SEEKING THE CONTENT OF THE RELATIONAL STRATEGY: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract- The competitive advantage of contemporary enterprises results from the ability to cooperate with others to obtain the relational rent. It drives the need for studies on the relational strategy of companies, as the current state of knowledge in this field is not satisfactory. Based on a literature review and its critical analysis, I proposed a conceptual model of the relational strategy. In particular, I discuss the relational approach to strategy as well as the content of the relational strategy determined by choices of the goal, the partner, interorganisational dynamic, and the way of establishing interorganisational relations.

Index Terms- relational view, strategy, interorganisational relations, value creation and appropriation, partners

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of the resource-based view to management [1], [2] has emphasised the importance of a firm's non-material resources and dynamic capabilities. This in turn has drawn researchers' attention to interorganisational relations with business partners, which form the basis of strategic actions of modern enterprises [3]-[6]. On the one hand, many studies prove that interorganisational relations are key and strategic resources of a company [7]-[9], while on the other, they emphasise the fact that organisations are not atomistic entities, but rather ones anchored in systems of relations [10], [11]. Interorganisational relations were analysed in terms of the motives of establishing relations, i.e., the creation and appropriation of value [12], [13], the development of competitive advantage [7], [8], [14], obtaining economic rent [15], [16], access to resources [17]-[19], flexibility [20], learning [21], innovativeness [22], [23], or coordination of partners' activities [24], [25]. A separate research trend refers to the types of interorganisational relations and their features [26]-[28]. Interorganisational relations were also analysed with reference to organisations or relations management [9], [29]. Although the topic of interorganisational relations has recently enjoyed immense popularity among researchers, and the published results show that the relational (network) paradigm should be adopted in management science [30], [31], there is still a scarcity of studies on the relational strategies of enterprises, arising from the relational approach to strategy. Hence, there is a cognitive gap, which this elaboration is attempting to fill. Therefore, an objective of this conceptual study is an identification of the content of a company's relational strategy.

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This paper contributes to the literature on strategic management, because the relational strategy itself has not been clarified either on the ontological or the epistemological basis. Taking a literature review and its critical analysis as the research method, I proposed components of the content of the relational strategy through the prism of the company's strategic choices. The study is organised as follows. First, I discuss the relational view (RV) in comparison with other approaches to a company strategy. Second, I determine basic strategic choices of the relational strategy of the enterprise and I present its conceptual model. I close with discussing the insights and outlining implications for theory as well as limitations and further research directions.

II. RELATIONAL VIEW: LITERATURE REVIEW FROM STRATEGY PERSPECTIVE

An enterprise strategy is an ambiguous concept, which has been caused by the development of strategic management and the resultant diversified approach to its content, based on different epistemological (scientific cognition), axiological (value theory) and methodological (methods of scientific research) assumptions. In the 1900s and 2000s, strategic issues were dominated by resource-based view (RBV) [1], [2], as influenced by a turbulent and less and less predictable environment. This complexity and dynamism of the environment of the contemporary enterprises results in numerous fleeting opportunities, which should be quickly identified and used by companies. Therefore, a strategy has been perceived through the prism of simple principles [32], [33]. However, in order to use opportunities, one needs not only simple rules, but also a redundancy of resources (creating their surplus in the area of intangible assets). Another strategy-related concept has thus emerged, referred to as the strategy based on opportunities [33]-[35]. Resources and opportunities are connected

by strategic relations. A new approach to a strategy of an enterprise has appeared based on the relational trend.

The Relational View (RV) explains and provides theoretical foundations for understanding why organisations establish and develop different structures of relations [7], [36]-[38]. The initial trend of research on RV concentrated on interorganisational cooperation [39], and then, it has evolved towards studies on strategic alliances [3], [40], partner companies [41], social networks [42], and interorganisational networks [5], [29], [38], [43]. Transaction cost economics (TCE) and resource-based view (RBV) are focal theories used to explain why firms collaborate and develop the interorganisational relations [44], but RV is also explained on the basis of other theories, including [43], 45]-[48]: industrial marketing, supply chain management, game theoretical perspective, stakeholders theory, knowledge-based view, and network organisation theory.

Generally speaking, the relational approach to a strategy is based on the will to cooperate with others in order to obtain an additional economic rent, called a relational rent, which 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" [7]. The RV indicates that interfirm cooperation in dyads and relational networks enables firms to specialise in core businesses, to outsource value-chain stages, to act quicker than rivals, and finally to achieve a sustained competitive advantage [49]. Many studies proved that building and developing interorganisational relations bring a lot of benefits. Among them, the following elements are frequently listed [8], [14], [37], [50]: cost reduction, including transaction costs; access to the partners' resources; in particular to knowledge; mutual learning and stimulation of innovativeness, including improvement and creation of new technological solutions; a more complete use of market opportunities; expansion of the scale of operations and access to new markets; greater efficiency. On the other hand, anchoring in relational systems is related to certain risks, such as [50]-[52]: loss of independence; leakage of knowledge and know-how; asymmetry in the flow of resources; appearance of opportunistic behaviours; weakening of reputation and market position; low efficiency of jointly implemented processes and targets. Therefore, strategically managed enterprises should build and develop interorganisational relations, which will allow them to obtain determined benefits and simultaneously reduce the risk of not receiving the relational rent. A question appears: how to achieve this? And here, the answer is the relational strategy.

