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Determinants of export marketing strategies of forest products companies in the context of transition — The case of Slovakia

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Abstract

Determinants of export performance have been extensively examined in the literature. Although marketing strategy is considered to be one of the major determinants of export performance, little attention has been paid to the factors affecting export marketing strategies. Direct empirical evidence pertaining to factors influencing export marketing strategies is lacking not only for developed western countries, but also for the transition countries of Europe. As a consequence of the changes that have taken place in these countries over last 17 years, the factors influencing export marketing strategies might significantly differ from the factors observed in the developed western countries. Additionally, this situation as it relates to the forest products industries specifically is still unknown. Incorporating insights from the resource-based view of the firm, market-as-network perspective and institutional theory connected by characteristics of transaction costs theory, the objective of this study was to determine deductively, and to subsequently test, the factors influencing export marketing strategies in the forest products industries in the context of Slovakia. A case study approach employing a qualitative methodology using in-depth personal interviews with individual decision makers from forest products companies was chosen to test the framework. The results suggested that generally the physical and relational resources and domestic formal institutions have the most relevant bearing on export marketing strategies. In addition, company history reveals that the years of the transition process are still having an effect.

Keywords: Marketing strategy; Export; International Trade; Forest Products; Transition economy

1. Introduction

It is commonly recognized that exporting represents an attractive means of tapping foreign market opportunities. Consequently, researchers have tended to seek out the driving forces behind the successful export concepts. Over 700 exploratory variables have been found in the literature on the determinants of export performance (Gemüden, 1991). Although export marketing strategy (EMS) is considered to be one of the major determinants of export performance (Aulakh et al., 2000; Dean et al., 2000; Hooley et al., 2001), an elaboration of EMS and its influencing factors has as yet not taken place. A few studies have, however, examined export performance and the role of export marketing strategies by identifying their influencing factors (Dhanaraj and Beamish, 2003; Morgan et al., 2004; Neill et al., 2006). These studies explicitly arrived at either external or internal factors influencing EMS. Nevertheless, this conclusion might be too narrow for several reasons. Firstly, by adhering to the normative view, the overwhelming majority of the influencing factors in the literature have been tested inductively or derived from different theoretical schools of thought (Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Langes and Montgomery, 2003). This has prompted several authors to express the need for a more coherent theoretical model (Gemüden, 1991; Leonidou et al., 2002; Zou and Stan, 1998). Second, of the small number of studies in which theoretical perspectives have been applied to determine the factors influencing EMS within the export performance framework, all have remained solely within the boundaries of one theoretical perspective. For instance, the insights of transaction cost theory (TCT) (Shoham, 1999) or resource-based view of the firm (RBV) (Dhanaraj and Beamish, 2003; Ling-Yee and Ogunmokun, 2000). Third, as none of the existing studies has

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focused on the transition countries of Europe, it remains unclear whether the factors arrived at either inductively or from the various theoretical schools of thought will have any bearing on EMS in a transition context generally, and on forest products companies in particular. The recent transition process accompanied by the liberalization, privatization, and particularly the restitution of state owned forests, represents an institutional environment which differs from that which a firm in a developed western country would encounter. After all, these economies including the Slovakian economy, have had to integrate "themselves into an international economic order that closes off options available 20 or 30 years ago" (Eichengreen and Kohl, 1998: 2). Finally, the determination and testing of factors influencing EMS is still untapped in the case of the forest products industries with past research focusing mainly on either the key characteristics of successful exporters (Eastin et al., 2004) or the marketing strategy classification (Borowski, 1996; Hansen et al., 2002; Niemelä, 1994).

Unlike inductive studies which seek general conclusions, these gaps are addressed by means of a case study and employing deductive logic. What is more, the purpose of the case study was not to prove or falsify any hypothesis, but rather to ascertain influencing factors and to test their relevance with respect to the export marketing strategies construct. Additionally, applying only one theoretical perspective on the new settings of transition economies might have equated to "committing the fallacy of assuming that constructs and theories developed" in developed western countries automatically apply in transition countries also (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006: 346). In contrast to other studies, in this case the insights of various theoretical perspectives were grouped in the manner observed in the literature on organization governance, strategic management and international business (Barney, 1986; Coles and Hesterley, 1998; Conner, 1991; Leiblein, 2003; Leiblein and Miller, 2003). In addition, "the value of including institutional factors in the corpus of mainstream economics is made clear" (Coase, 1992: 714). Thus, the incorporation of institutions has already been evidenced in the business strategy research carried out in the transition context (Hoskisson et al., 2000; Meyer and Peng, 2005).

