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# The Relationship between Managers' Network Awareness and the Relational Strategic Orientation of their Firms: Findings from Interviews with Polish Managers

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**Abstract:** The ability to cooperate with others in interorganisational dyads and networks is a source of competitive advantage for firms today. However, the question arises as to whether managers are aware of this and implement relational orientation as a strategy in their firms to obtain relational rent. The purpose of this paper is to provide an answer to this question. The research was conducted on 53 companies based in Poland using semi-structured interviews with executives. On one hand, the research results allowed recognition of the importance of and reasons for firms forming, developing, and withdrawing from interorganisational relations, and on the other hand, confirmed a relationship between a managers' network awareness and the strategic relational orientation of their firms. The higher the manager's network awareness, the more interorganisational relations a company forms with different partners, and the better the manager's knowledge about their partners' expectations and needs, which are then included in a company's strategy.

**Keywords:** relational view; interorganisational relations; strategic context of collaboration; knowledge and views of managers

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## 1. Introduction

Interorganisational relations have been the subject of many studies, and the topic is so significant [1] that the network paradigm has become an important concept in the management sciences [2–4]. This paradigm is based on three fundamental reference theories: social network theory [5,6], resource-based theory [7,8], and transaction cost theory [9–11], which are often supported by industrial marketing theory [12,13], supply chain management theory [14,15], stakeholder theory [16,17], and/or game theory [18,19]. The network paradigm seeks to understand and explain why organisations create and develop relations in dyads and networks.

The initial trend in the research concentrated on interorganisational cooperation [20,21], and has since evolved towards studies on strategic alliances [22,23], partner companies [24], and interorganisational networks [25–27]. The main research stream of these considerations was the cooperative relationships, both in dyads and in networks, that a firm enters into in order to achieve competitive advantage [26,28,29]. Nowadays, it is collaboration rather than competition that enhances the competitiveness of the company and the sustainability of growth. Interorganisational relations and a dialogue with stakeholders can be a source of innovation that also reduces economic, social, and environmental risks, thus contributing to promoting sustainable growth. It is important to indicate here that the broad topic of interorganisational relations is discussed within the framework of two main streams of research [30,31] (pp. 27–52). The first applies to the concept of “business networks” or “industrial networks” and the IMP network approach following the principles established by the

Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP). According to this approach, interorganisational relations and their networks arise in an evolutionary manner as a result of repeated interaction and interdependence [32]. It emphasises that “no business is an island” [3], which refers to the significance of a company’s interdependence with other entities in its environment and their mutual interactions. The second research stream refers to the concept of “strategic networks” or “strategic/value net” [33–35], and represents the strategic approach to interorganisational relations and networks. Researchers following this approach, similar to those who adopt the IMP approach, do not view companies as atomistic actors competing for profits, but rather as entities embedded in interorganisational relations and networks that facilitate social, professional, and exchange relationships with other organisations [35]. The strategic approach encompasses a firm’s set of both horizontal and vertical relations [35], with varying degrees of formality [36], and is based on the assumption that a company can plan and implement the development of long-lasting relations only within its own environment [30]. In this context, interorganisational relations are a kind of tool, model, or concept that a company and its managers purposefully use to achieve competitive advantage [37] linked with obtaining relational rent [38]. Comparing the IMP approach with the strategic approach to interorganisational relations and networks, one may say that the strategic approach is more broad, diverse, and appealing to managers, because it provides a vision of managers who can take control of at least some part of reality and their environment, and thus achieve better performance [31] (p. 42). For this reason as well, the considerations below will be located within the strategic approach to networks.

According to the strategic network approach, strategic action concerns efforts by one actor to influence relations with an external environment [39]. A company builds and develops interorganisational relations with different partners (i.e., suppliers, customers, competitors, and complementors), and its portfolio is a key factor in the process of developing competitive advantage manifested by relational rent [38]. This rent is defined as “a supernormal profit jointly generated in an exchange relationship that cannot be generated by either firm in isolation, and can only be created through the joint idiosyncratic contributions of the specific partners” [38] (p. 662). Seeking relational rent determines the relational view of a firm, and this view is manifested by a firm’s relational orientation, which is a type of strategic orientation.

In general, a relational strategic orientation of a firm is defined as the extent to which firms focus on developing and maintaining relations with different market partners, i.e., with customers, suppliers, competitors, and other partners that result in mutual exchange and benefits [40,41]. Although many studies have shown that forming and developing interorganisational relations provides many benefits [29,42,43] such as cost reduction, access to partners’ resources, mutual learning, mutual stimulation of innovativeness, the use of market opportunities, access to new markets, greater efficiency, etc., it remains unclear to what extent managers are aware of these when deciding the strategic orientation of their firms. Thus, the following research questions may be posed. (1) What is managers’ network awareness? (2) Why do managers form, develop, and withdraw their firms from interorganisational relations? (3) Is there a link between firms’ relational orientation (as a strategic orientation) and their managers’ network awareness? Such topics have not been subject to in-depth scientific investigation to date in the widely discussed area of interorganisational relations and networking, which constitutes a significant research gap. This paper attempts to fill this gap, and its purpose is the identification of the current state of managers’ network awareness, the relational strategy orientation of the firms that they manage, and the relationship between them. This research is exploratory in nature, studying companies operating in Poland, which provides an additional new research context. The clear majority of previous works devoted to the role of interorganisational relations in building the competitive advantage of a firm are on companies that are operating in developed Western markets. However, little is known about strategic orientation in the interorganisational relations of firms operating in less developed markets, including in the Polish market, nor about their managers’ network awareness.