In literature, the relational strategy is not clearly defined. There is a view that relational strategy is the result of adaptation to a selective environment, with simultaneous shaping of the environment and conditions of survival [11]. The Strategor Group [53] defines the relational strategy as one in which the existence of privileged relations established by a company with selected partners in its environment is a foreground element, and competition - a background one. Other researchers do not offer an unambiguous definition of the relational strategy as such, but rather refer to specific relations and describe them on their specific continuums [11], [28], [54] or they define the relational strategy referring to particular subjects in a relation or its nature, e.g. supply chain relational strategy [55], [56], coopetition strategy [51], [57] or cooperative strategy [58]. However, such an approach seems insufficient, as interorganisational relations can be established with various partners (suppliers, customers, competitors, complementors), and the relational strategy should take their value-creating heterogeneous portfolio into account, focusing not only on single relations, but also on their interdependence. It should be also highlighted that the portfolio structure is dynamic and it changes with time depending on the situational conditions.

Hence, taking into account the RV approach assumptions, I define the relational strategy as a holistic concept of action, covering strategic choices about the establishment of, development and withdrawal from interorganisational relations with different partners, occurring in conditions of uncertainty (restrictions, pressures and opportunities) with the aim of generating value and its appropriation, maintaining an organisation's potential for growth, and receiving a relational rent [59].

In this sense, the logic of relational strategy is close to the network approach to a strategy [5], [6], [30], but it also has some common points with other strategic views, especially with the resource-based view [1], simple rules school and strategy based on opportunities [32]-[34], positioning school [60], [61] and, considering the method of establishing relations (deliberate, emergent), also evolutionary school [62], [63].

Among the premises of the network approach to strategy, Czakon [64] mentions the fact that companies operate in an environment involving a relatively small number of actors (mainly suppliers, clients and competitors) with which they have links that change over time. These links give them access to the resources of other entities and combine the actions taken by many businesses, creating value. Distinctive competencies of a company are developed through interactions with partners, and the way of collaboration and attitude towards them becomes the distinctive element of the strategy. Business efficiency depends on the entire network, i.e., the context of co-dependency with third parties. Therefore, Czakon

believes that network strategy is "subjected to the process of creating value using resources and competencies of all members of the network, and its content is decision-making" [64, p.67]. The objective of the relational strategy, however, does not have to be only the creation of value, but also its appropriation, depending on the relationship partner or interorganisational dynamics. Moreover, in the relational approach, the analysed unit can be both dyads and individual relations, e.g. between the supplier and the recipient, as well as networks being a set of relations. The notion of the relational strategy is therefore broader than the notion of a network strategy within this approach.

Resource-based view premises, particularly the acquisition and use of knowledge, combine the relational strategy with the RBV theory. First of all, the complementariness of resources and access to resources, which are difficult to obtain individually, induce enterprises to establish external relations. Such relations enable access to the partners' resources and the use of the resultant common resource base, and sometimes, they require relation-specific investments [7], [65]. Furthermore, relations affect the use of resources, and relational competence becomes the source of competitive advantage [66]. This way, the relational approach complements the resource-based theory by emphasising the importance of external relational resources as the source of competitive advantage and the creation of value. It should also be added that the necessity of an organisation's internal competences being supplemented with as many external relations as possible is a consequence of the modern conditions of competition and it constitutes the basic assumption formulated in the concept of strategic management as a "portfolio of relations" supplementing the concepts of the "business portfolio" and the "portfolio of abilities" [67].

The common point with the position approach is tightness of positions manifested in strengthening of the market position of the partners in comparison to other entities in the environment, including competitors, through supporting or lobbying [11]. Seeking external relations additionally highlights the importance of the environment as a source of competitive advantage. In the environment, which is highly uncertain and unstructured, enterprises enter into the cooperation relation more frequently, agreeing to certain limitations to their independence.

Defining simple rules of the external growth of an organisation based on opportunities combines the relational approach to strategy with the simple rules school and opportunity-based concept [32], [34]. This in turn is linked to the evolutionary approach to strategy [63], [68]. On the one hand, interorganisational relations may be established in a synoptic way, i.e. purposeful and planned, while on the other – in an emergent one (incremental), occurring in the course of activities, or experimenting in search of the most efficient way of organisation growth.

