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DECIPHERING THE ARCHITECTURE OF B2B RELATIONSHIPS IN SMES INTERNATIONALIZATION: A QUALITATIVE OVERVIEW

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Abstract:
Research background: Cross-border cooperation promotes multifield relations in the global economy with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) aiming to find new markets and business networks and achieve any higher economic performance. In addition, it is more than healthy for businesspeople to use their experience to address the challenges of multi-cultural interactions and to form, develop, adjust and strengthen relationships within dynamic environments. Current studies on business-to-business (B2B) relationships and internationalization provide evidence that there is no single theoretical framework, and the analysis of the correlation between the two processes is an area of interest for future research. Thus, international relationships which take into account the general challenges of global intricacies, the cultural differences between target markets, emerge as relevant.
Purpose of the article: The paper seeks to examine managers' perception and attitude towards different facets of B2B relationships availed by SMEs in international contexts.
Methods: The research method used is the interview-based survey, a qualitative, eminently exploratory method which facilitates an investigation of presumed relationships between different constructs and, implicitly, a pertinent description of socio-human processes and phenomena.
Findings & Value added: The qualitative analysis of the collected data pointed to several main conclusions. Firstly, most of the interviewed subjects rated the dimensions related to B2B relationships as important in the internationalisation process of their SMEs. Secondly, managers consider that economic interests and overall business details prevail over socio-cultural differences between business partners and over the characteristics of the country of origin.

Keywords: business-to-business (B2B) relationships; small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); internationalization; competitiveness

JEL Classification: O32; O33

1. Introduction

The global economy has been actively promoting economic relations through cross-border cooperation by doing things like reducing customs duties, increasing operational and financial flows, decreasing transport costs, multiplying communication channels, encouraging citizens to pursue careers that take them around the world, etc. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often need to find new markets, new stakes, and especially new business networks in order to achieve superior economic performance, become more competitive, adapt intelligently to market conditions, be proactive, and dynamic in a highly competitive environment (Hilmersson, 2014; Sandberg, 2014; Koveshnikov et al., 2022). As a result, businesspeople must effectively manage the challenges of intercultural interactions, of forming, developing, adjusting, and strengthening relationships beyond the dot-com bubble (Cannone and Ughetto, 2014; Villar et al., 2014; Andrei et al., 2021).

Recent studies on relationship management and business internationalization have found that "there is no unified theoretical framework" and that the correlative analysis of the two processes needs to be a priority for future research (Vatamanescu et al., 2019, 2020, 2022a, 2022b). Despite being treated sporadically in the literature and from the perspective of culture and country of origin effect, relationship management in its various forms has been treated in a variety of contexts (Khojastehpour and Johns, 2014; Paduraru et al., 2016; Vatamanescu et al., 2022a). At this stage, internationalization is viewed as an exploratory approach to new markets with the goal of increasing the company's value through the acquisition of new capabilities, the formation of strategic partnerships with other businesses and the seizing of previously unrealized opportunities (Lin and Chaney, 2007; Khojastehpour and Jones, 2014; Alexandru et al., 2020). International relationships which take into account the difficulties of a changing global setting and the cultural differences among target audiences, is the key to success in all these endeavors (Leonidou et al., 2011; Koveshnikov et al., 2022).

Assuming these issues, the paper seeks to examine managers' perception and attitude towards different facets of business-to-business (B2B) relationships availed by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in international contexts. The research method used is the interview survey, a qualitative, eminently exploratory method which facilitates an investigation of presumed relationships between different constructs and, implicitly, a pertinent description of socio-human processes and phenomena. The main research question to be answered is: Which are the main dimensions of B2B relationships conducive to the success of SMEs internationalization?

By answering this inquiry, the paper makes significant contributions to specialized literature, providing valuable insight into how contemporary companies view and manage international relations. On the one hand, the importance of international collaborations for the success of a company is emphasized. On the other hand, different perspectives on how international collaborations can influence profitability are discussed, from the importance of knowing the policies of foreign markets to the need to focus on certain categories of products in specific areas. Moreover, the paper highlights the criteria that companies use to select foreign partners, such as competitiveness, profitability and opportunity for organizational development. Therefore, the contribution to the specialized literature is enriched, the paper offering a deeper understanding of the importance and impact of international collaborations in the context of contemporary business.

