are at least exporters),
- the sample contains businesses of different sizes but reflecting the research needs, i.e. (a) with a small share of microenterprises as the least internationalised, although they constitute the most numerous group in the investigated population, (b) with a relatively small share of large enterprises, which – although they constitute the smallest group in the population – are the most typical research objects in the subject of internationalisation, with the assumption that each of these groups should constitute approximately 10–15% of the research sample, (c) with a relatively large proportion of both small and medium-sized enterprises, which according to the assumptions should amount to 25–45% of the sample.

The survey was conducted in Poland as the post-emerging economies using the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) technique. The questionnaire was divided into six thematic sections, namely: (i) business characteristics, (ii) forms and scope of internationalisation, (iii) internationalisation patterns and strategies, (iv) resources and competences, (v) domestic and foreign environment, (vi) entrepreneurial orientation, and (vi) entrepreneurial characteristics (Wach et al., 2022).

A number of variables (Table 1) based on the survey questionnaire, as well as Statistica 13.3 computer software were used for statistical calculations. We applied two statistical tests – logistic regression and Chi-Square test of independence.

The empirical data was collected within the project no. 2012/07/B/HS4/00701 financed by the National Science Centre of Poland and realized by Cracow University of Economics in the years 2013–2018. The research sample consisted of 355 internationalised firms operating in Poland. The characteristics of the sample are as follows (Głodowska et al., 2022):

- size of firms: 14% micro-, 43% small, 30% medium-sized, 13% large enterprises,
- age of firms: Q1 = 14 years, Me = 20 years, Q3 = 25 years, Min = 1 year, Max = 183 years,

*Table 1. Applied variables in the survey questionnaire and statistical calculations*

| Variable                               | Measure   | Scale                | Source                |
|--|---|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Resources (RES)                        | Self-evaluation of entrepreneurs/managers of five different resources (physical, human, financial, information and intangible resources).   | 7-point Likert scale | Own construct         |
| Competences (COMP)                     | Self-evaluation of entrepreneurs/managers of six different competences (managerial knowledge, professional knowledge, conceptual skills, interpersonal skills, market opportunities exploitation, proactive decision-making). | 7-point Likert scale | Own construct         |
| Entrepreneurial orientation (EO)       | Three-dimensional construct (proactiveness, innovativeness, risk-taking)  | 7-point Likert scale | (Covin, Miller, 2014) |
| International networking (NET)         | Cooperating in at least one formal or informal international network  | dummy 0/1            | Own construct         |
| Internationalisation scale (INT_SCALE) | Foreign sales to total sales (FSTS) in % categorised in two thresholds - below and above the median Q2  | dummy 0/1            | (UNCTAD, 1995)        |
| Internationalisation pace (INT_SPEED)  | Early internationalisation within first 3 years of the inception versus slow internationalisation taking place later than within first 3 years.   | dummy 0/1            | (Madsen et al., 2000) |

Source: authors' own work

- ownership: 60% only domestic, 20% mixed, 20% foreign capital,
- sector of the economy: 58% manufacturing and construction, 40% trade and services, 2% agriculture,
- familiness: 45% family firms, 55% non-family firms,
- sex of respondents: 78% males, 22% females,
- position of responders: 18% owners, 45% CEO/directors, 37% other managerial posts.

## EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

First, we used logistic regression to determine what factors influence firms' cooperation in international networks. The dichotomous dependent variable was taken to be whether the firm operates in at least one informal or formal network. We used simple regression models with one explanatory variable, which we assumed to be resources (RES), competencies (COMP) and entrepreneurial orientation (EO), the values of which were established by determining the arithmetic mean for the components of these categories (Tables 2–4).

Resources turned out to be a factor with a statistically significant impact ( $p=0.0007$ ) on the cooperation of firms in international networks (Table 2). The odds ratio of 1.4308 indicates that a unit increase in the importance rating of resources in a firm increases the probability of cooperation in international networks by 43%. The model linking competences in general with international networking is not statistically significant ( $p=0.3926$ ), indicating that there is no effect of the evaluation of competencies for early internationalisation of the firm on the cooperation of firms in international

networks (Table 3). Entrepreneurial orientation proved to be a factor with a statistically significant effect ( $p=0.0487$ ) on the cooperation of firms in international networks (Table 4). The odds ratio of 1.2860 indicates that a unit increase in the evaluation of the importance of resources in the firm results in a 28.6% increase in the probability of cooperation in international networks.

