

Perceptions of Representatives of SMEs and Intermediary Organizations Concerning Collaborative Relationships in SME Internationalization

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The present study examines collaborative relationships between representatives of Finnish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the relevant Finnish and international intermediary organizations in the context of the internationalization of Finnish SMEs into China. Collaborative relationships are approached, in particular, from the perspective of interpersonal communication and relational dialectics. An online questionnaire survey, in 2009, of representatives from both Finnish SMEs and intermediary organizations ($N = 113$) provided data for quantitative analysis using descriptive methods and exploratory factor analysis. The results showed that perceptions of collaborative relationships should be conceptualized as four-dimensional: (1) trusted relationship, (2) equal relationship, (3) regular relationship, and (4) predictable relationship. Participants in collaborative relationships give priority to the achievement of results and goals, to shared goals and objectives, and to joint commitments to working together. However, the results of the study also indicate that bipolar concepts such as independence-interdependence and private-professional shape collaborative interaction in SME internationalization.

Internationalization has become a necessity rather than a choice for many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Finland. There are approximately 200 Finnish companies operating in China, the majority of which are SMEs (see Mikkola & Pirttimäki, 2007). Interpersonal relationships are important for SMEs seeking to expand their businesses into China. Previous research shows that in Chinese markets *guanxi*, which can be understood as an “interpersonal relationship” (So & Walker, 2006) or “the process of social interaction” (Fan, 2002), helps businesses to obtain important information and to influence Chinese decision makers (Björkman & Kock, 1995). *Guanxi* can reduce business risks, provide access to markets and customers, and help with business legal problems (Ai, 2006). *Guanxi* is especially important in the case of SMEs and in the initial stages of entering the Chinese market (Yeung & Tung, 1996).

Instead of contacting the Chinese partner directly, SME internationalization is often realized within regional and local networks of authorities, research institutions, consultancy and service companies, and other intermediary organizations. These networks enable access to important national and international networks (see Sternberg, 2000). Intermediary organizations related to SME internationalization are diverse, such as financing companies, innovation and technology centers, and business agents. Further, both formal and informal relationships are emphasized in the process of SME internationalization (see Holmlund & Kock, 1998; Ojala, 2008). Consequently, the range of possible collaborative partners in SME internationalization is broad and the members in these collaborative networks typically represent the many kinds of actors in international business. This does, however, mean that the actors also have a diversity of personal and organizational objectives in SME internationalization; for example, SME representatives may primarily be aiming to develop

business operations, whereas intermediaries may be more concerned with supporting regional development. Collaborative relationships can, therefore, be seen as multicultural relationships due to their organizational and personal backgrounds—as well as the national or ethnic backgrounds of the participants.

Several political and power inequalities can exist between the participants involved in collaboration, individuals and institutional. Therefore, as Keyton and Stallworth suggest, “Group member assimilation and relationship building are more crucial and require more attention than in other types of task groups” (2003, p. 258). Expectations, appreciations, and assumptions, which can also be seen as possible sources of tension, are probably related to collaborative relationships between SME and intermediary representatives. There are, therefore, good reasons to study how the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations perceive these interpersonal relationships.

Theoretical Background: Conceptualizing Collaboration and Collaborative Relationships

Even though the concept of collaboration has been applied widely across disciplines and defined in multiple ways, some points of convergence do exist. First, the definitions tend to focus on action, as collaboration is primarily an activity. Second, collaboration refers to the relation between self and other(s). Third, collaboration is characterized by equality between participants. Fourth, the definitions emphasize collaboration as a developing and changing process with a beginning, middle, and an end. Fifth, collaboration is seen as emergent, informal, and volitional (collaborative interaction in communication scholarship reviewed by Lewis, 2006). Finally, shared goals, member interdependence, equal input by participants and shared decision making are essential to collaboration (Stallworth, 1998, cited in Keyton & Stallworth, 2003).

