Exploring the impact of demographic differences on strategic networking antecedents among Slovenian SMEs

Morić Milovanović, Bojan; Opačak Eror, Marija; Cvjetković, Matea

A scientific paper

Bojan Morić Milovanović, Ph. D.
Institute of Public Finance, Zagreb, Croatia
E-mail address: bojan.moric@ijf.hr

Marija Opačak Eror, Ph. D.
University of Zadar, Croatia
E-mail address: mopacak22@unizd.hr

Matea Cvjetković, M. Sc.
Institute of Public Finance, Zagreb, Croatia
E-mail address: matea.cvjetkovic@ijf.hr

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES ON STRATEGIC NETWORKING ANTECEDENTS AMONG SLOVENIAN SMEs

ABSTRACT

In today's globalized and interconnected world in which firms form different kinds of inter-relationships, the concept of strategic networking has emerged as a valuable factor in understanding the firm's behavior and performance. This carries significant importance for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as networks help them overcome different challenges and seize new opportunities. In the context of tangible and intangible resource scarcity, the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in strategic networks has proven to be a promising path for attaining business success. While various antecedents of strategic networking have been outlined in the literature, there is a lack of understanding of the influence of demographic variables of the individuals involved in networking activities. This research focuses on exploring the direct and moderation effects of gender, experience, education, and position on each of the strategic networking dimensions (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, and cooperation) among SMEs in Slovenia. A total of 120 SMEs operating in different industries participated in an online survey conducted in March 2020, and their answers were analyzed using linear regression techniques. The results confirmed the direct effects of gender, experience, and education on certain strategic networking dimensions, while position did not prove to have such an effect. The results additionally confirmed several moderation effects of analyzed demographic variables. These findings contribute significantly to the field, offering both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for management.

Key words: *Strategic networking, demographic differences, SME, Slovenia.*

1. Introduction

Significant changes occurring in the global environment over the recent decades have encouraged both practitioners and researchers to explore contemporary business practices extending beyond conventional market and industrial frameworks (Gulati et al., 2000). That is why the concept of strategic networking has emerged as a valuable element in understanding

the firm's behavior and performance (Thrikawala, 2011). Operating in complex and dynamic settings has motivated companies to form different kinds of inter-relationships, making strategic partnerships and networks essential constituents of modern organizational strategies (Zeffane, 1995). This holds particular importance for small and medium-sized enterprises as networks help them overcome different challenges and seize new opportunities. In the context of tangible and intangible resource scarcity, the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in strategic networks has proven to be a promising path for attaining business success (Antoldi & Cerrato, 2020). Leaning on mutual collaboration, SMEs broaden their resources, capabilities, and knowledge base, and consequently overcome their constraints. Previous studies have emphasized numerous other benefits arising from strategic networking for SMEs since it allows the exchange of information, sharing of mutual risks and costs, access to resources, and spotting opportunities for innovation (Jarillo, 1988; Madzimure, 2019; Mbanje et al., 2015; Parker, 2008), which can lead to enhanced business performance (e.g., Chung et al., 2015).

Business networks offer a more logical and identifiable perspective as they are originally formed with the intention of actors to collaborate towards shared mutual goals. Business network breadth and depth significantly relate to a firm's dynamic capabilities development, conveying the advantages of the network into business output (Jiang et al., 2020). An improved business network almost certainly leads to SME development and helps achieve sustainable performance (Abbas et al., 2019). However, different networks assume different results, i.e., the peculiarities of the network generate particular knowledge (Belso-Martínez et al., 2020). Therefore, only a certain combination of specific external knowledge and firm group structures may lead to benefits such as improved innovation processes (Belso-Martínez et al., 2020). To amplify network stability and avoid its failure, it is recommended to adhere to two principles of design: (1) to align the interests of outside network managers with member entrepreneurs and (2) to employ sanctions to "free riders" (Parker, 2008). Essentially, the problem of cooperation caused by conflicts of interest is perceived as the problem of motivation. Still, networks collapse due to a lack of communication, trust, and direct competition, that is when the goals of individual partners are not consistent with the collective goals (Yaqub, 2011).

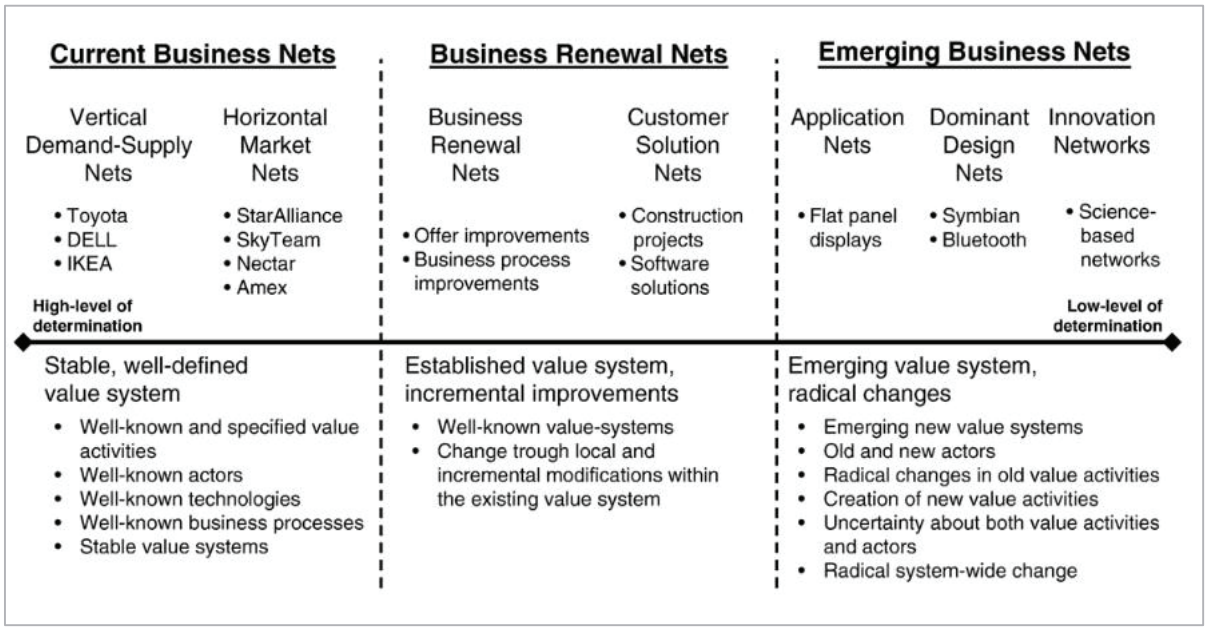
According to social capital theory, the ability of owners to effectively access resources that are beyond their direct control via networking can impact the success of their activities (Watson, 2012). Such collaboration can facilitate economies of scale in SMEs without the drawbacks associated with larger company sizes (Julien, 1993). Likewise, innovation theory underlines that networks play a crucial role in diffusing innovations (Granovetter, 1973), implying that SMEs whose owners actively engage in networking could outperform those whose owners do not (Havnes & Senneseth, 2001). However, previous studies indicated that some individuals were more prone to participating in networking activities than others (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). In a study conducted on managerial and professional employees, Forret & Dougherty (2001) examined the relationship of personal and job characteristics with involvement in networking activities inside and outside their organizations. They found that gender, socioeconomic background, self-esteem, extraversion, organizational level and position are predictors of engagement in networking activities. For example, men are more likely to engage in networking, as well as people with higher socioeconomic status and higher position in the company. Additionally, other networking differences concerning their members have been proposed, particularly regarding gender. In their literature review on entrepreneurial networks and gender differences, Hanson & Blake (2009) conclude that networking activities are infused with the norms and constraints from the local cultures, where social identity of entrepreneur shapes the nature of those links. Gender differences do exist in functioning of those networks, and they are mostly connected to the status, access to resources, and availability of opportunities. Given that networks are composed of personal motivation and past experiences;