The remainder of the paper will look into the specialized literature, the research methodology and will present the main results as derived from the interviews followed by discussion and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Interactionists believe that relationships develop throughout time as a result of a continuous chain of acts and reactions. Specifically, the relational strand is explained in the following ways (Anderson and Narus, 1999; Walter et al., 2000; Brennan et al., 2011; Vatamanescu and Mitan, 2023): the interaction encompasses all forms of exchange between the parties, including monetary, product-related, informational, and social ones, the benefits of the exchange extend beyond monetary ones, the exchange revolves around a dyad in the sense that both parties involved in an exchange can act convergently or divergently toward the other entity and the exchange implies an ambivalent perspective.

Many authors (Turnbull and Valla, 1986; Sin et al., 2005a; Sweeney and Webb, 2007) have focused solely on interaction rather than action and reaction in B2B markets because the buyer may be even more active than the seller. In this kind of market, clients come in all shapes and sizes and have a wide range of preferences when it comes to the products and services they use, therefore it's important that the interactive process adhere to the principles of customizing the offers made and taking a relational perspective.

Complexity is added to the IMP Group's perspective by the fact that it distinguishes between economic and financial transactions that occur on a whim and those that are sustained via repeated encounters. One-off contacts are called episodes or occurrences and are considered as "engines that generate the energy of the relationship" (Schurr, 2007, p. 161), but not as a reliable pattern of communication between partners. During this stage, the dynamics of interaction are shaped by factors that also affect the quality of relationships: There are monetary relationships that are contingent on the amount of money exchanged and thus directly affect the relationship's coherence; there are informational relationships, such as making technical and/or commercial connections; and there are product/service-based relationships, with the links between the parties built around these elements and directly determined by the intrinsic specifications and advantages of the goods and services themselves (Brennan et al., 2011). Partners become closer through communication, clarifying their understanding of one another and their respective roles. At this juncture, B2B relationships necessitate the participation of at least two businesses, and hence, at least two interacting people (Tidstrom and Hagberg-Andersson, 2012; Vatamanescu and Mitan, 2023).

Nonetheless, the physical properties of organizations, such as their size, structure, and technological resources, are not ignored by the IMP Group's interaction model (Mandjak and Durrieu, 2000; Payne and Frow, 2005; Gupta and Sahu, 2012). The size of an organization has a direct bearing on its position of dominance or subordination within any given relationship. It's a social structure where the bigger, stronger party has more say in how things go between the two of them. The configuration of ties between companies has repercussions on the extent to which authority is centralized, procedures are standardized, and roles are divided among different departments within the various companies involved. The ways in which people at various levels of an organization's hierarchy are able to communicate with one another reflects these traits (Vatamanescu et al., 2019).

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By shifting the focus to technology resources, B2B relationships and inter-organizational partnerships can be performed in light of what each party brings to the table and how they plan to use it within the context of the commercial relationship. The scope of technology goes beyond the physical components and underlying networks upon which they rely. Intangibles like organizational strategy and firms' prior experience are also included (Payne and Frow, 2005; Gupta and Sahu, 2012; Al-Hawari et al., 2013; Vatamanescu et al, 2020a, 2020b 2022a). According to the methodology of the IMP Group, this resource also incorporates objectified intellectual capital in the form of the knowledge, personality traits, experiences, and motivations of the organization's members, all of which have an effect on the business-to-business (B2B) relationship.

For instance, the partnership as a whole reflects - through various indicators - what each party hopes to accomplish through the commercial connection. Furthermore, companies' levels of involvement with their partners differ according on their previous relational experiences. The members of the organization interact to establish, develop, and maintain the business relationship, thus bestowing onto it the relational substance. The coordinates of the interaction and the actors' motivation to interact are mapped by the personalities and life experiences of the individuals involved (Brennan et al., 2011; Vatamanescu and Dinu, 2023).