The Polish economy is one of the most successful transition and emerging economies. According to a 2017 report of the European Commission and forecasts for 2018, Poland shows strong economic growth, has a stable financial sector, and also has low unemployment, despite a low level of investment [44]. The economy is developing solidly, and the main engine of its growth in the past few years has been domestic private consumption. Unfortunately, innovativeness in the Polish economy is low compared to other European Union (EU) countries, and with it, so is competitiveness. Poland occupies the second to last place in the group of moderate innovators [45], and hope for improvement of this situation is seen in the wider application of the model of open innovation, the essence of which is broad collaboration [46]. An important role in raising the innovativeness and competitiveness of any economy is played by the business sector, which in Poland is dominated by microbusinesses (their share in the structure of all businesses is 96% [47] p. 10). Polish firms are making a growing contribution to improving social prosperity, increasingly enjoy the fruits of internationalisation while their openness to cooperation with various partners is growing [47] (p. 4). As a result, Polish companies may serve as a good example of verifying the universality of the assumptions of the relational view approach in a transition and emerging economy. The research was conducted by interviews with 53 Polish managers in mid-sized firms. The study material included both qualitative and quantitative data.

This paper contributes to the literature on strategic management from the relational perspective by preliminary identification of the relationship between a manager's network awareness and a firm's relational strategic orientation. Thus, it expands the set of known antecedents of a firm's relational orientation [38,48,49] by its manager's network awareness. However, because of the sample size, the obtained results cannot be generalised. Moreover, they only refer to managers' perceptions and the context of companies operating under Polish conditions. In the following sections, I discuss the relational view of competitive advantage and how it determines the relational strategic orientation at the firm level. By applying the relational view and network perspective, I also define a manager's network awareness and its relationship to a firm's strategic orientation. Next, I present the research methodology used and discuss my findings. Finally, I draw conclusions and outline the limitations of this study, and suggest directions for further research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Relational View of Competitive Advantage

Relational view scholars argue that competitiveness arises from interfirm sources of advantage [38,42] from which relational rent is obtained. The relational view and the network perspective indicate that the basis for the generation of such a rent is a company's ability to create and develop relations with other entities that allow them to gain access to their resources [49]. Dyer and Singh [38] identified four sources that generate relational rents: investments in relation-specific assets, interfirm knowledge-sharing routines, the combination of complementary resources, and effective governance mechanisms. Kobayashi [29] proposed four prerequisites of relational competitive advantage, namely: physical distance, investments in special assets, knowledge sharing, and product features. Other scholars have focussed on different factors that determine the success of alliances or networks. These include the closeness, strength and quality of relations [50–52], their configuration and structure [53,54], trust in interorganisational relations [55,56], and relational capabilities [57–59].

Relational rent proceeds from the joint efforts of collaborating firms, and its amount is related to the process of creating and appropriating value. Value-creating processes are understood in various ways [60]. This is because value represents different concepts for diverse stakeholders. An organisation that attempts to meet its investors' and stakeholders' expectations operates both as a customer and a supplier; therefore, the motives for value creation might be different, and often even contradictory [61]. However, resource complementarity and the centrality of network position are main sources of value creation [62]. Firms do business with each other to create common value, which is then appropriated.

The division of value may be proportional to the initial contribution of the partners, which can be symmetrical (equal share in benefits) or asymmetrical, where one partner appropriates value that is greater than the amount of their contribution. Furthermore, appropriation in accordance with value network logic can be viewed through the lens of value intercepted by an enterprise, suppliers, complementors, recipients, and competitors [60]. Asymmetry in the division of value is related to the intentional, direct, and active efforts of the parties to the relationship seeking to intercept value [63]; however, the proportions and principles of division strongly affect the durability of the relationship [64]. Moreover, trust and network density can influence value creation and the mechanism of value appropriation [62]. The creation and appropriation of value are strongly related to one another; therefore, firms should strive for a balance between these two that would ensure competitive advantage [65].

A fundamental source of competitive advantage in the relational view is collaboration, which is manifested by cooperation (with non-competitive partners) and cooperation (with competitive partners). In the literature, one can find many studies (e.g., Fawcett et al. [11], Hardy et al. [66], Zakrzewska-Bielawska [67]) indicating the benefits, both tangible and intangible [68], that result from collaboration and the operation of businesses within dyads and interorganisational networks. Generally, these can be placed into four main groups, namely [69] (p. 139):

- Resource effects, including access to various types of resources from partners, in particular knowledge, resource sharing, or the creation of common resources [38]. Cooperating entities can form a relationship with a convergent resource configuration, thereby obtaining the same benefits of scale or create these on the basis of resource complementarity. On one hand, cooperation makes it possible to fill resource gaps, but on the other hand, it permits the exchange or sale of resources and capabilities that are either unused or unimportant, thereby creating at the same time a source of income [8,70];
- Financial effects, including a reduction in the costs of operation, especially of transaction costs [71], increasing revenues, or the possibility of securing financial resources for joint investments [72];
- Organisational effects, which should include above all the increase in the quality of executed processes (higher quality, shorter completion times, greater flexibility), as well as increasing the level of innovativeness [72,73];
- Positional effects, including a greater negotiating power of the entities relative to those outside of the system/interorganisational network, or also the development of the industry [74,75].

An additional group of benefits might also be those related to limiting uncertainty, owing to better adaptation to the environment, which develops through interorganisational relations, expanding the strategic options available, as well as improved access to information regarding the trends in the development of the sector [76] (p. 120).

On the other hand, anchoring in dyads and network relations is related to certain risks, which may consequently lead to negative effects. Similarly, these may be placed into four groups [69] (p. 144), namely:

- Dependency effects, which manifest themselves in the dependence on partners in the relationship, in stronger entities in the relationship dictating conditions for cooperation, and in the dilution of responsibilities [35,77];
- Financial effects, which are the reverse of obtained benefits, and thus are manifested by the increase in the costs of operation or the reduction of revenues [72];
- Organisational effects, which similarly have reversed effects, i.e., a reduction of the quality of executed processes or the reduction of flexibility [72];
- Positional effects, which are manifested by the reduction of negotiating power relative to entities outside of the interorganisational system, and which can be analysed relative to suppliers or clients [75].