cultural norms and household responsibilities often lead to female entrepreneurs participating in fewer networks compared to their male counterparts (Watson, 2012).
Specifically, in Slovenia, female entrepreneurs constitute around 30 % of all entrepreneurs (Pušnik et al., 2009), which represents the lowest rate in the EU (Morić Milovanović et al., 2021). Being an important source of innovation, women as entrepreneurs are important in creating new jobs, and for economic growth in general (Morić Milovanović, 2023). At the same time, they face several challenges while running their businesses, which are mostly based on gender-based obstacles, such as lower level of management skills, conflict avoidance, risk aversion, discrimination in accessing credit, and other financial constraints.
A study conducted by Morić Milovanović et al. (2021) has demonstrated that strategic networking is dependent upon personal traits of the owners/managers of SMEs (Morić Milovanović et al., 2021). In particular, gender and work experience have a positive effect on strategic networking, while education and position in the organization do not have such effects. As the study observed strategic networking as a unidimensional construct, there was a need to observe such effects on its dimensions: trust, commitment, reputation, communication, and cooperation. This study aims to fill the identified gap and is a continuation of that research. As such it aims to explore the direct and moderation effects of gender, experience, education, and position of key people in SMEs (owners, managers, directors) on five identified antecedents of strategic networking among SMEs in Slovenia. Since an individual's behavior affects the group dynamics and consequently impacts network settings, it is important to observe demographic traits and their relationship to various dimensions of networking activities (Koohborfardhaghighi & Altmann, 2016). Actors in the network use different techniques to achieve their objectives, making the network settings vibrant and complex. Observing networks concerning their actors helps in understanding many interactions and outcomes of their collaboration.
The paper is composed of five sections. After the introduction, a literature review follows which presents the hypothesis. The third section describes the research methodology, while the fourth section presents the results. The paper ends with the conclusion which summarizes the findings and compares them to previous studies; additionally providing theoretical and managerial recommendations, research limitations, and suggestions for future studies.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

Inter-organizational networks can be defined as groupings of business entities interconnected through market mechanisms (Zeffane, 1995). Networks offer faster, smarter, and more flexible solutions compared to reorganizations or downsizing and are becoming an important element in conducting entrepreneurial activities for resource-constrained small and medium-sized enterprises, allowing them to strengthen their position in the market. Business networks are created by at least three actors, to achieve numerous benefits in comparison with a single market transaction or firm (Möller et al., 2005). Based on a value creation logic, three different types of nets are recognized, each advancing different conditions and requiring different management approaches (Möller & Rajala, 2007): current business nets, business renewal nets, and emerging new business nets. Their differences are explained in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Business net classification framework

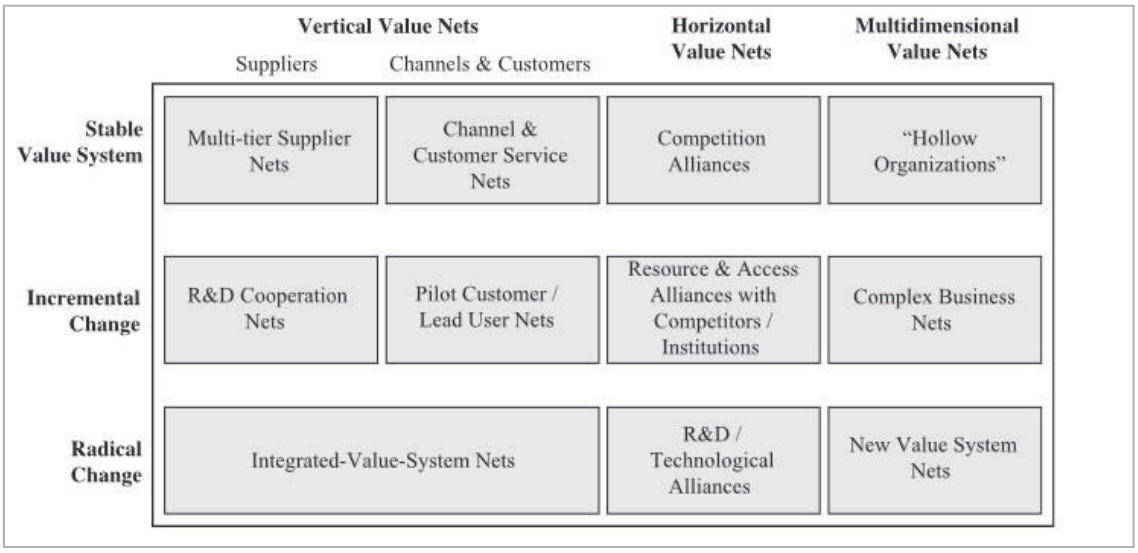


Source: K. Möller, A. Rajala (2007). ***Rise of strategic nets — New modes of value creation****, Industrial Marketing Management, vol 36, pp. 899.*