Collaboration is often approached as a group phenomenon and typically the definitions view the process as temporary. Also, a collaboration network can have participants from many organizations as Stohl and Walker (2002) explain:

Collaboration is the process of creating and sustaining a negotiated temporary system which spans organizational boundaries involving autonomous stakeholders with varying capabilities including resources, knowledge and expertise and which is directed toward individual goals and mutually accountable and innovative ends. (p. 240)

Stohl and Walker (2002) apply a *bona fide* group perspective to examine collaboration based on the idea that groups emerge from communication not only within the group but also across its borders. The perspective suggests that groups primarily have stable but permeable boundaries, that they are interdependent with the contexts in which they are embedded, and that they have unstable and ambiguous borders that differentiate the group from its contexts (Stohl & Walker, 2002; see also Frey, 1994, 2003). As Keyton and Stallworth (2003) see it, four key aspects locate collaboration within the *bona fide* group perspective: “(a) members from various organizations addressing a shared problem, (b) the potential imbalance of power, (c) divided membership loyalty, and (d) rotating organizational representation” (p. 239). The *bona fide* group perspective also recognizes the possible dialectical tensions among

the participants, their stakeholder organizations and their goals in collaboration (Heath & Frey, 2004).

This paper studies collaboration as interpersonal communication in a dyadic relationship instead of the group context. Furthermore, due to the complicated nature of collaboration processes, as described above, the paper uses the perspective of relational dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) to examine interpersonal communication in collaborative relationships. From this vantage point, relationships are shaped by dynamic interplays of contradictory forces, for instance integration-separation, certainty-uncertainty, and openness-closedness (Baxter, 2004a, 2004b; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). These bipolar forces do not exclude one another but are both present and mutually negating in relationships, even though one force may dominate at any particular time or situation (Montgomery, 1993). The creation and management of collaborative relationships can be seen as a complex knot of ongoing contradictory interplays in interpersonal communication, which are emergent and dynamic but also in dialogue with the social order that exists outside the immediate boundary of the dyadic (Baxter, 2004a, 2004b, 2008). By choosing the perspective of relational dialectics, I suggest that collaborative relationships are built not only on mutuality but also on individuality, not only on interdependence but also on independence, and that the management of these dialectical tensions is essential in collaborative interaction related to SME internationalization.

In addition to these bipolar forces, other factors such as differences in national and organizational cultures, levels of economic development, the regulatory environment, technological know-how, business goals, and specific communication goals and processes are possible sources of complexity in intercultural business relationships (Saatci, 2008). In order to facilitate the ideal collaboration, the participants should engage in dialogic processes, informal networks, and sharing of organizational agendas (see Heath & Frey, 2004). As collaboration typically lacks solid borders, "it is impossible to imagine that all relevant business is conducted around the collaboration meeting table" (Heath & Frey 2004, p. 204). Collaborative relationships in SME internationalization can, therefore, be seen as more complicated than many other business or task relationships.

In summary, I see that collaborative relationships are created, managed, and developed in collaborative interaction that is shaped by dialectical tensions. I argue that collaboration in SME internationalization is interpersonal, multicultural communication in which either both or all participants engage in managing dialectical tensions and work towards mutually acceptable goals.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the complex nature of collaborative relationships, the present study examines the perception of collaborative relationships in the context of SME internationalization and seeks to answer the following questions: How do the SME and intermediary representatives perceive their collaborative relationships? What do the SME and intermediary representatives see as the primary function of collaborative relationships? What characteristics do the SME and intermediary representatives consider important in their collaborative relationships?

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 113 respondents (90 men, 22 women, and 1 unreported) of various nationalities (100 Finnish, 5 Chinese, 3 Swedish, 2 Norwegian and 1 each of French, Italian, and Taiwanese) and representing both Finnish SMEs (49) and Finnish and international intermediary organizations (64). The ages of the participants ranged from 26 to 71 years ($M = 48.0$). The nationality of their collaboration partners were Finnish (71 %), Chinese (23%), and an assortment of other countries including Australia, England, Hong Kong, Norway, Sweden, and the USA (6%). Comparison of the nationalities of the respondents and their collaboration partners showed that 38% of the collaborative relationships were intercultural and 62% intra-cultural. The durations of the collaborative relationships were: less than a year (13%); 1-3 years (42%); 4-10 years (27%), and more than 10 years (18%). The ways in which the respondents had initially contacted their collaboration partner varied: through project, task, or previous work experience (41%); direct contact, a visit, or a meeting (23%); a colleague, network, or intermediary (18%); informal non-business networks, such as through studies, friends, or relatives (12%); other occasions (4%); and unspecified (2%).