Further applying this logic, with the aid of the characteristics of transaction cost theory (*asset specificity and exchange uncertainty*) the insights of four theoretical perspectives were combined: business studies, resource-based view of the firm, market-as-network perspective and institutional theory (Fig. 1). The purpose of this review is to highlight the joint and interactive application of asset specificity and exchange uncertainty in the examination of the factors influencing the EMS construct. The similarities and differences in the assumptions and predictions offered by each theoretical perspective were also emphasized.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Export marketing strategy

The marketing strategy is a roadmap of how a firm assigns its resources (Selnes and Johnson, 2004), relates to its environment

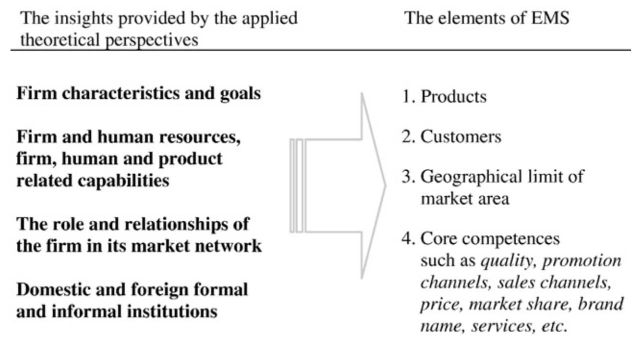

Fig. 1. The conceptual framework.

(Niemelä, 1994) and achieves corporate objectives (Greenley, 1989) in order to generate economic value and keep the companies ahead of its competitors. The issue of marketing strategy has reached relative theoretical maturity, which is in contrast to studies on the foreign market field. However, the definitions and concepts for both research streams are rooted in the strategy research. Particularly, the concepts of marketing strategy generally embrace marketing mix elements (Calantone et al., 2006; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Langes and Montgomery, 2003) and the decisions are therefore based mainly on product, price, distribution and promotion (Kotler, 2003). Nevertheless, other important facets of the export marketing strategy construct comprise not only the market offering aspect, but also the geographical design of the marketing value chain and the competitive process aspect (Lim et al., 2006).

While marketing strategies are becoming more important to the forest industry as it moves toward a market-oriented philosophy (Sinclair, 1992), the broader view has been emphasized in the forest products marketing research (Juslin and Hansen, 2003; Niemelä, 1994). In this respect, the marketing strategy is closely related to the company strategy, and is conceptualized on the basis of decisions taken regarding product, customer, geographical limits of market area and core competences (Juslin and Hansen, 2003). This construct, which has found application in developed western countries (Borowski, 1996; Hansen et al., 2002; Niemelä, 1994), was employed in the theoretical framework of this study (Fig. 1). Because of its various facets, the framework will still apply in the conceptualization of the export marketing strategy construct. However, it will be subject to the uncontrollable, highly complex and multi-dimensional elements of the marketing environment (Doole and Lowe, 2004), particularly as evident in transition countries (Baatra, 1997; Hooley and Beracs, 1997) and across national boundaries in general (Albaum et al., 2002).

2.2. Applied theoretical perspectives

Transaction cost theory, an umbrella over the conceptual framework of this study, states that there are costs involved in carrying out any transactions (exchanges between economic actors), "whether the transactions occur in a market or within a hierarchy" (Godfrey and Hill, 1995: 520). Three assumptions are critical to this equation, namely bounded rationality, opportunism and risk neutrality. The transactions are further characterized by two main dimensions: asset specificity and exchange uncertainty. Asset specificity refers to six types of tangible and intangible assets (Williamson, 1999), which have a value which may either rise or fall depending on the particular environment. The nature and ownership of specific assets describe markets, and through unforeseen contingencies create exchange uncertainty between actors (Kleinaltenkamp and Jacob, 2002; Leiblein, 2003). Bearing these characteristics in mind, the following common concepts are found in the joint application of insights of the resource-base view of firm, market-as-network perspective and institution theory. First, transactions or firm-specific investments (in a particular set of tangible and intangible assets) are often necessary to obtain the resources most likely to generate extraordinary economic performance (Mahoney, 2001), or for future use (Johansson and Mattson, 1987). Additionally, the specificity of these assets may form a competitive advantage for the investing organization (Anderson and Gatignon, 1986). Second, unforeseeable und uncontrolled changes in an environment create uncertainty (Williamson, 2000), which potentially leads to consequent contractual renegotiation that can be unpredictable in the presence of specific investments (Leiblein, 2003). Finally, it has been observed that, “the failure to integrate theories of organizational governance choice with theories of organizational form and performance may lead to misleading empirical findings” (Leiblein, 2003: 938).