The figure illustrates a continuum of value systems (VSC), featuring three ideal value systems that are explained in detail in the lower segment of the diagram (Möller & Rajala, 2007). These systems embody different approaches to value creation and ask for diverse management tools. The upper segment of the figure outlines the main types of strategic business networks and gives examples of the formed nets. The left end of the VSC presents current business nets, which are further divided into vertical and horizontal nets. Vertical networks represent clearly explicated and comparatively stable value systems wherein the actors producing and delivering particular products are readily identifiable. Horizontal nets are created in competing environments when companies realize they possess the products, relationships, or services that, when combined, achieve a stronger competitive position in the market (Möller & Rajala, 2007). The middle of the VSC labels value systems that are already determined, but are being modified through small innovations and activities to achieve improvements. The right end represents new, emerging nets that are formed in the environment of radical changes, comprise old and new actors, and create activities of new values.

Strategic networks as organizational configurations are important and represent stable inter-organizational relationships with participating firms (Gulati et al., 2000). They may include buyer and supplier coalitions (together with distribution channels, innovation, product development, and brand networks), but also technology coalitions, or competing firms coalitions to set up industry standards (Möller & Rajala, 2007). From that aspect, they can be classified as vertical, horizontal, or multidimensional strategic nets, which is further explained in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Types of strategic nets



Source: K. Möller et al.(2005). ***Strategic business nets—their type and management****, Journal of Business Research, Vol. 58, pp. 1277.*

Vertical value networks encompass supplier networks, distribution, and consumer networks, as well as vertically integrated value structures (Möller et al., 2005). The primary objective of a vertical network is to enhance operational productivity. Horizontal value networks include various modes such as competitive alliances, alliances for accessing or developing resources and capabilities, or technological alliances (Möller et al., 2005). Multidimensional value networks (MDVNs) comprise hollow organizations that operate only at their core business and outsource the rest of the processes. Additionally, MDVNs can include other complex business networks and new value system nets. These alliances require the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of several actors involved.

In today's competitive environment, the pressure to meet expectations on a global level has led SMEs to adopt a networking strategy as a solution to withstand rival pressure, complement inadequate resources, and share business risks (Bengesi & Le Roux, 2014). Small and medium-sized enterprises are extremely important for the development of modern societies, both at the national and global levels (Jarillo, 1998). These firms are vital for promoting competitiveness and innovativeness (OECD, 2000). They represent about 99 % of all enterprises in Europe, employing around 50 % of workers (Fatoki & Odeyemi, 2010). In Slovenia, SMEs contribute to 64.45 % of value-added and 72 % of employment, which is above the European Union averages of 56.4 % and 66.6 % (European Union, 2020). This sector faces several challenges in its daily business operations, with financial barriers being the most severe (Bartlett & Bukvič, 2001). Other obstacles include external elements such as regulatory burdens and intense competition, while internally they face limited access to skilled labor, inadequate managerial skills, and a lack of information sharing. To speed up their decision-making process and create faster solutions, SMEs need to adjust their organizational processes to new market contexts and customer preferences (Pérez-Gómez et al., 2018). Strategic networking allows for quicker adaptation and transformation into flexible organizational forms.

Strategic networking has several dimensions. This research focuses on trust, commitment, reputation, communication, and cooperation. Their identification is based upon various theories: transaction cost theory (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1981), resource dependence theory (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1992), social exchange theory (Birley & Cromie, 1988), and network theory based on Swedish model (Håkansson & Johansson, 1992). Trust is considered the most important component of strategic networking that significantly contributes to its success

(Antoldi et al., 2018; Chang & Harwood, 2001). It is also a significant factor when making decisions to upgrade the relationship (Selnes, 1998). It is viewed as "anticipated cooperation" (Burt, 2001), as it has been created by repeated cooperative actions, and as such represents a vital advantage of networks (Miller et al., 2007). When it comes to moderating effects, the effect of trust on network performance is reinforced by output control mechanisms (based on outcome measurements), but it has a lower positive effect for higher levels of social and process controls (Antoldi et al., 2018).

Commitment refers to persistence in maintaining a business relationship, where there is a strong will to maximize efforts to continuously invest in that relationship (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). Commitment can be observed as instrumental, attitudinal, and temporal, depending on the cause of a relationship (Gundlach et al., 1995). Considering that commitment stems from trust, the two are closely related and have a positive effect on network performance (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The mediating role of commitment is recognized as significant when firms in strategic networks, for instance, develop innovations in a group (Fjordhammar & Roxenhall, 2017).

Playing fair continuously enhances a company's capability for future transactions (Yaqub, 2011). It develops the firm's reputation for integrity which motivates partners to maintain their commitment to the alliance. For other firms, a good reputation implies clear and uncomplicated contractual relations and the possibility of exchange based on an oral contract (Dyer, 1996). Status is a stronger predictor of network characteristics than reputation, as it is based on product quality and financial performance perceptions (Chandler et al., 2013). In a mediating role, reputation reduces opportunistic hazards for the members who perceive future alliance(s) as important (Yaqub, 2011).

Stanko et al. (2007) consider a quality communication process an impetus for networking performance and success. In addition, a reliable partner who is willing to disclose information on expenses, quality, and production is vital to mutually benefit from an alliance (Dyer, 1997). Communication regularly enables network members a faster exchange of information and better mutual understanding, to achieve common goals (Jonsson & Zineldin, 2003). Since networks are constantly exposed to changes in composition, constant communication alleviates these challenges (Kahle et al., 2018). O'Connor & Shumate (2018) in their multidimensional network approach identified the key role of strategic communication in creating, maintaining, and dissolving network ties.