Materials and Procedure

In February and March, 2009, I invited the representatives of Finnish SMEs and Finnish and international intermediary organizations to participate in a bilingual (Finnish and English) web survey. I sent direct email invitations and also placed the invitation on web pages related to the internationalization of Finnish SMEs into China.

I asked the SME representatives, prior to completing the survey, to choose one collaboration partner, who worked in an intermediary organization in Finland, China, or elsewhere and had significantly assisted their SME's internationalization into China. Likewise, I asked the intermediaries' representatives to choose an individual from a Finnish SME and to refer throughout the questionnaire to this particular collaboration partner, the individual in their answers.

I used a 25-item Collaborative Relationship Evaluation Scale (CRES) to evaluate the collaborative relationships. I based CRES upon a 7-point semantic differential scale that had two bipolar adjectives or characteristics, one at each end of the scale. The representatives were asked to choose the extent to which one or the other adjective described their collaborative relationship. For instance, the respondents were asked if they felt that their collaborative relationship was more "stable" than "changing." Cronbach's alpha for the 25-item scale was $\alpha = 0.83$. However, given the multidimensional (bipolar) nature of the semantic differential scale, the estimation of the instrument's overall internal consistency may be difficult.

In addition, the questionnaire included a structured question about the function of the collaborative relationship. Finally, I asked both SME and intermediary representatives to consider which three characteristics from a list of options they saw as most important in the

relationship with their collaboration partner. The respondents ranked their choices 1, 2, and 3, with 1 as the most important.

Analysis

I used SPSS for Windows 16.0 statistical program to compute and analyze the data and to examine the descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations), item-total correlations, and frequencies. I used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to search for items that were linked together in the SME and intermediary representatives' perceptions of their collaborative relationships. I applied EFA with the principal axis method and varimax (orthogonal) rotation to all 25 items of CRES.

Results

Evaluations of the SME-Intermediary Relationships

The SME and intermediary representatives perceived their collaborative relationships as trusted ($M = 1.65$), honest ($M = 1.66$), accepting ($M = 1.80$) and flexible ($M = 1.80$). Mean scores of these items lie clearly at one end of the bipolar scale, and the standard deviations are small ($SD = 0.72$ – 0.83). Further, the respondents perceived their partnership was more typical of their collaborative relationships than competitiveness ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.26$). The relationships were also seen as more professional than private ($M = 5.39$). However, the standard deviation value is among the highest in this bipolar statement (private – professional, $SD = 1.59$). Interesting results are also found in those bipolar statements whose mean scores are not situated at either end of the scale, but in the middle. Accordingly, neither predictability nor spontaneity ($M = 3.15$), neither inter-dependence nor independence ($M = 3.59$), neither formality nor informality ($M = 4.57$) dominate in the relationships. Similarly, neither even responsibility nor uneven responsibility ($M = 4.57$), conventionality nor uniqueness ($M = 4.57$) are more typical of collaborative relationships. All of these items also scored relatively high values in standard deviations ($SD = 1.26$ – 1.66). Table 1 presents the item-total correlations with the descriptive statistics.

The exploratory factor analysis using varimax (orthogonal) rotation revealed that 22 items of CRES loaded onto four factors, which accounted for 59.4% of the variance. Three items (bipolar statements): private-professional, formal-informal, and conventional-unique, had to be excluded from the factor analysis due to their low item reliabilities (< 0.30) and low communality values (< 0.25).