It is also important to highlight that the external environment that frames dyadic relationships emerges as a significant determinant of organizations' relational behavior. To what extent the international market structure affects the business relationship in terms of the availability and attractiveness of collaboration alternatives with other partners, and how the location of the relationship within the collaboration chain is affected by and influences the characteristics of the wider social system, with strategies and changes in a particular area of the network also affecting the relational behavior, are examples of where the external environment can be seen to have an impact.

A connection is more than the sum of its parts, and that's why it takes time for interactions to develop. This is a dynamic partnership, with the connection evolving according to the specifics of each new episode. As time goes on, the bond grows stronger, creating an environment that is ideal for continuing to work together (Lambert et al., 1998; Sin et al., 2005b; Sweeney and Webb, 2007; Andrei et al., 2021). According to the IMP Group's concept, the climate of relationships can be characterized by bipolar characteristics including power and reliance, cooperation and conflict, intimacy and departure, with the partners' shared expectations serving as the relationship's spark.

There are a number of important details to bring up while discussing good managerial connections (especially those that take place between international partners). To begin, managers must always view interactions as mutually beneficial, which necessitates taking into account the goals, potential, and expectations of all parties participating in the exchange. Second, managers must take into account the cultural variation in the effects and possibilities for updating a given set of variables describing a set of relationships. Due to the wide variety of international contexts and variables that could explain each given relationship, no single set of guidelines can be said to guarantee success in any given connection (Vatamanescu et al., 2019; Koveshnikov et al., 2022). Finally, at any given period in every connection, long or short, the fundamental qualities of the interaction up to that point may be tracked. The relationship's past reveals its essential essence and also establishes the groundwork for its potential development in the future. Prescription of the indefinite business relationship requires a thorough familiarity with the interaction's background.

3. Methodology

The research objective was to examine managers' perception and attitude towards different facets of B2B relationships in an international context. The research method used is the interview survey, a qualitative, eminently exploratory method which, according to Chelcea (2004, p. 297), facilitates an investigation of presumed relationships between different constructs and, implicitly, a pertinent description of socio-human processes and phenomena. In this context, as a research technique, the interview allows for obtaining relevant data from specific individuals and interest groups as a basis for future quantitative studies.

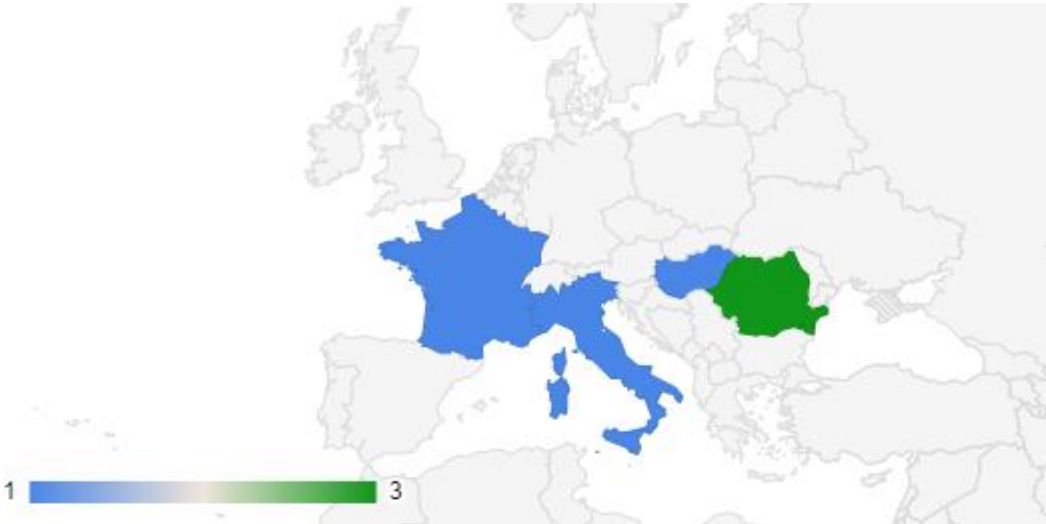
Seven subjects - managers in European SMEs in the industrial sector - were interviewed, with six out of seven stating that they have more than 100 international collaborators. As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, three of the respondents are of Romanian nationality and the other four are of Italian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, and French nationality, as follows.