2.2.1. Resource-based view of the firm

Through the possession of valuable and rare resources a firm can achieve a competitive advantage and enjoy improved performance in the short term (Barney, 1991). The formulation and implementation of the appropriate strategy requires not only the possession of resources and capabilities, however, but also the ability to organize and alter them (Barney et al., 2001; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Makadok, 2001; Peteraf, 1993). Where this is the case, unique resources and capabilities generate and sustain competitive advantage (Conner, 1991; Haahti et al., 2005; Leiblein, 2003). Summaries of empirical research on the resource-based view have revealed that unique capabilities (dynamic and otherwise) and core competences rather than static resources are essential to determining the competitive position of a firm (Newbert, 2007). In the transition context the ‘unique’ would apply in theory, but the types of unique resources that are available vary, as do their values (Meyer and Peng, 2005; Wright et al., 2005) under more market-oriented institutions. Firms in transition countries may face scarcities and obsolescence, or be subject to an excess of physical resources (Fahy et al., 2003; Peng and Heath, 1996). This might prompt companies to constantly update their strategies.

The strategy (Hoskisson et al., 2000) and its influencing factors have to date been the subject of little research using a resource-based framework in the context of transition economies. This contrasts with widespread application by researchers of resource-based concepts to a broad range of research topics, generally resulting in a complex and varied set of variables labeled resources and/or capabilities (Grant, 1991; Makadok, 2001; Newbert, 2007; Schulze, 1994) or tangible and/or intangible assets (Barney et al., 2001; Wernerfelt, 1984). Nonetheless, “resources and capabilities can be viewed as bundles of tangible and intangible assets, including a firm’s management skills, its organizational processes and routines, and the information and knowledge it controls” (Barney et al., 2001). Combining the RBV and TCT definitions of assets and capabilities (Ireland et al., 2003; Makadok, 2001; Williamson, 1999), the following synthesis was applied in the theoretical framework: firm and human assets (scale, experiential, financial, physical, networking); and firm, human and product related capabilities (export commitment, experiential, networking, innovation).

2.2.2. Market-as-network perspective

The market-as-network perspective originating in industrial marketing and purchasing theory implies that the traditional markets and vertically integrated companies are replaced by networks of connected firms (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Möller et al., 2005). Networks can be described as relationships (cooperative and competitive relations with other organizations) (Achrol, 1996), which managers use for value creation and the attainment of a competitive advantage. By developing and establishing a network position in foreign markets (achieved by building relationships) the firm is able to internationalize (Axelsson and Johanson, 1992; Johansson and Mattson, 1987; Peng and Heath, 1996), gain access to critical resources and to reduce uncertainty (Dyker et al., 2003; Johansson and Elg, 2002). Additionally, through maintaining a balanced position, the firm is also able to deal with conflicting demands over resource dependency (Easton, 1992). Such relationships within a network are superior assets (market assets) for an existing firm. However, new entrants to the market, such as firms from the transition countries of Europe, are faced with the task of building new relationships or rebuilding old ones in order to successfully establish themselves on international markets and to obtain market assets. Moreover, these firms are often in competition with firms already integrated within the network (Johansson and Elg, 2002). Economic actors from transition countries have often lacked the necessary knowledge of both market economy mechanism and of the potential partners and competitors. This lack of knowledge increases the costs involved in searching, negotiating (formal and informal) and contracting new business relationships, thereby multiplying “transaction costs in the transition context” (Meyer, 2001: 358).

Although a wide variety of studies on the relationships and networks in business exists (Ritter et al., 2004), little is as yet known about the conceptualization of business networks (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005). Nonetheless, an actor-network perspective offers the possibility to obtain managers’ perceptions of their business network and its boundaries (Halinen and Törnroos, 1998). Following the concept of “macroposition” rather than that of “microposition,” the network boundaries in the applied theoretical framework are set through the direct and indirect relationship to firms in the network, customers, suppliers and competitors (Johansson and Mattson, 1988; Ritter et al., 2004), and through the role of the firm in the network (Johansson and Mattson, 1988).