Moreover, frequently indicated among the dangers associated with cooperation or cooptation are the risk of the flight of knowledge and know-how, conflicts between partners that paralyse cooperation, difficulty in efficiently managing the complicated system of cooperation, and the possible appearance of opportunistic behaviours [78–80]. What is more, as Sroka and Cygler [81] correctly point out, every interorganisational cooperation is associated with the likely appearance of some negative phenomena, which they term pathologies, that reduce the attractiveness of this type of activity.

Therefore, managers should build and develop those interorganisational relations that will allow their firm to obtain benefits and simultaneously reduce the risk of not obtaining relational rent. Thus, the relational view of competitive advantage determines a firm's strategic orientation.

### *2.2. The Strategic Orientation of a Firm from the Relational View Perspective*

Strategic orientation is understood by the majority of researchers as a set of principles determining the actions and processes of a firm that are meant to ensure better results (performance) [82]. Some define it as a business philosophy [83] that represents the set of behaviours that ensure the achievement of a strategy [84]. In this sense, strategic orientation may be perceived as a key factor that is decisive in the success or failure of a business [85].

There are numerous possible company strategic orientations, and among these, scholars have distinguished those such as market, entrepreneurial, technological, innovation, or learning orientations [83,86,87]. There is also no consensus regarding what dimensions a strategic orientation should have and how to measure these [88]. Previous studies have conceptualised strategic orientation utilising various approaches, including classifying firms into typologies such as the archetypes of Miles and Snow [89] (e.g., Aragon-Sanchez et al. [90], Laforet [91], Pleshko et al. [92]) or identifying cultural attributes [85,93,94]. Others research strategic orientation through the lens of the influence of other orientations, such as customer orientation, competitor orientation, technological/product orientation [95,96], or concentrating on their short or long-term effects [97].

Considering the assumptions of the relational view in the development of competitive advantage by a firm, strategic orientation takes on an additional context, namely the relational context. Seeking relational rents is the main motivation for adopting this orientation [29,38]. The relational strategic orientation of a firm focuses on developing and maintaining relationships with different market partners, such as customers, suppliers, competitors, and others that result in mutual exchange and benefits [40,41]. On the one hand, this orientation is manifested by forming and developing many diverse interorganisational relations [42], but on the other hand, it focusses on identifying partners' expectations, defining the goals of cooperation in a clear way, and satisfying mutual needs [43]. The expectations of collaboration partners should be taken into account in a firm's strategy so as to effectively build and manage a portfolio of heterogeneous relationships [98]. Consequently, one may say that the relational orientation of a firm on one hand is focussed on forming and developing interorganisational relations (many, and with different various partners), and on the other hand, it is focussed on knowledge and consideration of the needs of partners in the strategic activities of a business. A critical factor in the adoption of this orientation is managers' network awareness, because it affects their perception of the possibilities offered by interorganisational relations (above all cooperation and cooptation) that can be acted on to achieve a competitive advantage and improve business performance.

### *2.3. Managers' Network Awareness as an Antecedent of a Firm's Relational Strategic Orientation*

Consciousness is an area of interest in psychology, philosophy, sociology, neurophysiology, and psychiatry. Generally speaking, the term consciousness refers to the basic and fundamental psychic state of humans, in which the individual is aware of internal phenomena (his or her own thought processes) as well as external ones, and is able to react to them [99]. Hence, awareness is considered a prerequisite for consciousness [100], and is understood as the state of knowledge, the views, and the imagination of people regarding a particular phenomenon [101]. In accordance

with this, I define managers' network awareness as the state of managers' knowledge and their views regarding the functioning of their firm in dyads and networks, as well as the influence of interorganisational collaboration on a firm's competitive advantage, the use of opportunities from the environment, and obtaining additional benefits (relational rents). Awareness may range from being completely ignorant (absence of awareness) to knowing all of the details and interpreting them [102]. The extent to which managers are aware of networking and its benefits, and how they perceive and interpret the aims of forming, developing, and withdrawing from interorganisational relationships, is an explanatory question of this paper.

On one hand, poor performance in a business ecosystem may result from managers being completely ignorant about the concept of the relational view of the firm, and on the other hand, aware managers who widely apply the relational view and strategic network perspective in developing competitive advantage can achieve high relational rents [103]. Therefore, managers' network awareness is an antecedent of a firm's relational strategic orientation that determines the way that a firm operates and its resulting performance. Consequently, I propose the hypothesis:

**H:** *Manager's network awareness affects a firm's relational orientation in the sense that:*

- (a) *The higher the managers' network awareness, the more interorganisational relations with different partners are formed by a company,*
- (b) *The higher the managers' network awareness, the more partners' expectations are included in a company's strategy.*

High network awareness among managers shows that they realise that their business is rooted in different types of relations that are both direct and indirect, contractual and social [31], which give the firm certain benefits, but are also burdened by a certain amount of risk [72,81]. Such managers form many relationships with various partners, and try to take advantage of their potential, setting out clear goals for the cooperation that are both shared and individual [76], and actively meeting them. High awareness of the interdependence of a firm and the needs and expectations of its partners describes a relational strategic orientation that leads to benefits for all [104].

On the other hand, low network awareness among managers often causes businesses to become members of networks passively and spontaneously as a result of ongoing transactional relations. In this case, there is no relational strategic orientation, and the system of interorganisational relations is formed independently of the will of the entities, and is not a result of strategic decisions made about creating a particular portfolio of relationships [105]. Only to a miniscule degree (if at all) are the expectations of partners in cooperation taken into account in the firm's strategy, and the business thus obtains a transfer rent [106] rather than a relational one.