*Table 2.* Influence of the importance of resources (in total) on the cooperation of firms in international networks

| Statistics        | Model: Logistic regression (logit)                |           |
|-------------------|---|-----------|
|                   | Final loss: 198.70764612 Chi2(1)=12.969 p=0.00032 |           |
|                   | Const.  | Resources |
| Estimate          | -2.8252   | 0.3582    |
| Standard Error    | 0.5565  | 0.1049    |
| T                 | -5.0771   | 3.4140    |
| <i>p</i> -value   | 0.0000  | 0.0007    |
| Wald's Chi-square | 25.7772   | 11.6552   |
| <i>p</i> -value   | 0.0000  | 0.0006    |
| Odds ratio        | 0.0593  | 1.4308    |

Source: authors' own calculations ( $n=355$ )

*Table 3.* Influence of importance rating of competences (in total) on cooperation of firms in international networks

| Statistics        | Model: Logistic regression (logit)            |             |
|-------------------|---|-------------|
|                   | Final loss: 204.8268 Chi2(1)=0.73091 p=0.3926 |             |
|                   | Const.  | Competences |
| Estimate          | -1.5617                                       | 0.1005      |
| Standard Error    | 0.6515  | 0.1185      |
| t                 | -2.3972                                       | 0.8482      |
| <i>p</i> -value   | 0.0170  | 0.3969      |
| Wald's Chi-square | 5.7464  | 0.7194      |
| <i>p</i> -value   | 0.0165  | 0.3963      |
| Odds ratio        | 0.2098  | 1.1057      |

Source: authors' own calculations ( $n=355$ )

*Table 4.* Influence of the assessment of the importance of entrepreneurial orientation (total) on cooperation of companies in international networks

| Statistics        | Model: Logistic regression (logit)            |        |
|-------------------|---|--------|
|                   | Final loss: 203.1838 Chi2(1)=4.0170 p=0.04505 |        |
|                   | Const,  | EO     |
| Estimate          | -2.0588                                       | 0.2515 |
| Standard Error    | 0.5451  | 0.1271 |
| t                 | -3.7772                                       | 1.9785 |
| <i>p</i> -value   | 0.0002  | 0.0487 |
| Wald's Chi-square | 14.2670                                       | 3.9144 |
| <i>p</i> -value   | 0.0002  | 0.0479 |
| Odds ratio        | 0.1276  | 1.2860 |

Source: authors' own calculations ( $n=355$ )

In the following section, we attempted to determine the impact of a firm’s cooperation in international networks on the pace and scale of their internationalisation.

Tables 5–6 summarise the groups of firms in terms of the form of co-operation they undertake and the pace and level of internationalisation. In the category of pace of internationalisation we have distinguished between companies that internationalised within 3 years of establishment (early internationalisation) and later (slow internationalisation) (Table 5). As a measure of the scale of internationalisation we used the share of foreign sales in total sales of firms (FSTS). In this criterion we distinguished two groups of firms: those whose share of foreign sales exceeds the median value (second quartile, Q2) of the analysed firms and those whose share of foreign sales is below the median (Q2) (Table 6).

*Table 5.* The number of companies by the form of international cooperation and the pace of internationalisation

| Forms of international cooperation            | Internationalisation pace |       |       |
|---|---------------------------|-------|-------|
|   | Slow                      | Early | Total |
| We do not cooperate in any networks           | 111                       | 146   | 257   |
| We cooperate in at least one informal network | 8                         | 34    | 42    |
| We cooperate in at least one formal network   | 17                        | 29    | 46    |
| Total   | 136                       | 209   | 345*  |

\* The difference between the number of firms in Table 5 and 6 is due to the fact that in the survey results 10 firms did not specify the pace of their internationalisation.

Source: authors’ own calculations (n=355)

*Table 6.* Number of firms in terms of the form of international cooperation and the level of internationalisation

| Forms of international cooperation            | Foreign Sale to Total Sale (in %) |          |       |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------|-------|
|   | Below Q2                          | Above Q2 | Total |
| We do not cooperate in any networks           | 148                               | 113      | 261   |
| We cooperate in at least one informal network | 23                                | 21       | 44    |
| We cooperate in at least one formal network   | 18                                | 32       | 50    |
| Total   | 189                               | 166      | 355   |

Source: authors’ own calculations (n=355)

In order to determine the impact of international cooperation on the pace and scale of internationalisation, we divided the analysed firms into two groups: those that do not cooperate in any international network and those that operate in at least one informal or formal network. With regard to the groups thus defined, we conducted a Chi-square test of independence (Table 7).