Table 1: Data sample

Respondent	Age	Position
Coca	47	Sales Manager
Adrian	52	General Manager
Andrei	28	Sales Manager
Umberto	25	Sales Manager
Maia	29	Regional Sales Manager
Ivelina	27	Purchasing Manager
Alan	37	Sales Manger

Source: own processing

Figure 1: Population distribution of the population



Source: own processing

The use of the interview in this research responds to substantive requirements. Thus, the information resulting from the interview supports the exploration of the variables and the links between variables, guiding the subsequent examination of the dimensions under analysis and, subsequently, the in-depth processes. Through open-ended questions, the perceptions and attitudes of the subjects in the field under investigation about the major constructs under discussion.

The survey was based on an intensive, semi-directive interview (Ghiglione and Matalon, 1991, cited in Chelcea, 2004, p. 306), focusing on in-depth structures, with each item in the interview guide targeting one of the main dimensions of the conceptual model. At this level, it should be noted that the interview focused on clearly predefined aspects and not on the person in the exhaustiveness of his/her professional, organisational activity.

The subjects were presented with the topic of the conversation and the ideological outlines. An indicative interview guide was drawn up, based on the pre-established themes and hypotheses, but the order of the questions was flexible in order to allow significant informational structures to emerge. Thus, the interview was semi-structured and focused on the subjective experience of the respondents, operationalised through both factual and opinion questions. The questions were designed so that the entire interview lasted between 25 and 35 minutes, given that the subjects were European managers in the industrial sector, and the respondents' willingness to answer the questions also depended on the prior assumption of a pre-determined interview time. The interviews were conducted via Skype, given the geographical dispersion of the subjects (Bulgaria, Italy, France, Hungary, Romania).

Following the first seven interviews, similar positions were reiterated by the interviewees, a phenomenon called representativeness or empirical saturation. The phenomenon describes "that situation in which, after a relatively small number of interviews, or observations, the amount of new information that is still obtained from subsequent interviews (or observations) is so low that it is no longer worth the effort of continuing with further interviews" (Iliescu, 2011, p. 18). As a consequence, the information resulting from the conversations with the seven respondents was centralized and conceptually systematized.

4. Results and Discussion

The first question in the instrument focused on the interdependence between the internationalisation approach and the profitability resulting from collaborations with foreign partners ("*In your field of activity, do you think it is important for your company to collaborate with foreign organisations? Do you think that your firm's profitability depends significantly on international collaborations (import, export, purchasing, sales, distribution)?"*).

The subjects' answers on this level were unanimously confirmatory, with respondents stating that the profitability of the business is substantially dependent on the company's international activities. In this respect, Andrei (Sales Director, 28 years old, Romania) points out that "*Without these collaborations, I believe that the profitability of our company would have been very low, if not non-existent. In our company, one of the basic mottos is 'No contract without a whiff of abroad*'". While Ivelina (Purchasing Manager, 27 years old, Bulgaria) says that "*export and distribution to foreign markets are the biggest revenue earners for the company*". Similarly, Umberto (Sales Manager, 25, Italy) confirms the considerable influence of foreign collaborations on profitability, arguing that "*today, you have to be as fast as possible, more competitive in terms of price and quality and faster in terms of delivery*", and all these opportunities should be sought abroad. The manager also mentions the importance of knowing the policies of different foreign markets in managing costs efficiently, for example transport costs: "*we often resort to contracting transport companies from Poland because they have better prices than domestic companies thanks to government subsidies*". A related perspective is brought to the fore by Adrian (General Manager, 52, Romania) - "*Profitability is also influenced by the number of customers and the countries they come from. Profitability margins can be improved by concentrating on certain product categories in specific areas where that category of goods is not produced*".

Taking a more radical approach, Maia (Regional Sales Manager, 29, Hungary) says that "*if we limit ourselves to internal collaborations, we should close the business*", while Coca (Sales Director, 47, Romania) believes that: "*In the current period, refusing to work with foreign* *companies is a first step towards bankruptcy. We all like to believe in the 'made in Romania' product, but the movements in the market for industrial goods and, by extension, metallurgical products no longer allow us the luxury of staying put. We need to identify manufacturers with quality goods and services but with good prices, we need to expand our distribution beyond our borders to increase our profits. I would say that at the moment more than 70% of the company's profit comes from international collaborations, import, export, distribution, etc*.".