In order to test this hypothesis, I conducted field research in Polish companies from November 2016 to July 2017.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Sample

The research subject was medium-sized companies (i.e., with 50–249 employees) operating in Poland. Companies of this size were chosen specifically, as they are characterised by a high level of diversity. In this group, there are also entities with qualities ascribed to small companies, as well as those whose characteristics are closer to those of large companies. According to data from Statistics Poland (the Central Statistical Office of Poland), there were 14,519 medium-sized companies operating in Poland in 2016. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, which is usually conducted to study a problem that has not been clearly defined yet, I used semi-structured interviews. One such as yet unstudied problem is managers' network awareness. The sole criterion of sampling was the size of the company. I planned to conduct around 50 interviews, and, wishing to maintain the diversity of the sample, intended to conduct 20 interviews with companies employing between 50–70 people,

which are closer in character to small firms, as well as 30 interviews with firms employing between 71–249 people, of which 15 employ over 200 people, and to a large extent exhibit the qualities of large companies. In the literature, it is suggested that the method of gathering data may limit the sample [107]. Due to the necessity of conducting the interviews on company premises and the desire to ask open questions, which make it possible to evaluate managers' network awareness, I concluded that a sample of 50 companies would be sufficient. Moreover, the literature provides no clear guidelines regarding how many partially structured interviews should be conducted to meet rigour and trustworthiness, and rather points to "saturation of knowledge" [108]. Some authors indicate that 15 interviews is enough to recognise patterns in the interviewees' experiences [108] (p. 37); others think that 12 interviews of a homogenous group is all that is needed to reach saturation [109].

The sampling method that I employed was probabilistic, stratified random sampling [110]. The sampling frame was the Polish National Business Registry (REGON), from which the gross sample was obtained. This is a list of entities that is several times greater in number than the sample size; invitations to participate in the research were sent to each. The base data contained 300 records. Finally, consent to participate in the study was given by 53 companies, 21 of which employed 50–70 people, as well as 32 firms that employed 71–294 people, of which 16 had over 200 employees. The detailed characteristics of the companies studied are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the businesses studied.

Metrics	All Firms	Employing from 50 to 70 People	Employing from 71 to 200 People	Employing from 201 to 249 People
Firm's age				
up to 5 years	1	1	0	0
from 6 to 10 years	4	1	1	2
from 11 to 20 years	17	6	7	4
over 20 years	31	13	8	10
Total	53	21	16	16
Dominant type of activity				
production	28	12	8	8
services	11	6	3	2
trade	14	3	5	6
Total	53	21	16	16
Dominant share of capital				
only Polish	43	16	12	15
only foreign	5	2	3	0
dominant Polish	2	2	0	0
dominant foreign	3	1	1	1
Total	53	21	16	16
Market scope				
local	15	10	0	5
national	20	9	6	5
international	12	1	6	5
global	6	1	4	1
Total	53	21	16	16

Most of the studied firms were mature entities, i.e., that have been operating on the market for over 20 years, which means that they have experience in forming, developing, or withdrawing from interorganisational relations. In over half of the firms, activities related to production were dominant, and the clear majority operated with Polish capital, whereby 43 entities declared domestic capital exclusively. The reach of market operations was diverse. Entities whose qualities were closer to those of small firms (i.e., employing from 50 to 70 people) did business mainly on the local market or the

national market (19 of 21 firms in this group). Larger entities more frequently operated on international markets, i.e., in several countries (11 firms), or global markets, i.e., in many countries, often on multiple continents (five entities).

### 3.2. Method of Research

I used semi-structured interviews [111] to collect data on managers' perceptions. The selection of this method was motivated by open-ended questions allowing respondents to speak freely. This would make it possible to obtain fuller and deeper information on the topic of the significance of interorganisational relations in the building of competitive advantage for a firm, as well as the motives for forming, maintaining, and withdrawing from them, and thus would permit description of managers' network awareness. This would serve as a basis for the construction of a scale for its measurement. The closed-ended questions aimed to measure both managers' network awareness, as well as the relational strategic orientation of their firms, whereby this measurement was made using a seven-point Likert scale. This scale is often said to increase data subjectivity, because what is measured is respondents' sense of the level of a given phenomenon, rather than its actual level. However, on the other hand, researchers have argued that managers' subjectivity and attitudes lead them to in fact significantly exaggerate the actual level of the given phenomenon [112], because by expressing their hopes, fears, or desires, they better reflect the phenomena and processes taking place in a firm. This is particularly relevant for the measurement of the degree of their awareness of the existence of the given phenomenon. For this reason, I decided to use this scale as well.

I conducted 53 interviews, including 49 with top managers and four with company owners. My focus on top management is justified by the importance of these individuals' awareness in shaping a firm's strategic orientation. It should be emphasised here that managers' network awareness is a result of the state of their knowledge and views regarding the operation of their company in dyads and networks, as well as the effect of interorganisational cooperation on the competitive advantage of the firm. This, in turn, depends on the appropriate cognitive frameworks used by an individual decision-maker or used cooperatively by top management [113]. I made a simplification here through identifying the cognitive conditioning of an individual manager (strategist) with the dominant logic of the top management of the organisation.

The interviews took place in the offices of the respondent's company, and were preceded by an invitation to participate in the research. I contacted by telephone those individuals who had expressed their consent to participate in the research in order to set a time and date for the meeting. Each interview lasted on average 30 min. All of the interviews were recorded (with the respondent's consent) and transcribed, which facilitated the subsequent analysis of the material obtained.

Since I collected data from managers using a single interview, any relationships observed may be susceptible to common method bias. I followed the procedures recommended by Podsakoff et al. [114] for limiting the potential for common method variance. Specifically, I assured respondents that there were no right or wrong answers, encouraged them to respond as honestly as possible, grouped construct items by sections rather than by variables, and employed multi-response formats. In addition, because my respondents were top managers or company owners who hold key information, the common method bias should be lower [115].