As being small in size implies potentially low power and control in the market, cooperation is one of the modes to improve business performance and adaptability for SMEs (Barratt & Oliveira, 2001; Feizabadi & Alibakhshi, 2022). Cooperation enables network members to conduct their individual goals that are aligned with the common goals of the network (J. C. Anderson & Narus, 1990; Barratt & Oliveira, 2001). The major advantages of cooperation occur in terms of synergistic and complementary effects (Feizabadi & Alibakhshi, 2022; Holub, 2016). Therefore, firms should perform better in cooperation rather than individually. It is interesting to notice that the probability of survival of a strategic network depends on strategic interests (benefits, contributions, priorities) and adaptive capabilities of members, across different stages of the network life cycle (Gulati et al., 2005).

As already mentioned, this research builds on the previous study (Morić Milovanović et al., 2021), examining the nature of the relationships between personal traits and strategic networking. The results showed that gender has a positive effect on strategic networking, with males having a higher level of strategic networking activities, but women become more active in networking with the increase in education and experience. Also, the study found that experience has a positive effect on strategic networking while education and organizational position show no effect on strategic networking. Based on the recommendations for future studies, this research now analyzes the direct effects of gender, experience, education, and

position on the antecedents of strategic networking and the moderation effects of gender on experience, education, and position to strategic networking antecedents. Hence, the proposed hypotheses are as follows:
H1.1. - H1.5. Gender has a positive effect on each of the strategic networking antecedents (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, cooperation), with males having a higher level of strategic networking activities than females.
H2.1. – H2.5. Experience has a positive effect on each of the strategic networking antecedents (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, cooperation).
H3.1. – H3.5. Education has a positive effect on each of strategic networking antecedents (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, and cooperation).
H4.1. – H4.5. A position has a positive effect on each of strategic networking antecedents (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, cooperation).
H5.1. – H5.5. Relationship between work experience (within the firm) and each of the strategic networking antecedents (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, cooperation) will be moderated such that the relationship will be stronger for women then for men.
H6.1. – H6.5. A relationship between the level of education and each of the strategic networking antecedents (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, cooperation) will be moderated such that the relationship will be stronger for women then for men.
H7.1. – H7.5. A Relationship between the formal position in the firm and each of the strategic networking antecedents (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, cooperation) will be moderated such that the relationship will be stronger for men than for women.

3. Research method

3.1. Sample, Variables, and Measures

The sampling frame was drawn from the consulting database of a private firm, where 1,000 Slovenian SMEs were contacted to participate in an online questionnaire. The classification of SMEs followed the EU definition, with micro firms defined as those with fewer than 10 employees, small firms with 10 to 49 employees, and medium-sized firms with 50 to 250 employees. The online questionnaire was distributed twice within the same sample, once in February and again in March 2020. A total of 120 valid responses were collected, resulting in a response rate of 12 %. Demographically, 41.6% of respondents were male, while 58.4% were female. Regarding work experience within the same company, 1% worked less than one year, 14% had worked for one to four years, 3% for five to seven years, and 82% for over seven years. Education levels indicated that 30.8% of respondents had completed secondary school or lower, 40% held a university diploma, 19.2% held a master's/MBA diploma, and 10% held a PhD diploma. In terms of positions within their respective firms, 65.8% of respondents were firm owners, 16.6% were directors, and 17.6% were managers.
In the research model, *antecedents of strategic networking* have been observed as dependent variables and were measured via three 7-point Likert-type questions, where commitment has been assessed based on Allen and Meyer's (1990) scale; trust based on Garbarino and Johnson's (1999) scale; reputation based on Hansen et al. (2008) scale; communication was based on Sivadas and Dwyer's (2000) scale; cooperation based on Eriksson and Pesamaa's (2007) scale. The commitment had a value of a minimum of 1, maximum of 7, range of 6.00, mean of 3.83, standard deviation of 1.84, and Cronbach's α value of .96. Trust had a value of a minimum of 1, maximum of 7, range of 6.00, mean of 6.02, standard deviation of 1.12, and Cronbach's α value of .83. Reputation had value of a minimum of 3.33, maximum of 7, range of 3.67, mean of 6.01, standard deviation of .89, and Cronbach's α value of .80. Communication had a

minimum of 1, maximum of 7, range of 6.00, mean of 5.19, standard deviation of 1.28, and Cronbach's α value of .73. Cooperation had a value of minimum of 1, maximum of 7, range of 6.00, mean of 3.96, standard deviation of 1.53, and Cronbach's α value of .79.
Gender, education, and position presented independent variables in the model. *Gender* was coded as a dummy variable, with 0 representing female and 1 representing male. The variable demonstrated a minimum value of 0, a maximum of 1, a range of 1.00, a mean of 0.64, and a standard deviation of 0.48.
Experience, another independent variable that presented a person's work experience within their current firm, was coded into four groups: 1 = 'less than 1 year', 2 = '1 to 4 years', 3 = '5 to 7 years', and 4 = 'more than 7 years'. Experience showed values of minimum of 1, maximum of 4, range of 3.00, mean of 3.63, and standard deviation of .78.
Education, as another independent variable was coded as follows: 1 = 'elementary school and lower', 2 = 'secondary school', 3 = 'university diploma', 4 = 'master/MBA diploma', and 5 = 'PhD diploma'. Additionally, education was coded as 'years of schooling' to further assess the obtained results' validity. There was no statistically significant difference between the two classifications. Education exhibited values of a minimum of 1, a maximum of 5, a range of 4.00, a mean of 2.15, and a standard deviation of 1.01.
Position, also an independent variable, comprised respondents' current roles within the firm's organizational structure, and was coded into three groups: 1 = 'owner', 2 = 'director', and 3 = 'manager'. The position displayed values of a minimum of 1, a maximum of 3, a range of 2.00, a mean of 2.67, and a standard deviation of 0.86.
Control variables included *firm size* and *industry*, with firm size coded according to the EU definition of SME. Industry-level effects were arranged into eight sectors based on the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia. Firm size demonstrated values of a minimum of 1, a maximum of 3, a range of 2.00, a mean of 1.46, and a standard deviation of 0.69. Industry exhibited values of a minimum of 1, a maximum of 8, a range of 7.00, a mean of 4.76, and a standard deviation of 2.31.