2.2.3. Institutional theory

The societal structures are not simply the result of individual and cooperative action, but are substantially affected by institutions (Quack, 2005: 347). Institutions are typically defined as man made "constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction" in order to reduce uncertainty in exchange and to establish a stable structure (North, 1991: 97). This rather rationalist perspective developed by North (1991) is in contrast to the sociological institutional perspective associated with Scott (2001). Whereas in the latter case the institutions as social systems regularize interactions, in the case of the former the series of sanctions and regulations (North, 1991) serve to lessen transaction costs (Meyer, 2001) by reducing uncertainty and creating order. This was not the case in the transition countries of Europe. In the aftermath of the disintegration of socialism, uncertainty abounded, contributed to greatly by unstable regulatory structures, government policies for example, and legal systems (Rosenbaum, 2001). Consequently, the inconsistencies between the requirements of different institutions and uncertainty over future changes led to a reliance on an inherited system, personal contacts and later the market networks (Peng, 2003; Peng and Luo, 2000).

On domestic markets and more particularly on foreign markets, environmental uncertainty is among the foremost challenges with which firms must cope. Even so, the impact of the institutional environment has not been explained well in the marketing literature (Chelariu et al., 2006; Hoskisson et al., 2000; Peng, 2003). It has been observed that institutional factors have occasionally been taken for granted by international business and management researchers, or by contrast, have been increasingly perceived by central and eastern European researchers (Hoskisson et al., 2000; Meyer and Peng, 2005). The formal and informal institutional constrains (North, 1991) found in rationalist institutionalism were therefore conceptualized in the framework: formal (domestic and foreign laws, political rules and programs, economic rules and contracts) and informal constraints (domestic and foreign codes of conduct, customary commercial practice, networks and personal exchange).

3. Methodology

3.1. Case selection

Unlike inductive studies, which seek to derive general knowledge from a large number of cases, the applied case study approach (Yin, 1994) incorporating deductive logic moves from "general assertions to relatively more specific instances" (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006: 339). The reasoning behind the application of theories to a particular context is twofold. First, in contrast to other case studies, the relevance of the factors found to influence EMS has been empirically tested in the study presented. Second, as comparison with other transition countries in Europe is difficult given the lack of data, only a single case study of the Slovakian situation has been chosen. Consequently, the case study results may be considered generally appropriate as a contribution to, or even for the development of theory in the transition context (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006; Eisenhardt, 1989).

Unlike Hungary and Poland, prior to 1989 Czechoslovakia had no significant experience of market reform "within a planning system, or with a sizeable, self-regulating civil society" (True, 1999: 362). However, due to its self-sufficiency in relation to wood resources, even then forest products were considered to be 'hard currency earning' commodities (Nagy, 1988). Although export activities were not new to this industry sector, the transition process and the opening of the domestic economy led to a redefinition and reorientation of the export markets, as well as the forest products themselves. These changes mirrored those observed in the forest products sectors of other European transition countries (FAO, 2005), but were even more pronounced in Slovakia. This was mainly due to the export of forest products, which is still an important part of the whole Slovakian forest products sector, accounting for 80.4% of the income generated by the sector, and as much as 6.6% of the total national exports (The Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, 2006). The largest portion (i.e. 43%) of the forest products exports went to Germany, Austria and Czech Republic (FAO, 2004). However, numerous companies of the pro-export oriented segment of the industry could not succeed in the markets of western developed countries in Europe during the last 17 years. Only recently have the sales, profit, and value added production of these companies been increasing (Haluza, 2007; The Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, 2005). Taken as a whole, the forest products sector has utilized nearly 90% of 10.2 million m^3 of wood provided by owners and users of forest land (The Ministry of Agriculture of the Slovak Republic, 2006). The largest share of the total value of forest products production has been the wood processing and furniture industry, closely followed with a 46% share by the production of the paper and pulp industry (The Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, 2006).