### 3.3. Methods of Data Analysis

In order to achieve the paper's objective, I used both qualitative and quantitative data. The first type was used to identify the significance of interorganisational relations in achieving competitive advantage and the reasons why companies form, develop, and withdraw from relations (I asked respondents four open-ended questions). Here, I used NVivo software and conducted a summative content analysis [116]. The content analysis is not a recent method of collecting research data, as it has already been used in various empirical studies, including studies on the Polish industry [117].

I applied this method by creating word clouds and grouping the most important quotes from the responses given by the respondents.

Next, derived from theory and the relevant qualitative data, I proposed a four-item scale measuring the managers' network awareness, which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and asked CEOs to indicate the extent to which managers were aware of how: (1) cooperation with parties in the environment is a source of additional benefits, (2) cooperation with parties in the environment influences the competitive advantage of a company, (3) goal realisation and the long-term development of the firm depend on forming and maintaining interorganisational relations and the way they are used, and (4) interorganisational relations support taking advantage of opportunities. I also proposed a six-item scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), measuring the relational strategic orientation of the firm regarding the number and variety of partners, their expectations, and the needs that a company's vision/mission and strategy should include [118].

I followed the two-step method recommended by Narasimhan and Jayaram [119] to test the reliability of the construct. The first step was to perform an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to ensure the unidimensionality of the constructs. I performed the EFA using principal component analysis (PCA) for factor extraction and the Varimax technique for factor rotation [120]. The second step was to compute the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) to test for the reliability of each construct.

Construct validity consists of convergent and discriminant validity, and it refers to the degree to which the items precisely measure the construct [121]. For testing convergent validity, I calculated the average variance extracted (AVE), and for discriminant validity, I examined whether the square roots of average variance extracted (AVE) were greater than the correlations among constructs (i.e., the off-diagonal values).

Next, I conducted structural equation modelling, which allowed analysis of the dependency between the hidden variables [122]. For estimation of the parameters, I used the ML (maximum likelihood) method [123]. I evaluated the fit of the model by use of measures of quality factor matching such as the Chi squared to df ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the normed comparative fit index (CFI), and the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) [122]. Due to the low sample size (53 entities), I used the bootstrap procedure [124] (pp. 369–392) to estimate the parameters of the model. On the basis of the data, a bootstrap was implemented for 2000 samples with the use of an estimator with the highest confidence.

All of the calculations were made using Statistica software, while estimates of the structural model were made in Amos software. Detailed results can be found in the section dedicated to the analysis of quantitative data below.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Findings of the Qualitative Data

The managers who were interviewed declared that their companies formed relationships with diverse partners, most of all with clients (all firms) and suppliers (97.3% of parties), but also with financial organisations (81.1%), competitors (77.4%), research and development (R&D) organisations (69.8%), social organisations (62.3%), as well as national and local governmental organisations (around 58%). Consequently, they were asked how they perceive the role and significance of interorganisational relations compared with other resources in achieving competitive advantage, as well as what inclines them to form, maintain, and withdraw from a relationship with a particular partner. Grouped representative samples of respondents' statements, as well as word clouds, are shown in Figure 1.