The four factors were labeled (1) trusted relationship, (2) equal relationship, (3) regular relationship, and (4) predictable relationship. Table 2 presents the factor loadings for the items. For those variables which did not exceed or approach the limit of 0.4 (see Gorsuch, 1997), I determined a suitable factor based on the highest loadings and internal consistency of the factors and their items. In the case of cross-loadings, I included only the most significant (highest) loadings in the factor model. I calculated the Cronbach's alpha for the bipolar statements which made up the particular factors. Cronbach's alpha indicated acceptable reliability for the four dimensions, ranging from $\alpha = 0.68$ to $\alpha = 0.87$.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Item/Total Correlations on Collaborative Relationships

	Bipolar statement	Mean	SD	Item/total corr.
1*	trust - distrust	1.65	0.72	0.55
	honesty - dishonesty	1.66	0.75	0.43
	acceptance - judgment	1.80	0.68	0.44
	flexibility - inflexibility	1.80	0.83	0.48
	openness - lack of openness	2.03	1.03	0.39
	mutual understanding - lack of mutual understanding	2.10	0.81	0.50
	equality - inequality	2.19	1.08	0.52
	shared goals - individual goals	2.19	1.17	0.57
	connection - separateness	2.34	1.01	0.69
	agreement - disagreement	2.35	0.81	0.52
	certain - uncertain	2.36	1.09	0.74
	permanent - temporary	2.37	1.12	0.52
	reciprocity - one-sidedness	2.58	1.28	0.58
	active - passive	2.61	1.31	0.62
	stable - changing	2.62	1.42	0.51
	close - distant	2.80	1.21	0.41
	regular - irregular	2.81	1.71	0.49
equal power - unequal power	2.88	1.27	0.37	
2**	predictability - spontaneity	3.15	1.36	0.46
	even responsibility - uneven responsibility	3.21	1.26	0.56
	interdependence - independence	3.59	1.56	0.44
	conventional - unique	3.79	1.57	-0.21
	formal - informal	4.57	1.66	-0.02
3***	private - professional	5.39	1.59	0.04
	competitiveness - partnership	5.72	1.26	-0.44

N = 113

Note

* The first characteristic is more typical of the relationship than the second (Mean = 1.0-2.9).

** Neither of the characteristics dominates in the relationship (Mean = 3.0-5.0).

***The second characteristic is more typical of the relationship than the first (Mean = 5.1-7.0).

Table 2

Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis With Varimax Rotation of Relationship Characteristics

<i>Bipolar statements</i>	<i>Factors</i>			
	<i>Factor 1: Trusted relationship</i>	<i>Factor 2: Equal relationship</i>	<i>Factor 3: Regular relationship</i>	<i>Factor 4: Predictable relationship</i>
trust - distrust	0.780	0.124	0.173	0.147
mutual understanding - lack of mutual understanding	0.725	0.032	0.057	0.405
acceptance - judgment	0.687	0.253	-0.014	0.194
partnership - competitiveness	0.666	0.190	0.177	-0.001
honesty - dishonesty	0.659	0.240	0.142	-0.028
flexibility - inflexibility	0.623	0.350	0.034	0.143
agreement - disagreement	0.393	0.091	0.202	0.368
equality - inequality	0.289	0.745	0.068	0.077
shared goals - individual goals	0.145	0.555	0.292	0.191
openness - lack of openness	0.326	0.491	0.112	0.012
equal power - unequal power	0.171	0.467	0.020	0.220
reciprocity - one-sidedness	0.128	0.465	0.204	0.465
certain - uncertain	0.313	0.446	0.405	0.386
regular - irregular	0.030	0.009	0.953	0.173
active - passive	0.075	0.425	0.634	0.219
stable - changing	0.203	-0.027	0.455	0.370
permanent - temporary	0.291	0.346	0.446	0.121
close - distant	0.270	0.336	0.436	0.019
predictability - spontaneity	0.140	0.001	0.091	0.676
even responsibility - uneven responsibility	0.106	0.317	0.083	0.575
connection - separateness	0.440	0.229	0.316	0.472
interdependence - independence	-0.050	0.279	0.254	0.428

N = 113

Note. Factor loadings > 0.390 and included in the factors and are in boldface.