Therefore, the relational strategy combines various approaches and looks on the strategy of organisations. It is based on the willingness to cooperate with others to obtain the relational rent, simultaneously taking the size and diversity of relations with other entities in the environment into account. However, here an issue appears: what is the content of the relational strategy in the context of strategic choices to be able to create it efficiently and achieve the intended benefits through its implementation.

Undertaking an attempt to answer the question above, a conceptual model taking strategic choices essential for the relational strategy of an enterprise into account was presented further in the article.

III. CONTENT OF THE RELATIONAL STRATEGY: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The Relational View necessitates studies on the value creation and its appropriation, which determines the objectives of creating particular interorganisational relations, and thus the relational strategy. Hence, the first strategic choice is the determination of the purpose of the relational strategy by choosing the logic to create value and the mechanisms of its appropriation.

Value creating processes are understood differently [69]. This is because the value represents different concepts for various stakeholders. An organisation that attempts to meet its investor's and stakeholder's expectations functions both as a customer and a supplier; therefore, the motives for value creation might be different, often contradictory [70]. From the relational perspective, two fundamental value-creating logics are distinguished: value chain logic and value network logic [71][1]. The first one refers to the concept of the economic path, including the set of economic entities cooperating with one another to a different extent, being suppliers, recipients and distributors for one another. Each participant of the path affects the shape of the value chain of other enterprises in the sector; moreover, each enterprise is a link of a broader value chain, but it also creates an internal chain on its own. The fundamental purpose is to create value for the purchaser, assuming that the value will exceed the costs incurred [72]. In the perspective of chain interdependence, the established and maintained relations have a transactional nature and their basis is the transfer of products and/or services with a

[1] The authors additionally distinguished one more logic, the so called value shop within which value is created in the process of solving specific individual problems of the customer and which results in a high degree of chain and network interdependence [71].

specified value.

On the other hand, the value network logic focuses on creating value through the cooperation of an enterprise, customers (recipients), suppliers, complementors and competitors, which brings benefits to all of them [64], [73]. The cooperating entities are interdependent and the degree and scope of this interdependence depends on the mutual interaction force of the parties, engagement or mutual learning. Therefore, interdependence in the value network is based on cooperation relations [37], [39], and their bases are exchange, engagement and mutuality.

The value-creating process should be completed with a phenomenon of possible value destruction, being a result of inefficient interaction [74].

Firms do business with each other to create a common value, which then is appropriated. Division of value may be proportional according to the initial contribution of the partners, symmetrical (equal share in benefits) or asymmetrical where one partner appropriates a value greater than their contribution. Furthermore, appropriation in accordance with the value network logic can be perceived through the prism of value intercepted by an enterprise, by suppliers, by complementors, by recipients and value intercepted by competitors [64]. Asymmetry in the division of value is related to intentional, direct and active efforts of the parties of the relation to intercept value [75]; however, the proportions and principles of division strongly affect the durability of the relation [17]. The key issues in the appropriation of value are appropriation mechanisms. There is a sort of a managerial dilemma – protection through isolation, or orientation to value maximisation [75]. Protecting the generated value by intellectual property rights, contractual clauses or tacit knowledge [76] does not bring economic rent and it is more focused on reducing losses [64]. Therefore, instead of protecting the created value, the appropriation can be made by maximising it through the control of the dissemination of innovations, increasing the speed of their commercialisation, reconfiguring the resource base and increasing the mobility of knowledge [12], [75].

The creation process as well as value appropriation should not be considered separately, as these activities overlap and are strongly related to one another [70]. Therefore, firms should seek an appropriate balance between them that would ensure their competitive advantage, which becomes a purpose of the relational strategy.

The second strategic choice determining the content of the relational strategy is the partner of the relations. Interorganisational relations may be established with a variety of partners. They may include: suppliers, clients, competitors, R&D institutions, financial, public and social institutions, national and local communities, an others. According to the logic of a value network, we can divide them into four groups: suppliers, customers, competitors and complementors [46]. All of them are market stakeholders who carry out value-creating activities and consume their results. Due to their nature, we can also divide these partners into competitive (competitors) and non-competitive (others) partners. The key decision here is to select the proper partner, as on the one hand – they determine efficiency and stability of long-term cooperation [77], and on the other – if the partner is not right, they may destabilise the interorganisational cooperation process. Therefore, the partner predetermines the ability to generate a relational advantage [78].

In literature, there is an agreement concerning the significance [77], [79] of the process of selecting the cooperation partners, its multifaceted nature and the necessity of its conscious and deliberate performance [78]; however, there are insufficient elaborations on the partner selection criteria. It results from the uniqueness and complexity of the interorganisational relations and multifaceted diversity of potential partners, which impedes or prevents the creation of a list of universal selection factors.