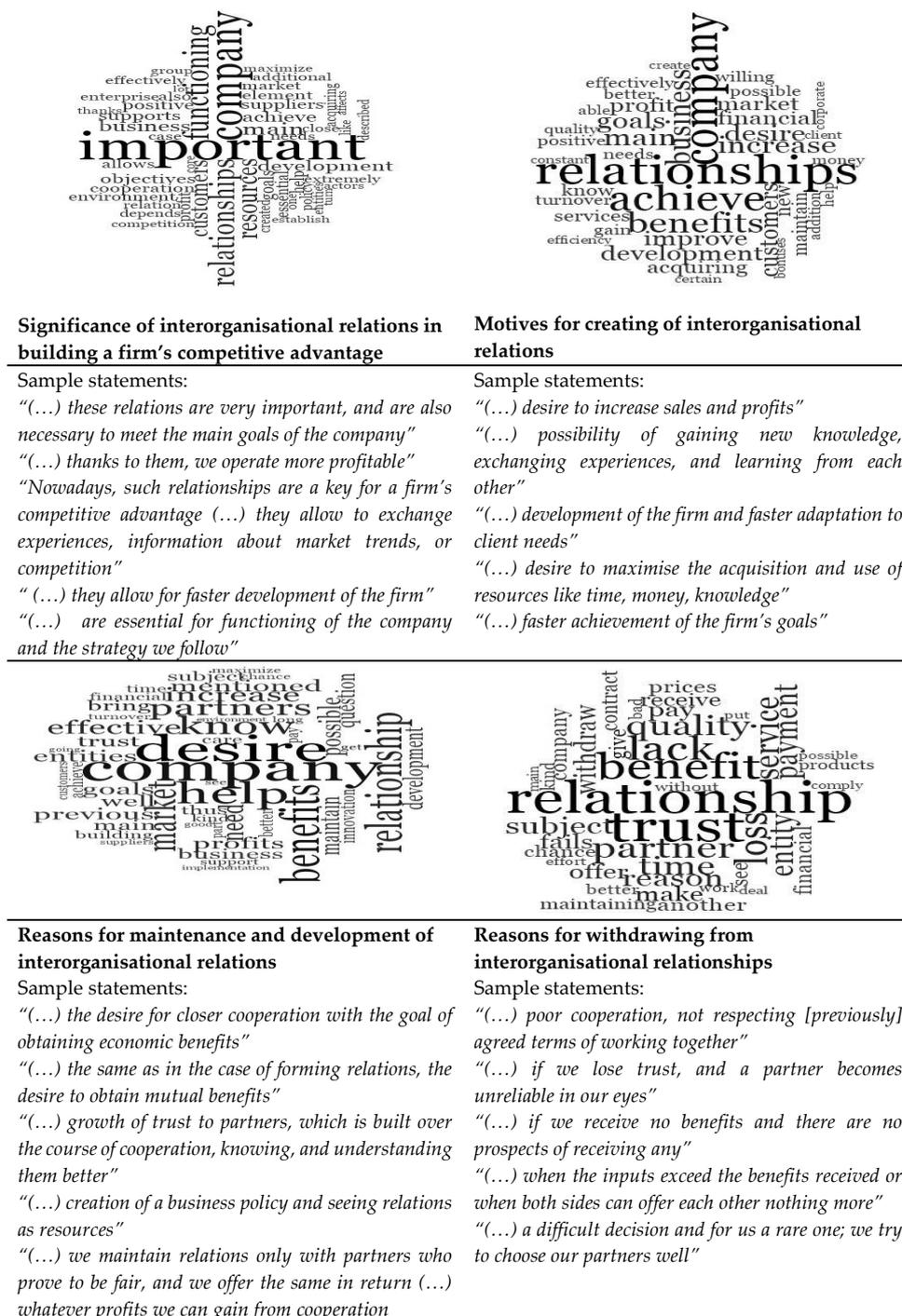


Figure 1. Word clouds and managers' sample statements.

Interorganisational relations are an important resource for the companies studied. The respondents emphasised above all the significance of relationships with their clients and suppliers, which to a large extent determine the development of the company and any competitive advantage that it may achieve. Some of the managers also appreciate relations with other partners (e.g., R&D organisations, financial institutions, or competitors), pointing to the opportunities to share knowledge and experience. These managers show high awareness of the significance of interorganisational relations in achieving competitive advantage, which has also been demonstrated by other researchers (e.g., Franco et al. [26], Kobayashi [29], Jarillo [37]). Some managers also indicated that interorganisational relations support

the basic activity of the company and allow the maximisation of the firm's profits, which has also been confirmed by others (e.g., Kawa [69], Fawcett et al. [72]). On the other hand, the opinion also appeared that interorganisational relationships are important, but they are not the most important factor and play a supporting role relative to other resources, and the quality of these is the basis for effective cooperation [43].

Among the key motives for forming interorganisational relationships, managers indicated the desire to obtain returns, especially financial ones, but also the desire to gain new knowledge, exchange experience, and the opportunity to learn from each other, which may bring about the growth of competence in the company and greater innovation. Thus, they are aware of the benefits received from cooperation, as indicated in the literature (e.g., Fawcett et al. [11], Hardy et al. [66]). These potential benefits may accelerate the development of the firm and the achievement of its main goals. Existing interorganisational relationships are maintained and developed for similar reasons, whereby what was highlighted here was the development of cooperation and making the ties closer between partners because of the growth in trust [55] and working out the norms of cooperation [125]. Several respondents also indicated that the development of such relationships is inscribed in company policy, because they constitute resources for the firm that should be developed [42]. Interorganisational relationships are also maintained with the goals of getting to know the business environment better and taking advantage of opportunities that appear [76]. Breaking off and withdrawing from relationships in the studied firms occurred mainly because of the loss of trust in a partner, the absence of benefits or rising inputs, violation of the terms of cooperation, and unreliability in fulfilling contracts. A few managers also emphasised the importance of the choice of a partner so as not to have to break off relations, but rather develop them, which can bring additional benefits to the firm.

After an initial analysis of the responses, we can state that the studied managers are aware of the benefits that interorganisational relationships and cooperation can bring (even though they do not directly call this relational rent [38]). Only some of the managers see them in the category of key resources that need to be developed and expanded if they are to be the source of additional benefits [126]. Respondents also indirectly addressed the process of creation and appropriation of value [62,65], indicating that they expected benefits in proportion to contributions, or a symmetrical division of value (equal shares). An important factor in relationships between partners is trust [56,125], and the loss of this causes a break in the relationship. None of the respondents addressed network position [127] or network density [128], whereby one may presume that interorganisational relationships are perceived above all through the lens of relationships with particular groups of partners (suppliers, clients, etc.), and awareness of their interdependence is low. This is also suggested by the dominant logic of value creation being value chain logic, rather than a value network [129].

#### 4.2. Findings of the Quantitative Data

The interviewed managers were asked to express their opinion regarding four items evaluating network awareness, and six items evaluating the strategic relational orientation of the firm. I conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the scale items, and calculated the reliability and validity of individual constructs. The results are presented in Table 2.

The manager's network awareness as a latent variable is described by one factor consisting of four specified items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.821). In the case of a firm's relational strategic orientation, two factors were extracted. The first can be described as 'partners in relations' (PR), and it includes numbers and variety of partners (Cronbach's alpha = 0.849), whereas the second is described as 'partners' expectations' (PE), which includes other items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.939). All of the coefficient alpha reliabilities exceeded the accepted threshold of 0.7 [119]. Some authors [130] have suggested that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient underestimates or overestimates the scale reliability. To complement the results, I also calculated composite reliability (CR), the values of which were greater than the threshold of 0.70 [119].

**Table 2.** Factor loadings of managers' network awareness and firm's relational orientation with analysis of their reliability and validity. AVE: average variance extracted; CR: composite reliability.