3.2. Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to test direct and moderation effects between independent variables: gender, experience, education, and position, and each of the strategic networking antecedents (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, cooperation) as dependent variables. To make sure there was no presence of nonresponse and common method bias, ANOVA tests and Harman's one-factor test analysis were used. Additional tests were conducted to ensure there were no issues with multicollinearity, heteroscedasticity, and autocorrelation.

4. Results

Table 1 provides information regarding means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients of controlling, independent, and dependent variables. Correlation coefficients are rather modest with the range from -0.389 to 0.680. Statistically significant correlation coefficients between controlling, independent and dependent variables as stated in the model are observed between the following variables: firm size and position (r = -0.389), industry and communication (r = -0.200), industry and cooperation (r = -0.268), experience and trust (r = 0.373), experience and reputation (r = 0.364), experience and communication (r = 0.244), and experience and cooperation (r = 0.199).

Table 1: Means, SDs, and correlations, n = 120 (antecedents of strategic networking)

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Firm size	1.46	0.69	1.00										
2. Industry	4.76	2.31	-.140	1.00									
3. Gender	1.35	0.48	-.027	.098	1.00								
4. Experience	3.63	0.78	-.099	.128	-.138	1.00							
5. Education	2.15	1.00	.079	.166	.148	-.205*	1.00						
6. Position	2.67	0.86	-.389**	.118	-.001	.033	-.040	1.00					
7. Trust	6.02	1.12	.087	.093	-.159	.373**	-.080	-.046	1.00				
8. Commitment	3.83	1.84	.149	-.144	-.057	-.064	.179	-.061	.103	1.00			
9. Reputation	6.01	.89	-.015	.075	-.140	.364**	-.090	.045	.629**	.031	1.00		
10. Communication	5.19	1.28	.137	-.200*	-.174	.244**	.066	-.028	.470**	.361**	.492**	1.00	
11. Cooperation	3.96	1.53	.146	-.268**	-.162	.199*	-.069	-.019	.298**	.497**	.209*	.680**	1.00

Notes: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source. Authors

Table 2 provides the results of the multiple regression analysis where each model had a different antecedent of strategic networking as the dependent variable while controlling and independent variables and moderation effects are kept the same in each of the observed models. Trust is a dependent variable in Model 1, commitment in Model 2, reputation in Model 3, communication in Model 4, and the dependent variable in Model 5 is cooperation. The results show that gender has a statistically significant direct effect only on cooperation ($\beta = -0.453$, $p < 0.1$), as shown in model 5, where males have stronger cooperating activities than their female counterparts, while there is no effect on other antecedents of strategic networking. Therefore, it can be confirmed there is statistically significant evidence to support hypothesis 1.5. Experience as an independent variable has a statistically significant direct effect on trust (model 1, $\beta = 0.418$, $p < 0.01$), communication (model 4, $\beta = 0.333$, $p < 0.05$), and cooperation (model 5, $\beta = 0.334$, $p < 0.1$), thus supporting hypothesis 2.1, hypothesis 2.4, and hypothesis 2.5. Education has a statistically significant direct effect only on commitment (model 2, $\beta = 0.292$, $p < 0.1$), therefore supporting hypothesis 3.2., while position does not have a statistically significant direct effect on any of the strategic networking antecedents.

Table 2: Multiple regression analysis (secondary model, showing only β); dependent variables: antecedents of strategic networking

Variables	Model 1: Trust	Model 2: Commitment	Model 3: Reputation	Model 4: Communication	Model 5: Cooperation
Controls					
Firm size	.268*	.308	.094	.361**	.361*
Industry	.053	-.137*	.026	-.113**	-.188***
Direct effects					
Gender	.244	.393	.160	.341	.453*
Experience	.418***	-.058	.333	.333**	.334*
Education	-.074	.292*	-.044	.125	-.037
Position	.016	.020	.073	.148	.160
Moderation effects					
Gender x Experience	-.560**	-.213	-.423***	-1.098***	-1.194***
Gender x Education	-.376*	-1.131***	-.139	-.664***	-.610**
Gender x Position	.285	-.387	.186*	.405*	-.335
Model stats					
R-squared	.235***	.172***	.185***	.334***	.272***
Adj.R-squared	.172***	.105***	.119***	.279***	.213***
D-W	1.935	2.000	2.051	2.133	2.106
VIF	<2	<2	<2	<2	<2
Max Cooks	.227	.079	.177	.177	.069

Notes: *p< 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Source. Authors

When looking at the moderation effects of gender on experience and education relationships to strategic networking antecedents, results confirm that moderation relationships are stronger for women than for men. More precisely, there is statistically significant evidence to confirm that the relationship between work experience (expressed as the number of years with the firm) and trust (β = -0.560, p < 0.05), reputation (β = -0.423, p < 0.01), communication (β = -1.098, p < 0.01) and cooperation (β = -1.194, P < 0.01) is moderated as such that the relationship is stronger for women than for men. Therefore, there is enough evidence to support hypothesis 5.1, hypothesis 5.3, hypothesis 5.4, and hypothesis 5.5. Furthermore, there is statistically significant evidence to confirm that the relationship level of education and, trust (β = -0.376, p < 0.1), commitment (β = -1.131, p < 0.01), communication (β = -0.664, p < 0.01) and cooperation (β = -0.610, p < 0.05) is moderated as such that the relationship is stronger for women than for men. Therefore, there is enough evidence to support hypothesis 6.1, hypothesis 6.2, hypothesis 6.4, and hypothesis 6.5. When observing the moderation effect of gender on the relationship between position and strategic networking antecedents, there is no statistically significant evidence to confirm that the relationship is stronger for women than for men. To be more precise, there is statistically significant evidence to confirm that the relationship level of position and reputation (β = 0.186, p < 0.1), and communication (β = 0.405, p < 0.1) is moderated as such that the relationship is stronger for men rather than for women, thus supporting hypothesis 7.3 and hypothesis 7.4. Furthermore, as shown in Appendix 1, figures 1(a) – 1(d) and figures 2(a) – 2(d) provide further evidence to support the previously mentioned hypothesis related to the moderation effect gender plays on the relationship between experience, and education, and antecedents of strategic networking.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has set out to examine the direct and moderation effects of demographic traits of owners and managers: gender, experience, education, and position on five different antecedents of strategic networking (trust, commitment, reputation, communication, and cooperation) working in SMEs in Slovenia. As the literature review demonstrated, networks help SMEs overcome the common barriers they face in a relatively cost-efficient manner. Moreover, it allows for faster adaptation and formation into flexible organizational units. Since the formation of these inter-relationships is dependent on personal traits and other demographic variables, there was a need to further observe and examine their impact on strategic networking antecedents. This study aimed to fill the identified gap. The survey conducted on 120 key people working in SMEs in Slovenia, confirmed the direct effects of gender, experience, and education on certain strategic networking variables, while position did not prove to have such an effect. The results additionally confirmed several moderation effects of analyzed demographic variables. These findings offer both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for management.