Focusing on the main criteria for selecting a foreign collaborator, respondents mentioned several common aspects: competitiveness, profitability and the opportunity for organisational development as a result of establishing the partnership. These components are considered by the majority of subjects as a prerequisite for the business relationship. In addition, credibility, reliability, honesty, flexibility and compatibility of the parties and good cooperation between the partners were highlighted.

"*The main criterion is to be competitive and therefore profitable. The desire to grow, to develop as a business, but also financially, leads us to opt for one collaboration over another. If we agree in terms of price, quality, payment terms, delivery, transport, what matters is professionalism and respect for the commitment of the other party*" (Coca, Sales Director, 47, Romania).

The idea of organizational development is recurrent in the respondents' statements, with Andrei (Sales Director, 28 years old, Romania) stressing that "*if establishing a link with a foreign company propels us and helps us to develop as an organisation, we don't miss the opportunity to explore a possible collaboration and, if things go well from the beginning, we invest in that business relationship as much as we can*". Competitiveness and profitability of collaboration take many interlinked forms "*a collaboration has details such as delivery time, payment method, product quality, which are strictly related to trust (...) Two other very important criteria are price and quality. Without a competitive price or without fulfilling the minimum quality conditions set by the standards in force, there is no reason to establish a collaborative relationship*" (Adrian, General Manager, 52 years old, Romania). Similarly, Maia (Regional Sales Manager, 29 years old, Hungary) credits the credibility of the parties, the growth potential of the organisation and making payments on time with a major importance, but "*all this matters only when we have common interests and collaboration helps each other to be competitive*". References to loyalty and credibility are also found in the responses of Alan (Regional Sales Manager, 37, France) and Ivelina (Purchasing Manager, 27, Bulgaria), the latter highlighting a focus on "*both product specifications and relational exchanges*".

A more nuanced perspective is offered by Umberto (Sales Manager, 25, Italy) who differentiates the selection criteria according to the type of international collaboration (buying versus selling) and according to the cultural and national dimensions of the potential partners: "*If you sell in Germany or Western Europe in general, you tend to trust the buyer from the start because of their approach and high professionalism. On the other hand, if you are selling in Turkey or South-East Europe, you wonder from the start about the honesty of the customer, you wonder if it would be better to ask for payment in advance. If you're the one buying, it's easier because the risks are more with the seller, especially when it's not a niche supplier unilaterally setting the terms of the collaboration*."

Corroborating the information resulting from the subjects' answers, the basic criterion supporting the establishment of a business relationship at international level is subsumed by the competitiveness of the organisation in terms of quality, price of products and services, quality-price ratio, payment and delivery terms. Following on from these, the quality and consistency of relational exchanges between managers stand out as defining factors, influenced in turn by the effect of the country of origin and intercultural differences.

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The third item in the interview guide aimed to investigate the importance of direct face-to-face contact between managers in different countries in order to initiate or develop international partnerships. The focus was on trade fairs, international exhibitions of reference for the metallurgical sector. Respondents unanimously confirmed the importance of face-to-face meetings between collaborators, each of them nuancing, according to their experience, the contexts and situations in which this type of interaction is most useful. In this respect, Andrei (Sales Director, 28 years old, Romania), considers that: "*For the development of the collaborative relationship between companies and meeting new potential collaborators, it is necessary to meet face to face through reciprocal visits or by taking advantage of opportunities when fairs and exhibitions are organised. Many technical things can be discussed by e-mail, but a strong collaboration is also strengthened by direct contacts between the managers of the two companies*."