3.2. The study sample and data collection

Based on information obtained from the Slovak export registry, the registry of sector organizations, the list of members of the Association of Wood Processors of Slovakia and internet enquiries, a database was created containing 254 companies exporting forest products from Slovakia. It was assumed that direct exporters such as sawmills, forest enterprises with sawmill production capacities, wood-based panel companies, producers of engineered wood and other wood products, and wood furniture producers employing 20 or more employees exhibit some common characteristics. Due to ownership by global corporations and exhibition of completely different characteristics, mainly in exporting, the paper and pulp firms were not included in the database. Sourcing the whole target population (direct exporters employing 20 or more employees) proved extremely difficult for a number of reasons. First, after 1989 the government was no longer entitled to demand data from private companies. Second, the Slovak statistics office does not provide information on any exporting companies. Finally, even though some scattered lists of forest products companies existed, they were outdated and incomplete due to high levels of bankruptcy and constant changes in ownership of local incumbents, new start-ups and foreign entrants.

Table 1
General profile of the interviewed companies

General profile (N=26)	
Type of production	
Sawmills	6
Board producers	4
Engineered wood and other wood products producers	7
Manufactures of furniture made of wood components	9
Production structure	
Custom made production	3
Serial made-to-order production	14
Large serial made-to-order production	7
Mass production	2
Number of employees	
Large companies >250	3
Middle size companies 50–249	15
Small companies <50	8
Export volume	
>70%	18
<30%	6
In between	2
Ownership structure	
Foreign ownership	7
Slovak ownership (foreign credits or start up capital)	4
Slovak ownership	15

The stratified sampling method was subsequently used to further determine the sample (Bazeley, 2004; Thomson, 1992). The stratification was based on specific characteristics (Creswell, 2005). This guarantied that the specific desired characteristics, such as the production type and an export volume of between >70% and <30%, were represented in the sample. The random selection of 34 firms from the stratums in combination with subsequent in-depth personal interviews guaranteed the representativeness of the research study. Detailed semi-structured (Schnell et al., 1995) problem-centered (Lamnek, 1995) interviews with open questions were selected as part of the deductive study design, where perceived value is more valuable than the objective ones. The suitable decision maker to be interviewed at each company so as to collect the primary data used in the study was identified in advance, either by means of a public source or through telephone inquiry. In order to increase the response rate, a letter of notification was then mailed to the selected interview partner at each of the respective export companies. The letter was followed by several phone calls to agree to an appointment. This resulted in 29 in-depth personal interviews of about 60–120 min in length, which in some cases were combined with a company tour. Table 1 presents a general profile of the 26 respondents whose interviews fulfilled the study criteria. Three companies approached were subsequently excluded: one filed for bankruptcy, another ceased export activities and the third switched from direct to indirect exports.

3.3. Analytical methods

The transcribed interviews were processed by means of content analysis (the content structuring technique and the

Table 2
Degree of association between the isolated factors and EMS construct

The influencing factors (X)	The elements of EMS construct (Y)								
	Products	Customers	Market area	Quality	Promotion channels	Sales channels	Price	Market share	Brand name
Business studies background									
Company goals	0.456	0.600 [a]	0.631 [a]	0.462	0.526	0.594	0.230	0.474	0.373
Production type	0.515	0.473	0.704 [a]	0.462	0.420	0.422	0.586	0.600 [a]	0.444
Export motivation/dependence	0.309	0.369	0.693 [a]	0.378	0.574	0.430	0.504	0.404	0.187
Resource-based view background									
Foreign direct investment	0.172	0.451	0.620 [a]	0.290	0.674 [a]	0.691 [a]	0.624 [a]	0.359	0.266
Financial resources for export support	0.509	0.588	0.661 [a]	0.441	0.706 [a]	0.617 [a]	0.578	0.441	0.370
Physical resources (human, technological & supply security)	0.517	0.434	0.417	0.425	0.317	0.447	0.600 [a]	0.327	0.386
Market knowledge	0.478	0.192	0.608 [a]	0.136	0.511	0.732 [a]	0.474	0.447	0.295
Export experience	0.322	0.321	0.317	0.350	0.466	0.255	0.628 [a]	0.279	0.250
Means of acquisition of new contacts and customers	0.333	0.455	0.668 [a]	0.380	0.559	0.735 [a]	0.418	0.345	0.272
Foreign language knowledge	0.482	0.387	0.272	0.465	0.308	0.321	0.367	0.628 [a]	0.340
Perceived export success	0.403	0.582	0.612 [a]	0.439	0.482	0.351	0.472	0.197	0.203
Product and/or production innovation	0.235	0.534	0.502	0.303	0.481	0.641 [a]	0.408	0.113	0.147
Markets-as-networks background									
Relationship with foreign customers	0.306	0.557	0.657 [a]	0.578	0.563	0.574	0.694 [a]	0.561	0.300
Relationship with domestic customers	0.333	0.500	0.218	0.316	0.365	0.707 [a]	0.408	0.408	0.658 [a]
Role among competitors	0.353	0.330	0.549	0.378	0.350	0.466	0.619 [a]	0.477	0.399
Institution theory background									
Political situation in Slovakia	0.651 [a]	0.467	0.388	0.640 [a]	0.380	0.310	0.552	0.387	0.452
Economic situation in Slovakia	0.305	0.115	0.280	0.280	0.445	0.449	0.772 [a]	0.231	0.295
European Union accession	0.353	0.222	0.182	0.303	0.261	0.634 [a]	0.362	0.173	0.279
Current development in state forest enterprise	0.358	0.433	0.316	0.150	0.551	0.649 [a]	0.289	0.479	0.307