From the theoretical perspective, this study shows that demographic traits of owners and managers have an effect on networking initiatives of SMEs. The results of the study showed that that gender has a statistically significant direct effect only on cooperation, where males have stronger cooperating activities than their female counterparts, thus supporting hypothesis 1.5. When comparing these results to the previous studies, it can be noted that even though the differences concerning gender have long been acknowledged among scholars in different fields, the studies observing the impact of gender on the networking activities of SMEs are inconsistent (Rho & Lee, 2018). For example, Aldrich, Reese, and Dubini (1989) concluded that female entrepreneurs are not as likely to have a higher degree of networking activity, which was further supported by a study by Cromie and Birley (1992) stating that female managers devote less time to developing network contacts. On the other hand, other scholars emphasized that women are prone to cooperating more in networks since they have better communication skills, and encourage active participation and information sharing, which is why they engage and communicate more with external partners (Johansen 2007; Jacobson, et al. 2010). Watson (2011) demonstrated that male SME owners engage in more formal networks than women. Contrarily, Mengel (2020) did not find evidence of gender differences when forming the networks, measured in terms of the number of links formed or the centrality in the network. Similar findings were presented by Forret & Dougherty (2001) who found that the only difference between men and women in five dimensions of networking behavior was that men participated in more socializing behavior than women. This difference, however, was not present when observing men and single women. Even though this study confirmed stronger cooperating activities for males, additional research is encouraged to reach more definite results.

Furthermore, the results of this study showed that experience has a statistically significant direct effect on trust, communication, and cooperation, which supports hypotheses 2.1, 2.4, and 2.5. This can be explained by the fact that when key people in SMEs work within the same company for the longer period of time, they get acquainted with the industry (and the key players within that industry), and over time they form connections with different business partners. So, it is easier for them to identify opportunities for collaboration and can leverage their knowledge to enter different networks. They also have larger network of contacts which can enhance their cooperation within networks. Experience can also improve their communication skills, as with time managers/CEOs have developed better understating how to better convey messages, listen to feedback and resolve conflicts. A somewhat opposite results were reached in a study by Watson (2011), who found there was no relationship between experience and networking. This

was explained by the fact that managers with more experience do not feel that they need to engage or seek advice from other partners as they feel confident enough to make decisions on their own. In this study, conducted on SMEs in Slovenia, the majority of participants (82%) worked in the same company for over 7 years and the results indicated that experience has a statistically significant impact on trust, communication, and cooperation dimensions of networking. Future studies are encouraged to explore this variable in more detail to reach concise conclusions.

When it comes to other hypotheses, the results of this study also showed that education has a statistically significant direct effect only on commitment, therefore supporting hypothesis 3.2., while position does not have a statistically significant direct effect on any of the strategic networking antecedents. Education provides necessary skills and knowledge to excel in a certain field of work. Educated people can also have higher career goals and expectations, and can be more persistent to succeed within their job field, to overcome obstacles and achieve their networking goals, which can affect their commitment. A somewhat similar results were reached in a study by Watson (2011) who demonstrated that education, industry, age, and size of the company are significantly connected with networking. Similarly, Shaw et al. (2008) noted that people with high levels of human capital (such as education education) also have a high level of social capital (e.g., contacts in a network). In terms of position, this study showed no statistically significant impact on any of the strategic networking antecedents, which is in contrast to the study of Michael and Yuki (1993) who found that organizational level is important for networking. As a person progresses within the organization, the expectations regarding his/her role rise in terms of acquiring new contacts, relationships, and cooperation, which is why they could be more prone to networking. As this study did not reach the same result, additional studies are needed for further clarification.

In examining the moderating effects of gender on the relationships between experience and education with strategic networking antecedents, findings indicate that these moderating relationships are stronger for women than for men. Specifically, there is statistically significant evidence confirming that the association between work experience (measured by the number of years with the firm) and trust, reputation, communication, and cooperation is moderated, showing a stronger relationship for women compared to men. This validates hypotheses 5.1, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5. Additionally, there is statistically significant evidence to confirm that the relationship between the level of education and trust, commitment, communication, and cooperation is moderated as such that the relationship is stronger for women than for men, thus supporting hypotheses 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, and 6.5. This could be explained by several reasons. For example, Moleta et al. (2023) in their study on women entrepreneurs in Brasil found out that women tend to have higher expectations regarding trust within business networks compared to the actual level of trust they perceive in these networks. In other words, women expect a higher degree of trustworthiness and reliability from their business networks than what they actually experience or perceive in reality. With higher levels of experience and education, they are more confident in engaging in networking activities (and thus manifest higher levels of trust, reputation, communication and cooperation). Moreover, Ashourizadeh & Schøtt (2013) revealed in their study that more educated entrepreneurs have larger networks than the ones with lower education level. The same study revealed that women tend to have smaller networks than men. So, even though women do not engage in networking activities as frequent as men, their level of education will still increase their levels of trust, reputation, communication, and cooperation (as a dimensions of strategic networking).