Thus, the respondents' perceptions of their collaborative relationships are best conceptualized as four-dimensional: (1) trusted relationship, (2) equal relationship, (3) regular relationship, and (4) predictable relationship. The first and the strongest factor (eigenvalue = 7.82), *trusted relationship* ($\alpha = 0.87$), explained 35.5% of the variance and demonstrated good internal reliability¹. The factor includes seven items which state that trust, mutual understanding, acceptance, partnership, honesty, flexibility, and agreement are typical to this type of collaborative relationship. The second factor (eigenvalue = 2.23), *equal relationship* ($\alpha = 0.80$), which accounted for 10.2% of the variance, consists of six items that deal with equality, shared goals, openness, equal power, reciprocity, and certainty in the collaborative relationship. The third factor (eigenvalue = 1.58), *regular relationship* ($\alpha = 0.79$), explained 7.2% of the variance. The items in this factor indicate that the relationship is regular, active, stable, permanent, and close. The fourth factor (eigenvalue = 1.44), *predictable relationship* ($\alpha = 0.68$), accounted for 6.5% of the variance and consists of predictability, even responsibility, connection, and interdependence in this type of collaborative relationship.

The Primary Functions and Most Valued Characteristics of Collaborative Relationships

The results presented in Table 3 show the SME and intermediary representatives' perceptions of the function of their collaborative relationships. The data indicated that collaborative relationships serve many purposes for the participants. Almost a third of the respondents perceived the prime functions of collaboration with their current partners were equally information exchange, and planning or coordination. A third of the respondents felt that problem-solving, relationship-building or networking, as well as innovating new solutions, products, and information were the primary functions. A few of the respondents had more pragmatic perspectives, such as trading (3.5%) or funding (2.7%). The aggregate of 5.3% for other functions includes items such as product registration, administration, recruiting, assignment, or functions related to international business.

Table 4 presents the frequencies of the characteristics which respondents perceived as being among the three most important characteristics of their collaborative relationships. The frequencies showed that the respondents emphasized the importance of achievement of results and goals, mutual goals and objectives, mutual commitment to collaborating, trust, information sharing, and aiming for mutual or the public good in the collaborative relationships. By contrast, the respondents place a great deal less emphasis on expressing emotions, sharing personal issues/information, similar interests, humor, and non-business meetings.

Table 3
Functions of the Collaborative Relationships

Function	<i>f</i>	%
Information sharing	18	15.9
Planning or coordinating	18	15.9
Problem solving	13	11.5
Relationship-building or networking	13	11.5
Innovating new solutions, products or information	12	10.6
Consultation or guidance	11	9.7
Negotiation	9	8.0
Trading	4	3.5
Funding	3	2.7
Motivating, encouraging or supporting	3	2.7
Visioning	3	2.7
Other	6	5.3
Total (<i>N</i> = 113)	113	100

Table 4
Frequencies of Importance of Collaborative Relationships Characteristics

Very important		Important		Less important	
<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	
Achievement of results and goals	72	Enhancing network relations	27	Regular meetings	
Mutual goals and objectives	64	Active contact	22	Mutual favors	
Mutual commitment to collaborating	44	Flexibility and adaptability	18	Non-business meetings	
Trust	39	Mutual motivating and encouragement	15	Humor	
Information sharing	33	Joint decision making	14	Similar interests	
Aim of mutual or public good	30			Sharing personal issues and information	
				Expressing emotions	

Discussion

The present study was designed to examine the perception of the collaborative relationships and their primary functions and characteristics in the context of SME internationalization, particularly from the point of view of representatives of Finnish SMEs and intermediary organizations. The results of this study suggested several key findings. First, the CRES results provide information not only about the current collaborative relationships between representatives of Finnish SMEs and intermediary organizations but also about the value that the actors in SME internationalization attribute to these interpersonal relationships. Since the respondents were asked to evaluate the collaborative relationship with a partner who had had a significant role in the process of SME internationalization, it is likely that the results present a profile of good or successful collaboration. In a good collaborative relationship trust, mutual understanding, acceptance, flexibility, and honesty are the dominant characteristics. These relationships can be seen as true partnerships on which the SME and intermediary representatives can rely in the multiple networks of stakeholders, agents, authorities, and competitors.