[a] $0 \leq$ Cramers' V ≤ 1: Being close to 1 is an indication of strong dependency between X and Y.

summarization technique (Mayring, 2002, 2003) and thematic coding (Flick, 2002, 2004). This was done with help of the MAXqDA2 software. The text investigation resulted in categories of data, which consisted of various factors, further described on the basis of values attributed according to their theoretical background. For instance, the category has referred to firm experiential resources, of which one factor to export experience, and its values to 15 years inclusive experience prior to transition, 15 years in a transition period, and 7 years in transition but after the election of a new government in 1998. The factors with representing responses were further numerically coded (Bazeley, 2004). Descriptive statistics, particularly contingency tables were used for the bivariate analysis of the codified data. The advantage of contingent analysis lay in the identification of relevant relationships between dependent elements (export marketing strategy) and independent factors (including control factors: export volume and production type resulting from stratification). However, this method of analysis provided no indication of how strong these relationships were. Using the SPSS 14.0 software, χ^2 and Cramer's V test were applied to test for the significance and strength (Everitt, 1992; Howell, 2002; Norušis, 2004). As the value of chi-square statistics depends on the sample size, the number of rows and columns in the table, and the extent of the departure from independence (Bryman and Cramer, 2005; Everitt, 1992), Cramer's V test was used for the selection of the most relevant factors, Cramer's V ≥ 0.6 (Table 2).

Thematic coding (Flick, 2002, 2004) was applied to process additional independent values not considered in the theoretical framework (Flick, 2002, 2004) and, therefore, not part of the descriptive statistical analysis. In this way it was possible to identify influencing factors not originally considered in the framework.

4. Results

The findings obtained through in-depth personal interviews indicated 45 factors influencing EMS. In addition 17 values were uncovered and thematically coupled into four new factors. In total, 23 influencing factors were statistically isolated as the most relevant (Table 3). The factors isolated were derived from all of the theoretical perspectives employed: (a) business studies, (b) RBV, (c) market-as-network perspective and (d) institution theory. The results implied that the majority of the influencing factors were derived from RBV. Only half of the influencing factors isolated were recognized as being relevant in comparable studies done on developed western countries (Table 3). The methodological and theoretical approaches explained this finding. First, a comprehensive comparison with these studies was not always possible as they only partially overlapped. This was mainly due to the factorial analysis employed, which combined several influencing factors derived either inductively or deductively. Second, factors derived from the institution theory generally tended to be absent in comparable studies, explaining the main discrepancy between the identified factors and those determined in comparable studies. The four additionally identified factors represented a further difference (Table 3), particularly the issue of company history and human capabilities. The history of a company is the sole relevant influencing factor that directly suggested that the previous 17 years of transition process continued to have an effect. In addition, the human capabilities revealed a lack of entrepreneurship drive and management qualities, also implying an indirect effect of the transition process.

The relationship between isolated influencing factors and the multi-dimensional EMS construct are shown in Table 2. The results demonstrated the multi-dimensionality of an EMS constructed on the basis of product, customer, market area and core competences such as price, quality, market share, and promotion and sales channels.