Similarly, Coca (Sales Director, 47, Romania) says that: *"There are some moments when it is very important to meet potential and even existing collaborators face to face. First of all, initiating a contract is more solid when the deal is validated by shaking hands. When you see a new partner face-to-face, you're sharing both your way of being and the benefits of the organisation you come from. If you get along well on personal terms, possibly if we both have the same sense of humor, things are promising. Secondly, I think there are certain events that should not be missed in order to be visible to both existing partners and to establish new alliances. The Dusseldorf Fair is recognised in the field of metal products - if you don't go to Dusseldorf once every two years, you don't really exist."*

The example given by Coca is echoed in the arguments given by Maia (Regional Sales Manager, 29, Hungary): *"In my opinion, giving a face and a voice to a company through direct meetings is very important for gaining trust and credibility (...) For example, there is a big fair in Dusseldorf once every two years and we cannot afford to miss this event because we would miss a good opportunity to meet most of our partners - suppliers and customers, renew relationships, create new contacts, etc."*

The relevance of direct social exchanges is also supported by Adrian (General Manager, 52 years old, Romania) who mentions that: *"This kind of meeting is very important because in the competitive environment in which we operate we need to differentiate ourselves and establish a personal connection with potential collaborators. Also, this kind of personal acquaintance provides trust to both parties and facilitates further communication. Trade fairs are the best opportunity to meet potential clients because of the large number of participants and the fact that you can meet a lot of companies in a short time and at a low cost compared to the traditional method of visiting each one individually."*

The responses to item three again brought to the fore the influence of the country of origin on subjects' reporting. Thus, Umberto (Sales Manager, 25 years old, Italy) states that "*face-to-face meetings are the key to good collaboration, especially when potential partners are from Eastern countries. Before we can do business or increase the volume of transactions, we have to make sure that the client is credible*". In addition, Alan (Regional Sales Manager, 37 years old, France) sees personal contact as a form of interpersonal learning and adaptation to the extent that "*I can manage my attitude and projects better to create a pleasant business environment*". Even if she does not consider face-to-face meetings with business partners as compulsory, Ivelina (Purchasing Manager, 27, Bulgaria) stresses, however, that they are "*useful for establishing new solid collaborations and fairs and exhibitions are a good opportunity to create new contacts. There are situations where we meet our main partners directly once a year, but we keep in touch by e-mail or phone"*.

Related to the previous question, the fourth item in the interview guide focused on the respondents' comfort with working with geographically closer foreign partners. The initial inclusion of the item in the instrument aimed at highlighting issues related to the psychological (socio-cultural) distance between managers with distinct cultural dimensions. However, centralising the responses revealed a different perspective on the empirical reality. On this level, Andrei (Sales Director, 28 years old, Romania) mentions that: "*It doesn't matter so much the geographical position of the country with which you have a collaboration or in which you can be a potential collaborator. As long as the laws on trade with those countries are respected, and both companies are interested in each other's services, I don't see any real obstacles in working with a foreign partner. The only drawbacks that could affect collaboration with a company further away are higher transport costs or longer delivery times*."

Coca (Sales Director, 47, Romania) adds that "*comfort is given by the profitability of the business very often. And it is also more profitable to work with partners who are geographically closer because there are several advantages: lower transport or delivery costs, shorter delivery times, the possibility to visit us more often when small inconveniences arise*". The imperative of lower transport or delivery costs and the possibility to intervene more quickly in the event of a crisis (rejection of products due to poor quality and the need to send other products quickly) is a recurring theme in the responses of all subjects, with the comment that when "*the company is in a remote corner of the world, transport costs may be too high to make collaboration meaningful. Special cases are when a customer needs a good product in a certain country or region and transport costs are no longer restrictive, but these cases are quite rare*" (Adrian, General Manager, 52 years old, Romania).

When international collaborations with long-distance partners have a direct impact on the competitiveness and profitability of the business, geographical positioning and therefore cultural differences take second place, a point confirmed by both Alan (Regional Sales Manager, 37, France) and Maia (Regional Sales Manager, 29, Hungary), the latter stating that "*nowadays, it is no longer relevant from which part of the world a partner comes from as long as there are multiple communication channels to keep in touch effectively*". Even in this context, there is one respondent who states that "*interacting with partners in closer locations creates the conditions for better collaboration*" (Ivelina, Purchasing Manager, 27, Bulgaria), as geographical proximity brings with it cultural proximity.