	Items	Factor Loading	Reliability	Convergent Validity
A manager's network awareness (MNA)	MNA 1. Cooperation with parties in the environment is a source of additional benefits	0.750	Cronbach's alpha = 0.821 CR = 0.838	AVE = 0.567
	MNA 2. Cooperation with parties in the environment influences the competitive advantage of our company	0.876		
	MNA 3. Goals realisation and the long-term development of the firm depends on forming and maintaining interorganisational relations and the way they are used	0.792		
	MNA 4. Interorganisational relations support taking advantage of opportunities	0.854		
Strategic relational orientation of the firm (SRO)	PR SRO 1. We form relations with many parties in the environment	0.932	Cronbach's alpha = 0.849 CR = 0.838	AVE = 0.752
	SRO 2. We form relations with various parties in the environment	0.932		
	SRO 3. We know the expectations of our direct market partners (suppliers, clients, competitors, complementors)	0.913	Cronbach's alpha = 0.939 CR = 0.940	AVE = 0.796
	PE SRO 4. Our strategy considers the needs of our market partners who we cooperate with, and is based on them	0.929		
	SRO 5. Our cooperation partners' expectations are considered in our company's vision/mission	0.984		
	SRO 6. Our activity meets the needs of our market partners	0.907		

Note: Factor extraction method—principal component analysis (PCA). Rotation method—Varimax with Kaiser normalisation. Extraction of one factor for managers' network awareness, and two factors: (1) partners in relations' (PR) and (2) 'partners' expectations' (PE) were extracted for the strategic relational orientation of the firm. Rotation converged in three iterations. Total variance explained = 85.84%; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin-test of sample adequacy (KMO) = 0.732; Barlett  $\chi^2 = 237.99$  (Sig. = 0.000).

The EFA results show that all of the items have loadings greater than 0.7 on their factors, with no substantial cross-loadings. The cumulative variance of these three factors in the rotation sum of squared loadings is 85.84%, of which the eigenvalue is higher than 1. The convergent validity of the scale was confirmed by the values of factor loadings [131] as well as the average variance extracted (AVE) values, which are higher than 0.5 [121]. I calculated the square roots of average variance extracted (AVE) values to assess discriminant validity. The results, which are presented in Table 3, show that discriminant validity was also confirmed. Each construct shared more variance with its measures than with the other constructs.

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity of constructs.

Constructs	MNA	PR	PE
MNA	0.753		
PR	0.677 **	0.867	
PE	0.351 *	0.283	0.892

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Together, these results indicate that the scales exhibit satisfactory reliability and validity.

In Table 4, descriptive statistics for managers' network awareness are presented, as well as the correlation between variables. The results confirm managers' high network awareness, especially in regard to cooperation as a source of additional benefits as well as the influence of interorganisational cooperation on taking advantage of opportunities in the environment. Moreover, all of the variables positively correlate with each other.

Similarly, relational orientation, as a strategic orientation of a firm, is evaluated highly (Table 5). The respondents indicated above all the importance of the quantity and diversity of partners. Here, the majority of variables correlate positively with each other, in particular within extracted factors.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics and correlations of managers' network awareness (MNA) components.

Variables of MNA	$\bar{x}$	Sd	M	IQR	MNA1	MNA2	MNA3
MNA 1	5.70	0.89	6	1			
MNA 2	5.23	1.29	5	1	0.577 *		
MNA 3	5.11	1.37	5	1	0.368 *	0.507 *	
MNA 4	5.66	0.87	6	1	0.516 *	0.575 *	0.563 *

\* The correlation is statistically significant for  $p < 0.05$ ,  $R \geq 0.368$  is essential with min.  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\bar{x}$ —mean; Sd—standard deviation; M—median; IQR = interquartile range.

**Table 5.** Descriptive statistics and correlations of firm's strategic relational orientation (SRO) components.

Variables of SRO	$\bar{x}$	Sd	M	IQR	SRO 1	SRO 2	SRO 3	SRO 4	SRO 5
SRO 1	5.41	1.31	6	1					
SRO 2	5.28	1.29	6	1	0.772 *				
SRO 3	4.91	1.15	5	2	0.138	0.239			
SRO 4	4.83	1.08	5	2	0.215	0.281 *	0.787 *		
SRO 5	4.81	1.04	5	1	0.179	0.204	0.809 *	0.907 *	
SRO 6	4.92	1.02	5	2	0.129	0.306 *	0.791 *	0.782 *	0.784 *

\* The correlation is statistically significant for  $p < 0.05$ ;  $R \geq 0.281$  is essential with min.  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\bar{x}$ —mean; Sd—standard deviation; M—median; IQR = interquartile range.

In light of the obtained results, one may conclude that the higher a manager's network awareness, the stronger the relational strategic orientation of a company will be, manifesting itself in a greater number of relationships formed with various partners, as well as considering to a large degree their needs and expectations and satisfying them as well. To check this assumption and test the advanced

hypothesis, structural equation modelling (SEM) was used. The results are presented in Figure 2, along with the path dependence between the constructs and their attributed levels of significance, as well as the standardised parameter. The constructed model is adjusted adequately, which is shown by particular indicators, such as  $\chi^2/df$ , RMSEA, CFI, and GFI.

Analysis of the results allows confirmation of the advance hypothesis, which stated that managers' network awareness affects the relational strategic orientation of a firm. The manager's network awareness (MNA) strongly and positively influences 'partners of relations' (PR), which means that the higher a manager's network awareness, the more interorganisational relations a company will form with different partners. Most of all, MNA impacts on the selection of various partners (suppliers, clients, competitors, financial organisations, etc.) that create common value, which is then subject to appropriation [57,63]. Knowledge of the expectations of partners, considering their needs in the firm's strategy, and fulfilling them constitute the second factor of a relational orientation, which is termed here 'partners' expectations' (PE). This also depends on managers' network awareness, but much more weakly. The positive influence of MNA on PE means that the higher managers' network awareness, the more partners' expectations are included in a company's strategy. In particular, the higher this awareness in the area of obtaining mutual benefits, the greater the degree to which partners' expectations are considered in the firm's vision and mission. This can cause a rise in the effectiveness of cooperation and the endurance of the ties between partners [132,133]. As a result, managers' network awareness should be regarded as an important antecedent to a company assuming a relational orientation.

