

## Article

# Sustainable International Expansion via Cooperation Networks in the Manufacturing Industries

Anderson Rei Galvão <sup>1,2,\*</sup> , Carla Mascarenhas <sup>1</sup> , Carla Susana Marques <sup>1</sup> , Vitor Braga <sup>3</sup>, Luis Moreira <sup>2</sup>, Pedro Ferreira <sup>2</sup> and Tiago Castro <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Economics Sociology and Management, University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro & CETRAD Research Center, 5000 Vila Real, Portugal; carlam@utad.pt (C.M.); smarques@utad.pt (C.S.M.)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Business Internationalization, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão, Polytechnic of Porto, 4610 Felgueiras, Portugal; luismiguelpereira@gmail.com (L.M.); pedroooooferreira@gmail.com (P.F.); tiago-g@hotmail.com (T.C.)

<sup>3</sup> The Center for Innovation and Research in Business Sciences and Information Systems, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão, Polytechnic of Porto, 4610 Felgueiras, Portugal; vbraga@estgf.ipp.pt

\* Correspondence: anderson@utad.pt

**Abstract:** For the manufacturing industry in particular, networks lead to an increasing interaction between different actors representing a complementary response to insecurity arising from internationalization subjects. The aim of this study is to understand how cooperation networks contribute to the international sustainability of the manufacturing industry. To carry out this study, a qualitative methodology was chosen through semi-structured interviews with eight companies in the manufacturing sector from different areas. The interviews were handled with NVIVO software support. Regarding the findings, it is unanimous that cooperation networks are essential for the internationalization of the manufacturing industry. In general, the companies that participated in the study believe that the networks helped to reduce costs and to have access to certain resources that were essential for the success of internationalization. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the size of the country and the low purchasing power were some of the substantial factors that triggered the process of searching for new markets. It also became evident that there are barriers that need to be taken into account at the time of internationalization and that cooperation with other companies can help to overcome them. This study provides empirical evidence on the importance of cooperation networks for the internationalization of companies in the manufacturing industry. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the main motivations, strategies and barriers for these companies to internationalize.



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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, globalization has led to a restructuring of business, mainly in the manufacturing industry [1,2]. According to some authors [3–6], networks of cooperation are an essential component for the sustainability of the manufacturing industry because they help to create and maintain competitive advantages in an increasingly global market. The cooperation networks that many companies look for in order to reach international markets allow them to obtain resources, detailed information, technologies, economies of scale and to share risks with other companies in order to make companies better able to seize new opportunities and market challenges [7].

In the internationalization process, networks are crucial for recognizing opportunities [8]. According to Chetty and Wilson [9], some studies showed that mainly SMEs (due to lack of resources) take into account their networks to educate themselves about internationalization, select the internationalization method, and obtain resources and information to internationalize. For Olhager and Feldmann [1], cooperation between companies encourages innovation, allows for learning, and facilitates new combinations of inter-organizational resources.



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Studies on the internationalization of the manufacturing industry are extensive and address, for example, factors that affect factory location decisions [10–12], individual factory functions [13–15], or international manufacturing networks, addressing, for example, international manufacturing configuration and coordination [16–19]. However, there is still some disagreement in the results of studies on the impact of different networks on company performance [20,21]. In addition, there is still a lack of studies showing the role of cooperation networks for internationalization through specific cases (case studies) for different sectors of activity or countries [22,23].

Although the manufacturing environment has gone through dramatic changes in recent decades due to globalization, some authors report that the global scenario of the manufacturing industry requires a more in-depth analysis on the topic [24–26]. Research in this field is still fragmented, in part due to the complexity involved in studying the same subjects at different levels of analysis [16,27].

In order to fill the identified gaps and based on the resource dependence theory, this study aims to understand how cooperation networks contribute to the international sustainability of companies in the manufacturing industry. In this sense, the following research questions were defined:

- What are the main motivations and barriers for internationalization?
- What are the reasons for resorting to cooperation networks to internationalize?

For the development of this study, a qualitative methodology was chosen, through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were applied to eight heads of companies in the manufacturing sector from different areas of activity. The content of the interviews was analyzed by the NVIVO software.