*Table 7.* Results of the Chi-square independence test for groups of firms distinguished by their form of international cooperation and pace and scale of internationalisation

| Statistics         | Internationalisation pace (early vs. slow internationalisation) | Internationalisation scale (FSTS, in %) |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Pearson Chi-square | 6.17442   | 4.755221                                |
| df                 | 1   | 1                                       |
| p-value            | 0.01296   | 0.02921                                 |
| Odds ratio         | 1.933151  | 1.69301                                 |

Source: authors’ own calculations (n=355)

Cooperation of firms in international networks has a statistically significant effect on their internationalisation pace ( $p=0.01296$ ), which means that the assumed hypothesis H1 was confirmed. Odds ratio of 1.93 indicates that the chance of early internationalisation (within 3 years) is 1.93 times higher for firms that cooperate in international networks than for firms that do not.

Cooperation of firms in international networks has a statistically significant impact on their internationalisation scale ( $p=0.02921$ ), which means that the assumed hypothesis H2 was confirmed. An odds ratio of 1.69 indicates that the chance that a firm's share of foreign sales exceeds the median value for all firms is 1.69 times higher for firms that co-operate in international networks than for firms that do not.

## CONCLUSIONS

The network-based approach is a significant research stream explaining the internationalisation process of firms. Prior research confirms the influence of different types of networks on internationalisation and its various aspects. The process of creation and development of networks is complex but can be critical to internationalisation. It applies particularly to companies with limited capabilities and experience (e.g., latecomers from emerging markets), where the networks can strengthen and expand internal resources and capabilities.

Answering the research questions posed in our study, it should be stated that the factors that determine networking of internationalised firms from Poland are resources (financial, human, physical, information, intangible) and entrepreneurial orientation (proactiveness, innovativeness, risk-taking). However, resources are a priority. Competencies (general, professional, conceptual, social, proactive attitude to opportunity and decision) were statistically insignificant factors in terms of their impact on networking. This result requires in-depth research in the field of delimiting of these two categories: resources and competencies. In the literature, there is a differentiation between resources and competencies, but also, resources are considered in a broad sense, including competencies as a specific type of resource (Ibrahim et al., 2016). Therefore, the understanding of these two categories by the survey respondents may be puzzling, which could have impacted the survey results.

Our study covers both formal networks and informal networks. In the case of Polish firms, the networks positively impact both the scale of internationalisation and the pace of internationalisation. Firms that participate in networks internationalise faster and on a larger scale than firms that do not have these network connections. The difference is quite evident. These results are in line with those obtained by other researchers, including studies from developed countries. Langseth, O'dwyer, and Arpa (2016), based on case studies from Norway and Ireland, showed that networks and their nature affect the pace of internationalisation. Goxe, Mayrhofer, and Kuivalainen (2021) use the term "argonauts" for companies that enter new markets with the ability to adapt and adjust through networks, which enables successful internationalisation.

Our research gives insight into the role of networks in the internationalisation process and the factors influencing networking in firms referred to as "latecomers" in international entrepreneurship. This research is not without limitations, which at the same time contribute to further research in this area. The case of Polish businesses is an interesting example, however, the research results cannot be generalised. It is therefore



recommended to conduct a comparative study on entrepreneurial internationalisation. Moreover, the adoption of some general values for variables like aggregate resources or networks in general is also a limitation because we know that the nature of the network (intensity, strength, size, etc.) can have various meanings for the internationalisation of firms; as already indicated by Oviatt and McDougall (2005). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further in-depth research taking into account more detailed variables. It is also worth considering combining quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g., in the form of interviews), eliminating typical mistakes appearing in questionnaire surveys. It is advisable to take into consideration of the post-pandemic realities in the future empirical research, as the Covid-19 pandemic changed the landscape of the global business and international entrepreneurship (Banaszyk et al., 2020; Iwashita, 2020; Pelle, Tabajdi, 2020).

Despite these limitations, the study provides important insight for policy and managers. It confirms networks as an essential factor in the internationalisation of firms from emerging markets, prompting the creation of certain preconditions for network development. It also draws attention to the importance and the ability to penetrate various types of networks (formal and informal) and develop them effectively.

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