Table 3
Summary of factors influencing EMS compared with findings of comparable studies

Factors with respect to their theoretical perspective:	Comparable empirical studies:
Derived from business studies	
Company goals	
Production type	
Export motivation/dependence	(Calantone et al., 2006; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Langes and Montgomery, 2003)
Derived from resource-based view	
Foreign direct investment	
Financial resources for export support	(Julien and Ramangalahy, 2003; Ling-Yee and Ogunmokun, 2000)
Physical resources (human, technological & supply security)	
Market knowledge	(Julien and Ramangalahy, 2003; Styles and Ambler, 1994)
Export experience	(Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Julien and Ramangalahy, 2003; Koh, 1990; Styles and Ambler, 1994)
Means of acquisition of new contacts and customers (market orientation)	(Julien and Ramangalahy, 2003; Koh, 1990; Styles and Ambler, 1994)
Foreign language knowledge	
Perceived export success	
Entrepreneurial drive and quality of management [a]	
Product and/or production innovation	(Calantone et al., 2006; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Dhanaraj and Beamish, 2003)
Means of company's establishment [a]	
Derived from markets-as-networks	
Relationship with foreign customers	(Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Styles and Ambler, 1994)
Relationship with domestic customers	
Role among competitors	Shoham (1999)
Derived from institution theory	
Political situation in Slovakia	
Economic situation in Slovakia	
European Union accession	
Current development in state forest enterprise	
Governmental support [a]	
Activities of professional and industry associations [a]	

[a] Newly identified factors based on thematic grouping.

In competitive export markets, forest products companies based in Slovakia adopted the product specialization strategy. Contrary to expectations, the results suggested only an indirect impact of product and production innovation, and the irrelevance of product adaptation. This implies that companies were restricted to maneuvering within their production type due to the high technological development of the sector and the limited financial resources. Moreover, the investment flow preferences into different industry and current developments in the forestry sector, among other factors, were occasionally marked by corruption and bureaucratic impediments. As the manager of wood firm #13 summarized: "Perhaps the forest products industry is not a Cinderella, but it is…; well not many programs exist that would allow us to use the means provided by the structural funds." Therefore, it is not surprising that the formal domestic institutions proved to be only directly relevant to the product strategy.

The customer strategy with a particular focus on stable export partners was directly determined by a company's goals. As the owner of sawmill #8 stated: "Some years ago we did not need a marketing plan because the customers came looking for producers. Now it is the other way around, producers have to look for customers. Nowadays they [the customers] are looking for producers in the cheap countries." This implied that a company's goals — for instance, maintaining access to existing markets and gaining new markets, increasing turnover, or adding value to produce — forced not only a reappraisal of company strategy, but were also directly linked to customer strategy. Nevertheless, means of acquisition of new contacts and customers turned out surprisingly to have only an indirect influence.

The majority of the factors identified with direct influence were the driving forces behind the strategy of geographical limits of market area. Presumably, exporting is a laterally rigid response to the new pressure of internationalization, arising from the small size and the openness of the domestic market. However, as the manager of wood company #5 pointed out: "Export by itself now that we are in the EU…, it does not matter to me where I am going to sell them [products]. Export by itself this word has been losing its role. I need to sell them." Not surprisingly, therefore, the results also suggested that to be able to sell the products, a firm's capabilities and relational resources facilitated access to various international markets and knowledge. This also showed that managers made decisions regarding geographical limits of market area based on their sense making of their present export success.

The results demonstrated that the promotion and sales channels, and price (core competences strategy), were directly influenced by the overwhelming majority of the isolated factors. It was not surprising that the main differences between Slovak and foreign owned forest products companies were observed in this area. The latter were mostly 'production units' for the foreign parent company. By contrast, the Slovak owned companies maintained and increased sales through the building and strengthening of their relationships with their current partners or with native mediators in certain foreign markets. The results also suggested that formal domestic institutions shaped the sales channels and price strategy. Details in relation to this finding were expressed mainly in challenges associated with exchange rates, the raising costs of inputs, access to the bank loans and the lack of transparency with respect to wood supply distribution. As the manager of wood company #11 stated "…on the lumber market everything is a risk," and that it is "managed by the state forest and its policies." Contrary to expectations, price was occasionally perceived to be an independent factor, as highlighted by the following statement made by the manager of wood company #5: "Price is not set by the producer. The market sets the price and this is clear to us. It is only a question of how can we adapt and adjust the costs to this price."

5. Discussion and implications

This case study identifies and tests factors influencing export marketing strategies by generalizing existing theories of firm, organization and business studies. Several important implications could be deduced from the findings of the study. First, the determination of the driving forces behind EMS is complex due to its dynamic nature. There are three possible reasons for this complexity. The EMS is a multi-dimensional construct determined by influences derived from four theoretical perspectives: business studies, RBV, market-as-network and institution theory. Therefore, the elaboration of influencing factors in isolation of one theory is not possible. Additionally, it is not always clear which factors are dependent and which are independent. Price, for example, is to a certain extent set by the market and could, therefore, be considered an independent influencing factor. Finally, many methodological problems are associated with testing RBV (Meyer and Peng, 2005; Morgan et al., 2006) or institution theory (Meyer and Peng, 2005), but in-depth personal interviews allowed for generalized testing and made it possible to overcome these problems.