On the other hand, when examining the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between position and strategic networking antecedents, the results reveal statistically significant evidence confirming that the association between position and reputation, and communication is moderated, showing a stronger relationship for men compared to women. This supports

hypotheses 7.3 and 7.4. This could mean that men tend to promote themselves and their ideas in networking situations more frequently, leading to a stronger association between their position and reputation or communication outcomes. Moreover, there is also a difference in motivation and power between men and women (Shen & Joseph, 2020). For example, Gino et al. (2015) found that both men and women associate position with power and career advancement, but women tend to have less power-related goals and connect them more to negative outcomes. Moreover, societal norms also dictate how women and men are perceived and evaluated in leadership positions (Bullough et al., 2021). Men are expected to be more dominant in their roles, which can have an impact on their position within the network. Rothstein et al. (2021), emphasize that women and men belong to different sex-segregated networks, which can restrict the communication flow and lead to potential problems for career advancements in management for women. In their study, they confirmed that women are significantly under-represented at top levels in their organizations, and tend to belong in sex-segregated networks, which was further negatively associated with the status and power of network members - only for women, not for men.

From the practical side, this study can help key people in small and medium-sized enterprises evaluate their situation and position themselves in relation to the antecedents of strategic networking. This can help them determine where they might need to invest additional effort to increase their networking activities. Knowing that gender, experience, and education impact strategic networking antecedents can help overcome some of the identified constraints and additionally invest in networks and inter-relationships and thus gain a competitive position. Even though this study has shown that certain individuals are more likely to establish networking activities, it also points to the specific other actions that practitioners can follow to increase their networking skills. For example, investing in continuous education and professional development can enhance managers' skills, knowledge and expertise within their industry (Forret & Dougherty, 2001). This can include workshops, seminars or networking events where they can stay up to date on all the latest trends in their market, but also expand their network of contacts. Moreover, key people in SMEs should be mindful of the demographic differences that might exist when forming networks, especially when it comes to gender. Endorsing inclusive culture, building mutual trust, promoting mentorship and support and encouraging women at higher positions to participate in networking activities can bridge the gap in gender inequalities that might exist at workplace.

The study also has limitations, since it is cross-sectional in nature and thus provides a snapshot of the current state of mind of the respondents. Moreover, the results are based on the self-report data, meaning that response bias can occur. Additionally, not all potential contextual factors influencing demographic differences (internal organizational climate or culture, type of business ownership, etc.) are elaborated in this study, which is also a recommendation for future research. Additional recommendations go in the direction of conducting longitudinal research, to get a more realistic picture of the influence of demographic variables on strategic networking antecedents. An online questionnaire, as a survey tool, also has its limitations which are mostly displayed in potential technical issues with the internet or lack of digital skills of respondents.

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Appendix 1

Figure 1: Interaction effects of gender on relationship between experience and (a) trust, (b) reputation, (c) communication, and (d) cooperation

Figure 1 (a)

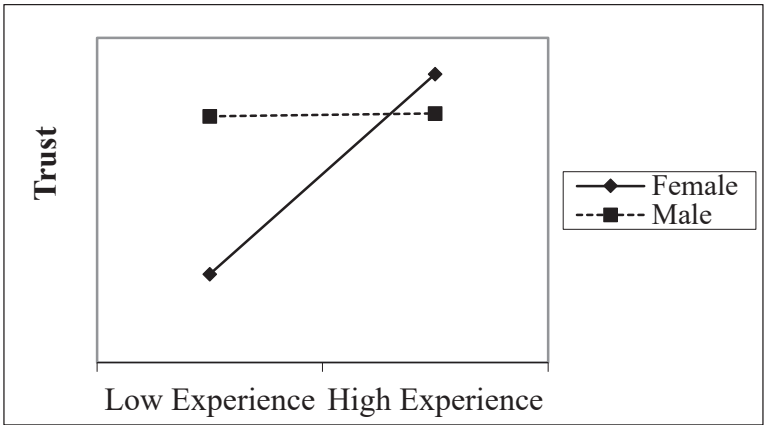

Figure 1 (b)

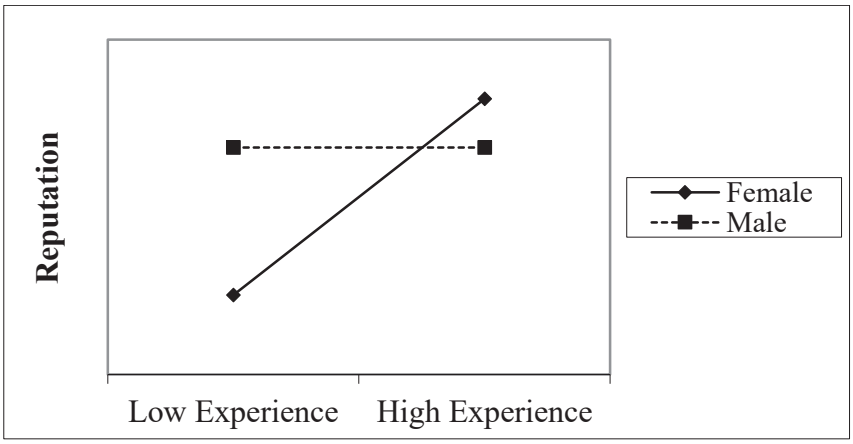

Figure 1 (c)

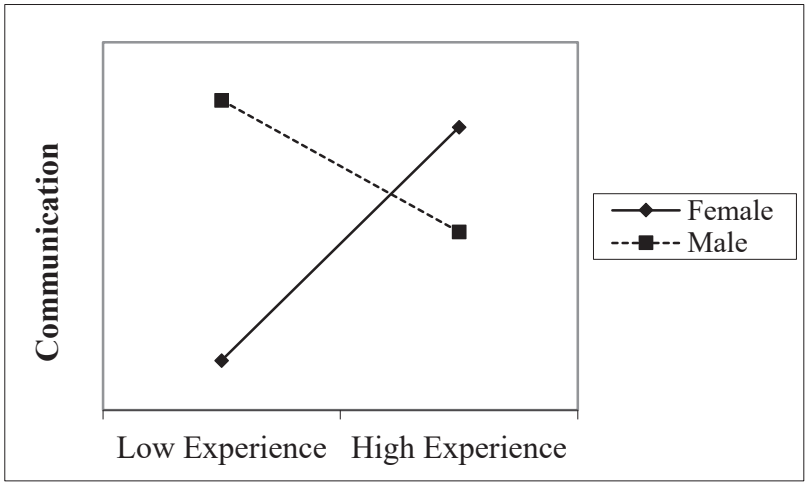

Figure 1 (d)