The interesting aspect, however, is that even more than trust, the representatives of the SMEs and intermediary organizations seem to prioritize the achievement of results and goals, mutual goals and objectives, and mutual commitment to working together in their collaborative relationships. This aspect might be a reflection of the complexity of collaborative interaction in SME internationalization. Members are most often committed to multiple targets, including the targets of their parent organizations, and they do not necessarily all experience the same benefits. As Stohl and Walker (2002) suggest, “*When trust develops in a collaborating group is as important as whether trust develops, given the group’s composition and short-term nature*” (p. 244). Mutual goals and objectives, and mutual commitment to collaborating, may enhance the development of trust or make working together less difficult within collaborative interaction in the context of SME internationalization. Finally, that the achievement of results and goals was seen as the most important characteristic reflects that these interpersonal relationships are essentially instrumental in nature.

Second, the results supported the viability of the perspective of relational dialectics (Baxter, 2008; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) in the study of collaborative relationships. The respondents did not perceive either even responsibility or uneven responsibility and either interdependence or independence as more typical of their collaborative relationships, which indicates that a potential imbalance of responsibility and divided loyalty may be distinguishing characteristics of these relationships. This imbalance should not be seen as a negative feature of the relationship but rather a reflection that while the representatives of the SMEs and intermediary organizations are actors in their collaborative relationship they are also members of other business units such as their parent organizations. They are, therefore, influenced by the social order that exists outside the immediate boundary of the collaborative relationship. These findings offer empirical evidence to support the argument that dependence and interdependence, as much as the interplay of mutuality and individuality, shape collaborative relationships and that the management of these dialectical tensions is essential to collaborative interaction.

Third, the factors found through EFA provided insights into which attributes are linked together in the perceptions of the collaborative relationships between the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations. The representatives perceived collaborative relationships as a four-dimensional construct: (1) trusted relationship, (2) equal relationship, (3) regular relationship, and (4) predictable relationship. There were, however, three bipolar statements or dialectics which did not fit into these dimensions, private-professional, formal-informal, and conventional-unique. These need to be examined as separate items. This may indicate that perceptions of collaborative relationships as private or professional, as formal or informal, or as conventional or unique reflect a different level or perspective on relationships than the characteristics included in the factor model.

Interestingly, these dialectics in interpersonal communication seem to shape respondents' evaluations of their relationships on a larger scale. For instance, representatives of the SMEs and intermediary organizations evaluated their collaborative relationships as professional but close or as both conventional and unique. One reason for this apparent contradiction may be the different backgrounds of the collaborative relationships. For some of the respondents the creation and management of a collaborative relationship may be an activity they are required to do rather than a relationship they have voluntarily chosen to engage in, whereas they may have established other collaborative relationships on a more volitional basis. These relationships are distinguishable from the definitions, in which characteristics such as emergent, informal, and volitional are associated with collaboration (see Lewis, 2006). Furthermore, Hardy, Phillips, and Lawrence (2003) see collaboration as "a cooperative, inter-organizational relationship that is negotiated in an ongoing communicative process, and which relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control" (p. 323). Taking a different approach and applying relational dialectics theory, this paper contributes to the conceptualization of collaboration by suggesting that collaborative relationships are neither formal nor informal, neither professional nor private, but a combination of both—a dynamic interplay of these dialectical tensions in interpersonal communication. Furthermore, collaborative relationships in SME internationalization are interdependent with the context in which they are embedded, and they are inevitably influenced by market and hierarchical mechanisms.