Second, the relevant factors influencing EMS were examined in two groups based on the main transaction cost characteristics: asset specificity and exchange uncertainty. According to the RBV, the possession of assets of a tangible nature, particularly the firm resources provided a temporary competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Morgan et al., 2006). In addition, the results indicated that access to the available wood resources can lead to a long term advantage. Furthermore, consistent with the RBV and market-as network perspective (Dyker et al., 2003; Johansson and Elg, 2002), the data suggested that the intangible assets such as the firm capabilities and relational resources (Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Styles and Ambler, 1994) were relevant factors in establishing and maintaining long term relationships with key actors. Other intangible assets, such as product related capabilities (Calantone et al., 2006; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Dhanaraj and Beamish, 2003) are necessary if a company is to survive alongside old and new competitors. Thus, the findings indicated that forest products companies gradually shifted away from the vertical large volume production to a horizontal approach of specialization (Eichengreen and Kohl, 1998). Even where a firm resources and capabilities were potentially of value, they had to be effectively structured and allocated among the firms and relationships. The results suggested that this was not always the case in the situations of extreme uncertainty and where the capabilities of the indigenous leaders were lacking (Newman, 2000). Overall, deriving from the business studies, the export motivation (Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Langes and Montgomery, 2003) and noticeably export dependency (Calantone et al., 2006) as measure of firm's reliance on exports as a source of revenue and profit, determined the EMS of a majority of forest products companies. Taken together with the findings of comparable studies, this would indicate that perhaps these tangible and intangible assets are universal driving forces behind the formulation and implementation of EMS construct. By contrast, the uncertainty associated with, for example, the opening up of the markets and the creation of new institutions is taken for granted in comparable studies. This prompted Williamson (2000: 595) to admit that "we are still very ignorant of institutions." Although Shoham (1999) found uncertainty on foreign markets to be a significant influencing factor, the influence of foreign formal institutions was not identified as being relevant in this study. On the contrary, given that the Slovak government was more heavily regulated in 2000 than was the case in 1993 (Pejovich, 2005), the government policy implications and programs for the forest products industry in Slovakia remained an important backdrop. This finding suggested that the governments in transition context have only a limited capacity to steer the process of economic development (Eichengreen and Kohl, 1998). On the other hand, political pressure as a result of directed investment flow, the shifting interests of professional and industry associations, or current developments in state owned forest enterprise to specify but a few factors, lead to bureaucratic impediments and prompt rent seeking behavior.

As a final point, the results implied that as the transition progresses, the insights provided by institution theory might first become relevant, but later on, mostly the role of insights of RBV will be greater (Hoskisson et al., 2000; Peng, 2003; Wright et al., 2005). Additionally, an unclear position by the government (Eichengreen and Kohl, 1998) and a lack of support interventions for the forest products sector defended this finding. However, the uncertainties associated with formal domestic institutions still led occasionally to a reliance on informal relationships (Peng and Heath, 1996). By contrast, the formal relationships derived from market-as-network perspective represented a critical market asset but are not sufficient influencing factors in the internationalization of forest products companies. This implies that both formal domestic institutions and competitive (tangible and intangible) assets were equally relevant to the export marketing strategies. Additionally, the history of the respective forest products company was found equally relevant. This suggested that the efficiency of privatized assets (Pejovich, 2005), the spillover effects of foreign direct investment (Eichengreen and Kohl, 1998; Fahy et al., 2003; Uusivuori and Laaksonen-Craig, 2001) and entrepreneurial activity (Meyer and Peng, 2005) continued to have an effect after 17 years of transition.

For further attempts to arrive at a conclusive set of factors influencing export marketing strategy in transition countries in general and in forest products sector in particular, it will be useful to conduct additional empirical studies in different transition countries of Europe. Once empirical investigation has provided clearer theoretical and methodological learning, the determination process will provide in-depth understanding on factors influencing EMS. Therefore, the potential of the case study in the context of Slovakia in the absence of the additional empirical studies lies in its capacity to shed more light and contribute to the theories in transition context.

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