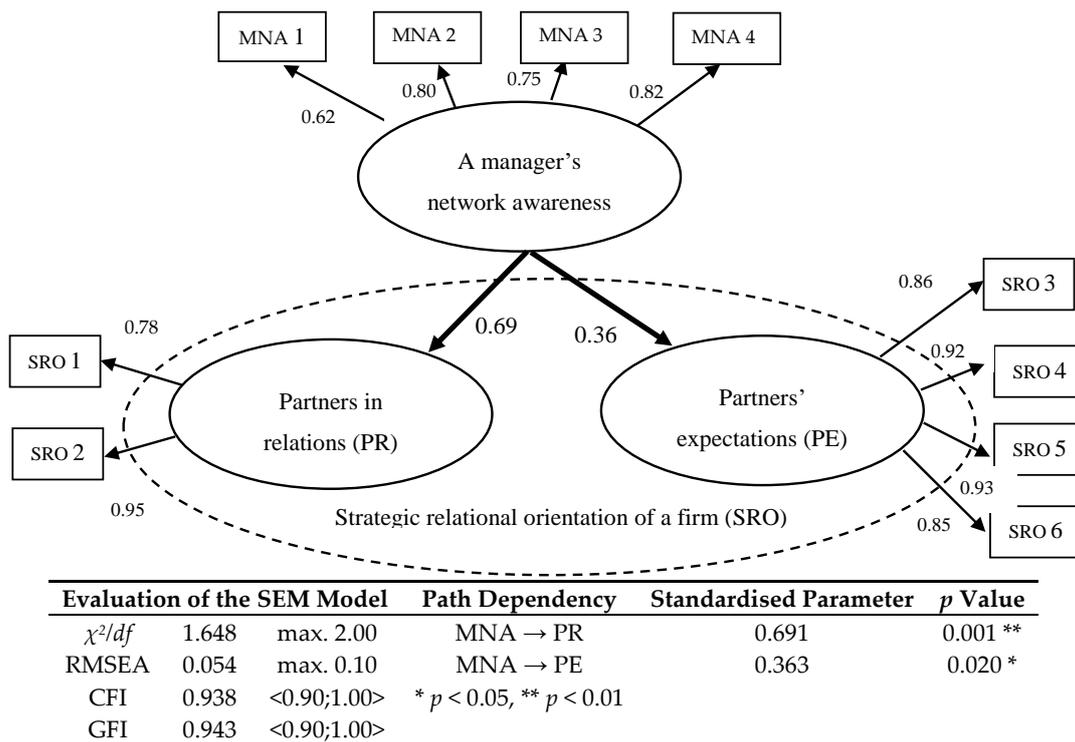


Figure 2. Structural model depicting the relationship between a managers' network awareness and the relational strategic orientation of a firm.

### 5. Conclusions

Management paradigms have evolved over time. Recently, we could observe a shift from the transaction-oriented firm to the relationship-oriented company [4]. Most managers are aware of this development, and want to fully take advantage of the benefits that result from interorganisational relations.

My findings highlight an important aspect that has been overlooked in the previous literature: the managers' network awareness and its relationship with the firm's relational orientation. Managers with greater network awareness, especially in the context of the benefits that cooperation can bring, to a greater degree regard interorganisational relationships as a key resource, understanding that contemporary competitive advantage is achieved with the support of value from interorganisational relationships [38,42]. At the same time, to a large degree, they accept a relational orientation as the strategic orientation of the firm, wanting to obtain additional economic rent, i.e., relational rent [29]. They form and maintain numerous relationships with various partners to create value and then to appropriate it, whereby an important element in the maintenance and development of relationships is trust in a partner or partners. Managers' network awareness can then be regarded as an important antecedent to the relational approach to firm strategy in the conditions of a transition and emerging economy, which is my main contribution to the literature on strategic management in the field of the relational view. The work also expands the scope of previous antecedents of strategic cooperation and competition [93,134–136], which include (1) environmental pressure (including from clients, competitors, technology, product life cycle, or institutional factors), (2) organisational antecedents at the level of individual organisations considering the motives for cooperation linked with concrete strategic choices, seeking greater efficiency or striving to improve by learning from partners, (3) antecedents at the dyad level, regarding strategic adaptation, the complementarity and similarity of resources, as well as trust in a given partner, and (4) antecedents at the network level, in which important roles are played by network leadership, social capital, and competition. Managers' network awareness, together with their perception of collaboration and the associated benefits for the firm, should be located at the level of organisational antecedents. However, every organisation may have its own individual perception of the influence of the environment and of factors that condition bilateral or network cooperation. So, this is closely linked with antecedents in the remaining groups. My findings open the way to further scientific investigation. An interesting direction for further research may well be determining the dependence between a manager's network awareness and other antecedents of interorganisational cooperation.

My research is not free from limitations. These are connected with the research method used and are apparent, among others things, by the subjectivity in the respondents' statements, differences in the amount of detail given in the answers to open questions, as well as a relatively small research sample size that was limited to only medium-sized firms operating in Poland. This may inspire further research conducted on a larger and more representative sample. A longitudinal survey could also bring more insight to the debate. Another interesting direction for further research could involve using the tools of social network analysis to identify managers' network awareness—not only in Poland, but around the world as well—the relational orientation of their firms, as well as the dependence between these as the basis for a study of social networks. Social network analysis (SNA) focuses on the structure of ties within a set of social actors, e.g., firms, and is linked to structuralism, stressing the significance of both formal and informal relations among them. Hence, it can be a useful tool for the further investigation of the issues under study. Finally, although the interviews were designed to identify the managers' network awareness in the areas of creating, maintaining, and withdrawing from interorganisational relations, and the benefits from these that affect a firm's relational strategic orientation, the proposed measures could be applied in further research conducted in companies operating in a different economic context to compare findings related to managers' perception of the significance of interorganisational relations in achieving a competitive advantage for their firm.

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