Fourth, this study suggests that collaborative relationships in SME internationalization serve several purposes for the participants. Perceptions of the primary function of collaborative relationships were fairly evenly distributed between information sharing, planning and coordination, problem solving, relationship-building or networking, innovating new products or information, and consultation or guidance. This finding gives evidence of the complicated nature of these interpersonal relationships. Collaborative interaction has multiple objectives, including both personal and instrumental goals, which in interpersonal communication can also support each other. Developing relational ties between collaboration participants can improve the purpose for which collaboration has been undertaken (see Keyton & Stallworth, 2003).

Background information on the collaborative relationships also demonstrated that even though many of the respondents had initially contacted their collaboration partners through formal relations (such as through a project, task, or previous work), they had also used informal relationships (e.g., friends or relatives) on a considerable number of occasions. This finding is consistent with the idea that collaborations typically lack solid infrastructures

(Heath & Frey, 2004). Therefore collaboration may not be successful if SMEs and intermediaries attempt to make a definite distinction between private and professional relationships: doing so might block beneficial information or other networks.

Finally, the results indicated collaborative relationships in SME internationalization are regular and more permanent than temporary. This finding further emphasizes the importance of managing and developing interpersonal relationships in SME internationalization.

Practical Implications

This study provides valuable insights into the complexity of collaborative relationships. These relationships form a tapestry of contrasting perceptions and expectations, which from a practical perspective poses a great challenge to the interpersonal communication competence of the representatives of SMEs and intermediary organizations. First, to fulfill the instrumental goals related to collaborative interaction the representatives need to know about effective and appropriate communication, they need interpersonal communication skills, and they also need to be motivated to participate in sharing, managing and creating information, and negotiating the goals and objectives of the collaboration (for interpersonal communication competence, see e.g., Spitzberg, 2006; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Second, to achieve the long-term benefits of collaborative relationships and mutual commitments in collaborating, representatives need to know how to create and manage relationships and they need relational communication skills and motivation to develop the interpersonal relationship with their collaborative partners. Third, they need knowledge of the interaction partner and of communication processes, strategies, and context; they also need metacognitive skills of planning, controlling, and evaluating communication (for metacognitive skills as part of interpersonal communication competence, see Valkonen, 2003). Representatives need interpersonal communication skills and the motivation to manage the diversity and dialectics related to collaborative interaction. Understanding how the collaborative partners' background may influence the collaborative relationship and being able to adapt and adjust to the tensions, such as formal-informal or private-professional in interpersonal communication, will enhance the achievement of both the instrumental and personal goals of collaborative relationships in SME internationalization.

The findings of this study can provide a basis for training and developing interpersonal communication and interpersonal communication competence in the context of SME internationalization. The findings specify the communication challenges that the representatives of the SMEs and intermediary organizations face in their collaborative relationships and will help instructors to plan the contents and objectives of communication training to better respond to trainees' needs. Also I hope this research encourages representatives of the SMEs and intermediary organizations to consider their collaborative relationships, to reflect on their own behavior with their collaborative partners, and evaluate how they could further develop those relationships which have not been as successful as those examined in this study.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the useful information acquired from this study, there are also limitations and directions for future research to consider. First, a higher return rate of questionnaires would have enhanced the validity of the results. Interpretation of these results must therefore be made with a degree of caution. Second, this study may have primarily captured the perceptions of successful collaborative relationships. In order to gain a deeper understanding of collaborative relationships those relationships perceived as unsuccessful should also be studied. Third, using qualitative research methods could provide additional and more in-depth information on collaborative relationships, and also help individuals' understanding of the results of this study. Finally, this study was limited to an exploration of collaborative relationships in the context of SME internationalization. I suggest that future empirical studies examine collaborative relationships and test the Collaborative Relationship Evaluation Scale (CRES) in a variety of organizational and professional contexts. This study gave some indication that the conceptual definition of collaboration and collaborative relationships may not remain unchanged from one context to another; consequently, more research is needed to clarify this issue.

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Note

1. To ensure appropriate interpretation, I re-coded the bipolar scale "competitiveness-partnership" in a converse order ("partnership-competitiveness") for the reliability analysis. I repeated EFA with varimax rotation with the re-coded data, resulting in the same factor model.

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