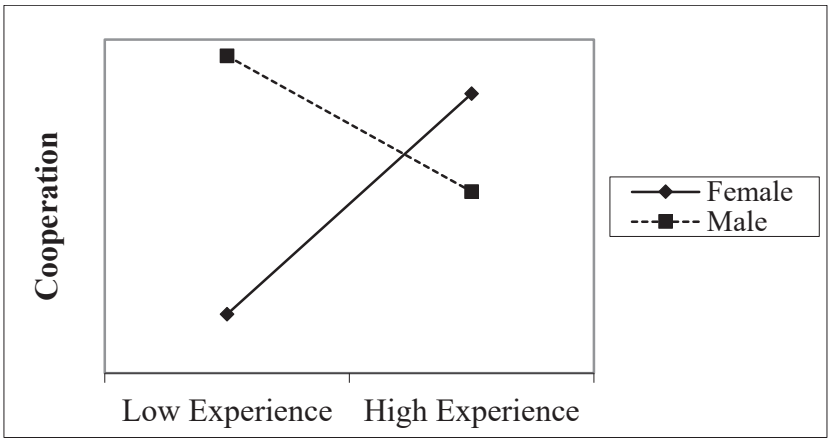

Figure 2: Interaction effects of gender on relationship between education and (a) trust, (b) commitment, (c) communication, and (d) cooperation

Figure 2 (a)

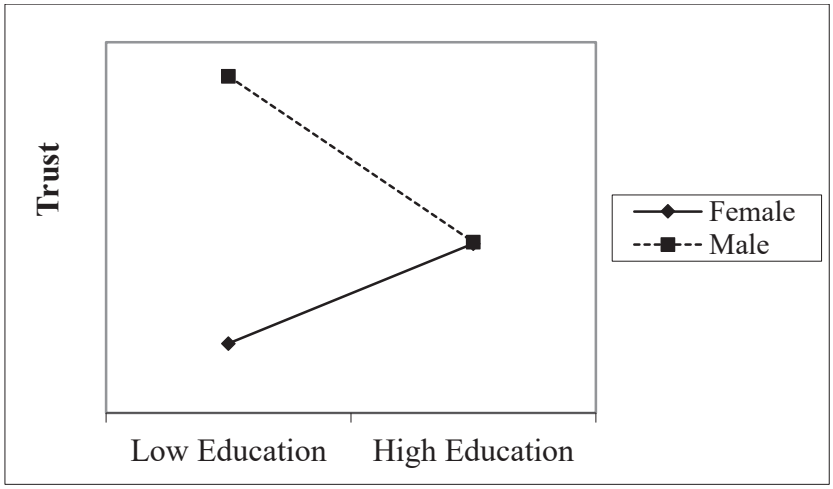

Figure 2 (b)

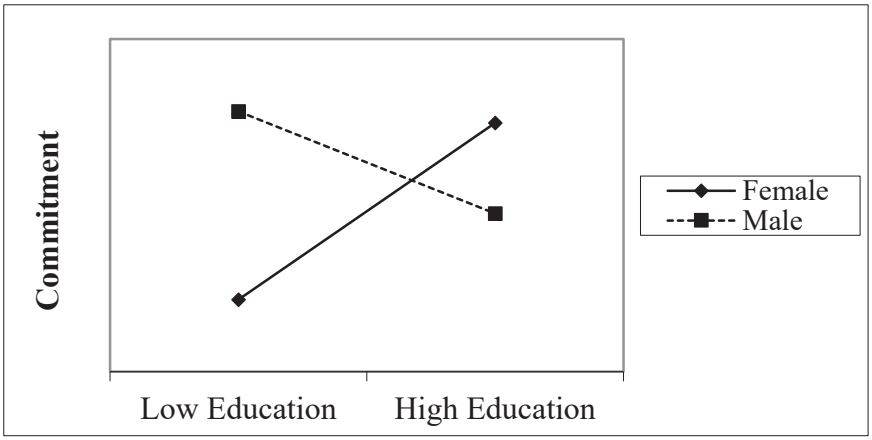

Figure 2 (c)

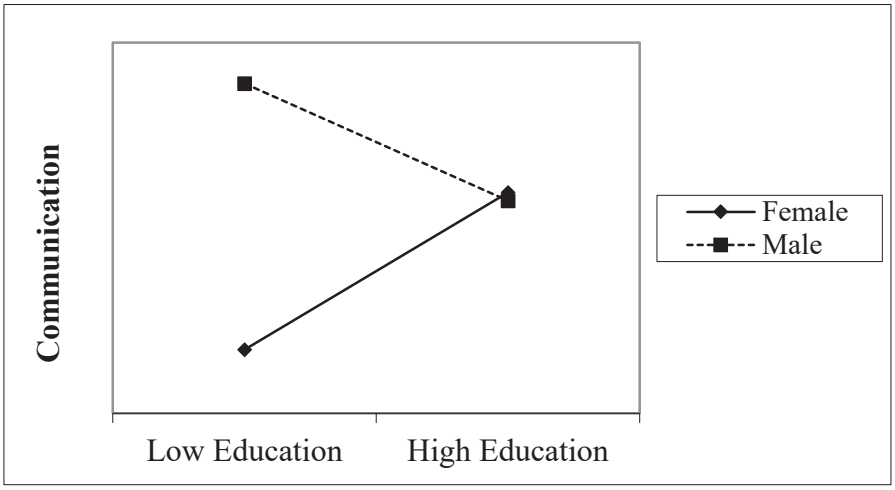

Figure 2 (d)