When asked if they had ever stopped developing a business relationship simply because they were not personally compatible with the other organisation's manager, respondents took similar approaches. Subjects consider compatibility a relevant relational aspect, but for them, business interests take precedence. For example, Adrian (General Manager, 52 years old, Romania) states that: "*Incompatibility, even on a personal level, causes barriers in communication and a business relationship cannot develop without genuine communication, with a short response time (...) Even though business should be based only on figures and rational decisions, we are often put in borderline situations where the decision can no longer be taken only by paper calculations. At such times, personal relations with the manager of the collaborating company will be decisive*".

Similarly, Umberto (Sales Manager, 25 years old, Italy) confirms that in case of incompatibility, the business relationship "*dissolves itself (...) If one of the parties has no other solution, they will still make great efforts to continue the collaboration*", a point shared by Alan (Regional Sales Manager, 37 years old, France) - "*it is important for me to see a positive attitude from the other manager (...) If my business depends on that collaboration, I will try to get over the personal aspects*". Andrei (Sales Director, 28, Romania) points out that "*so far, I have not encountered such problems. Where there is a great interest on both sides to collaborate, some* *form of agreement is found. We just need to speak the same language - the 'language of profit*". On the same level, Maia (Regional Sales Manager, 29 years old, Hungary) highlights that in the metallurgical sector, "*terminating a business relationship due to lack of compatibility between managers is a threat to the business in general as most foreign partners are very different from us. What matters are common interests - profit, growth and development of the business, more markets - and limiting personal ego*".

The example given by Coca (Sales Director, 47, Romania) in this regard is eloquent: *"We didn't stop working together, but we were very close. It happened that the manager of an organisation with which we worked very well left for another company and the person who took his place was a very arrogant and rigid person. Although I had been working with this company for almost 7 years, there was a temptation to give up the partnership and look for another supplier. However, after several meetings with the new manager, we both came to the conclusion that we are better off together than separately. To sum up, personal and social factors are important, but the long-term benefits are essential."*

The issue of differences between managers also addressed cultural differences ("*Do you think intercultural differences are an important factor when establishing international business relationships? Can you give an example? How do you deal with situations of divergence?*"). Six out of seven respondents consider intercultural differences to be a relevant factor in building and developing business relationships. Thus, Adrian (General Manager, 52 years old, Romania) states that: "*Intercultural differences are important and can even be decisive in some situations. If you make the wrong gesture or joke at the first meeting with a potential collaborator, they may consider you rude and it will be hard to get rid of an unfavourable label, especially as we are considered inferior in many countries. To avoid such situations, it's good to find out beforehand what you should and shouldn't do, and if it's clear that you've done something wrong, it's good to clarify the situation so that the end of the discussion is still positive*."

Similarly, Umberto (Sales Manager, 25 years old, Italy) explains that situations of cultural divergence need to be handled with care because there may be situations where "*business partners will not understand the discussion, the request, the joke etc. correctly*". In this vein, Ivelina (Purchasing Manager, 27 years old, Bulgaria) mentions the ambivalence of cultural specificity, which is "either a support or a hindrance" in establishing international business relations - however, "*when partners approach differences with mutual consideration and respect, business relations are solid (...) Concessions on both sides are needed for the relationship to work*".

Illustrating from personal experience, Coca (Sales Director, 47, Romania) says: *"I remember once showing the 'OK' sign to a partner in Australia and he looked at me very badly. He told me later that in their culture it is a rude gesture. I apologised and explained the meaning of the gesture in Romania. We both laughed. Our good fortune was that we are both open, communicative people interested in working together. Probably, if we hadn't given each other a chance, if we hadn't clearly explained what bothers us or what we consider a problem, we wouldn't have ended up with almost 11 years of collaboration behind us."*

Similarly, Andrei (Sales Director, 28, Romania) specifies *"experience in different international markets helps you to accept or tolerate new situations more easily. For example, when I first worked with a German company, a manufacturer, I was annoyed by their formal, often judgmental style. Later, when I was in the situation of signing a contract with another company in Germany, my expectations were already formed, and it was easier for me to react*". Only one respondent - Maia (Regional Sales Manager, 29 years old, Hungary) - does not consider this kind of differences as an important factor when doing business internationally as "*it is a proof of business maturity to deal with divergent situations by being open to new cultural* *prototypes and positioning. If both parties are interested in a profitable collaboration, they need to harmonize with the rest*".