From the RV perspective, there is usually a need of (1) technological alignment (i.e. technical capability, resource complementarity, and overlapping knowledge bases), (2) strategic alignment (i.e. motivation correspondence and goal correspondence), and (3) relational alignment (i.e. compatible cultures, propensity to change, long-term orientation) [80]. Trust is also an important factor [57], [79]. In general, a potential partner has to fit a firm's needs in various dimensions, related to: tasks, learning, risk, or the relational aspect. However, the fit is not necessarily symmetrical. Potential partners may not share the same interests or views on collaboration [81], so the relationships between partners can be dominated by one of the partners, or may be peer-to-peer relations, wherein all of the partners have similar bargaining power [82]. The character of these relationships depends not only on the objective of the relational strategy and choice of partners, but also on the interorganisational dynamic, which is the third key strategic choice of the company.

Considering the interorganisational behaviour of firms at competitive markets, the following four types of cross-organisational dynamics can be distinguished: coexistence, competition, cooperation and coopetition [83]. Of these four types, only two (cooperation and coopetition) are based on collaboration, including the convergence of interests, and are the source of the relational rent. Cooperation is a kind of collaboration with non-competitive partners, while coopetition is a kind of collaboration with competitive partners by which simultaneous cooperation and competition between enterprises is implied [81]. In general, the need for cooperation and

coopetition may be explained by such conditions as: globalisation, shortening life cycles of technologies and products, deeper and faster changes in the environment and its high uncertainty, shortage of resources, pressure on innovation and efficiency of performance [20], [37], [39], [50]. Many studies [18], [44], [51], [84] proved that cooperation and coopetition bring better collective and individual results and allow companies to gain a competitive advantage [7], [28]. Therefore, the relational strategy should focus on cooperation and coopetition as interorganisational behaviours.

Interorganisational relations may be established in a premeditated, previously planned and arranged way, or emerge in the course of operations as a result of identified and used opportunities, which corresponds to the formation of deliberate or emergent strategies [85]. That is why the way how interorganisational relations are establishing seems to be the fourth important strategic choice within the relational strategy content.

According to the deliberate view, the interorganisational relations are built and developed rationally based on predicting a competitive advantage from the relations with different partners by analysing the partners' resources and capabilities alongside value creation and appropriation possibilities [86]. The ability to perceive and manage opportunities for collaborating with different partners is, thus, held and passed on, first and foremost, by executives [87]. Support for such notions can be found in the strategic alliance literature [3], [67], [79]. On the other side, perceiving the interorganisational relations as an emergent process, they are formed through spontaneous acts and without certain prearticulated intentions [76]. Managers are consequently assigned the task to react and respond to unintended opportunities and challenges arising in the interorganisational interactions [88]. Emergent features, such as self-interest and opportunism of organisations, as well as a complexity and volatility of the environment, influence the collaboration and provide insights into the dynamic nature of forming relations [86].



Fig. 1: Conceptual model of the relational strategy

The relational strategy, due to the purposefulness of the selection of the interorganisational relation portfolio, should be shaped in a conscious and synoptic manner. However, it does not mean that relations created emergently cannot exist. Frequently, they result from arising opportunities, the use of which allows the establishment of new or the development of existing relations. These four fundamental strategic choices constitute the content of the relational strategy, which was illustrated in the form of a conceptual model in Fig. 1. The content of the relational strategy consists of choices concerning: (1) the goal, (2) the partner, (3) interorganisational dynamic, and (4) the way of establishing interorganisational relations. It should be also highlighted that these choices are not made in isolation, but instead they are closely connected to one another and interdependent, creating a portfolio of interorganisational relations, which allow the enterprise to achieve benefits resulting from cooperation and to obtain the relational rent. In this approach, the relational strategy constitutes the foundation for the development of an enterprise and it affects further product and market choices.

CONCLUSION

Strategic management evolves, and consequently, competition for the value resulting from interorganisational relations becomes the third pillar in the theory of strategy (after the competition for products and markets as well as for resources and competencies) [89]. This study has set out to define the relational strategy and model its content, thereby contributing to the strategic management theory. Most of all, based on the review of literature, a conceptualisation of the relational strategy of an enterprise has been performed, indicating the most fundamental elements of its content and strategic choices related to it, simultaneously developing the relational view approach [7], [8], [36]. Partner choice and the related organisational dynamics combine interorganisational relations with value creation and the appropriation theory [12], [13], but the relations

can be established in deliberate or/and emergent way, which joins strategy with evolutional theory [85].

This study is conceptual in nature, which is a kind of limitation. That is why further directions of research should

focus on an empirical verification of the relational strategy's components, using the framework I presented in this paper. Another interesting direction for future research is to attempt to identify the types of relational strategy based on the highlighted components of its content and their assessment from the perspective of company performance. A relational view is developing an approach to strategy, thereby it can be assumed that the relational strategy will continue to be explored by scholars and researchers.

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