The next item in the interview guide focused on respondents' opinions on the main success factors for a long-term business relationship and the place of credibility of collaborators. In this respect, the subjects focused on the data inherent to the business itself, as Andrei (Sales Director, 28 years old, Romania) stated: "*Success factors are primarily related to win-win situations for both partners. Meeting payment and delivery deadlines, responding quickly to a request, finding quick solutions in exceptional cases are all basic elements. All this shows that our partners can be considered reliable and trustworthy and that it is worthwhile to continue investing in the business relationship. In my opinion, there can be no long-term relationship if we do not prove our credibility on an ongoing basis.".*

Similarly, Coca (Sales Director, 47, Romania) argues that *"success factors are many - besides the classic ones - price, product, distribution, deadlines - the credibility of the other party is essential to the success of a long-term deal. If the commitments made are respected, if we treat our partners with respect and professionalism, the business relationship works for a long time*." Such a perspective is also taken by Maia (Regional Sales Manager, 29, Hungary) who credits long-term collaboration and the added value brought to partners with a defining importance - *"always trying to be a useful resource, honest all the time, meeting deadlines and relating to the customer as a person, not just as a source of money*". In addition, Ivelina (Purchasing Manager, 27, Bulgaria) brings to the fore mutual respect, accuracy in collaboration and maintaining competitiveness, with the credibility of the parties being a potential enabler as long as there is a competitive advantage associated with the partnership. Credibility is seen as a central aspect of collaboration by Umberto (Sales Manager, 25 years old, Italy) and Adrian (General Manager, 52 years old, Romania), the latter concluding "*Credibility is the main personal factor of success in a collaboration. Without credibility, there is no possibility to develop a business, especially in the long term*".

5. Conclusions

In a global economic environment that promotes economic relations through cross-border cooperation, SMEs are often forced to find new markets and business networks to become more competitive and to adapt intelligently to market conditions. Recent studies have highlighted the lack of a unified theoretical framework for relationships development and business internationalization. This makes the correlative analysis of the two processes a priority for further research. As emerges from the interviews, international collaborations are indispensable for the profitability of their businesses, which is a way for them to effectively expand internationally. The general criteria applied in choosing a foreign partner include competitiveness, profitability and opportunities for organizational development, along with good reputation. The qualitative analysis of the collected data pointed to several main conclusions. Firstly, most of the interviewed subjects rated the dimensions related to B2B relationships as important in the internationalization process of their SMEs. Secondly, managers consider that economic interests and overall business details prevail over socio-cultural differences between business partners and over the characteristics of the country of origin. Furthermore, the results obtained indicate that international collaborations are essential to the profitability of businesses. Managers believe that such collaborations are crucial for organizational growth and development. Aspects such as competitiveness, profitability and expansion opportunities are important selection criteria in choosing foreign partners. Also, credibility, reliability, honesty, and good cooperation are considered essential aspects for a successful business relationship. In addition, most respondents admit that the profitability of their business is strongly influenced by international collaborations, and the refusal to work with foreign companies can lead to bankruptcy. The main criteria for selecting a foreign collaborator include competitiveness, profitability, and opportunities for organizational development. Despite the novel insights brought forward, this work has several limitations. The research involved only seven subjects, which may limit the generalizability of the results to European small business managers in the industry. In addition, as the subjects come from several European countries, there may be cultural and contextual differences in other places that were not included in the research. Since the study is based on interviews, they run the risk of being subjective and influenced by the subjects' own experiences and knowledge. Additionally, time limiting the interviews to 25-35 minutes may have restricted more detail and complexity of responses.

In conclusion, future research could involve a larger and more diverse sample of European SME managers from different industrial sectors to provide a more detailed insight into B2B relationships in the same international context. Furthermore, the cross-industry comparison of B2B perceptions and practices can reveal some important differences and provide a more accurate view of the different industrial context influencing B2B relationships at the international business level. At the same time, analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on the business context may have the potential to become an interesting direction for research.

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