After this introductory point, a brief theoretical approach will be made on networks and internationalization. In point three, the methodology used will be developed. In the next section, the findings obtained will be presented, as well as their discussion. Finally, in the last point, the main conclusions, implications, limitations and future investigations will be presented.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Internationalization

The rapid process of business globalization and intense competition in the environment encouraged companies to seek alternative opportunities outside their countries of origin [28,29]. Internationalization is considered a process of continuous growth, which must be seen as a phenomenon of advances and setbacks [30]. The internationalization process translates into the progressive participation of a company in international operations [31], which, as a rule, is one of the various growth strategies of a company [32]. With the emergence of the digital age, new resources (intangible assets) are perceived as significant factors in the formation of the internationalization process.

According to Utama et al. [33], internationalization is a term defined as a process of expansion of companies' business activities through a progressive stream of actions to expand their participation in international markets and carry out transactions across international borders, which encompasses characteristics of various strategies in a multifaceted environment with a multidimensional configuration.

In line with the process of internationalization of companies, You et al. [28], states that there are several motivations for internationalization. Internationalization is believed to increase profitability, improve performance, minimize insolvency, and improve investors' risk return opportunities [33]. In addition, the internationalization needs of companies are also supported by eight concepts, production savings, amortizations, supply of cheaper inputs abroad, access to foreign knowledge, risk reduction advantages of geographic diversification, tax evasion opportunities and international experience [34].

Barriers to internationalization can influence the positive or negative decision of companies whether or not to enter foreign markets [35]. According to some authors [36–38], barriers can be internal to the company (for example, lack of financial, strategic, managerial and operational resources and capabilities) or external (e.g., home country institutional environment and various factors in foreign locations, such as unfamiliar business protocols, high tariffs and tax structures, cultural differences, etc.). According to Leonidou [39], the lack of management, human and financial resources is the main barrier that prevents the company from starting or increasing its export activity.

The resource dependency theory shows that organizations are in a constant struggle for autonomy, confronting their resource limitations [40]. Since organizations have difficulties to acquire and control their resources, their survival can be explained by the ability to deal with environmental contingencies, with a view to guaranteeing the supply of resources necessary for their existence [41]. Resource dependence theory emphasizes the importance of organizations establishing cooperative relationships to gain easy access to specific scarce resources without which they could not survive [40].

Internationalization is seen as a gradual process that is based more on the construction of networks, leaving out, however, the characteristics of the company and the market in the internationalization process [42]. Companies do not always have all the resources at the time of internationalization, and it is necessary to exchange resources with other parties, such as manufacturers, distributors, suppliers, resellers, customers, among others [43]. Thus, the networks of companies can be understood as an inter-organizational understanding, with the legal independence of the companies, but dependent at an economic level on the cooperation between them, in order to overcome the competition [7].

A solid network is one of the main factors in the development of a company, that is, several authors [34,44–46] argue that networks are part of the explanation for success may be one of the most important assets of a company.

## 2.2. Cooperation Networks for Internationalization

Networks enable companies to compensate for their shortcomings related to the size and scarcity of resources, allowing for rapid growth and the conquest of international markets [41,47]. Witt [48] states that companies, through networks, enjoy the possibility of obtaining resources less expensively than if they had to resort to the market, in addition, there are resources that can be purchased on the network and that are not normally available on the Marketplace.

In this sense, the theory of resource dependence demonstrated the importance of organizations establishing cooperative relationships in order to have easy access to certain scarce resources, without which they could not survive [49]. In this case, companies have a shortage of resources, and it is essential that they create networks of cooperation that will allow them to overcome this situation, having access to complementary resources and competitive gains that they can provide.

Cooperation networks are an important element of understanding the internationalization process, since with the business relationships between companies, partners, buyers, suppliers and other stakeholders there is an intensification of relationships and a need for cooperation to work in an interconnected way [1,50]. According to Ciravegna et al. [49], companies that are part of networks are able to benefit from more resources, which leads to an increase in opportunities in international markets to which they would not be able to access as an individual company.

Companies established in networks gain the advantage of acquiring knowledge regarding partners' needs, resources, capabilities and strategies, as well as reducing the risk and uncertainty of the external market [51,52]. Companies established in both developed and emerging economies generally depend on networks to seek, discover and explore business opportunities in foreign markets. These networks help companies gain resources such as political influence, reputation and mutual trust [53].

A company's international performance depends a lot on its ability to analyze opportunities in different markets [54]. The international analysis process leads companies to face large and competitive markets, sharing resources between countries, allowing them to obtain greater profits by having the ability to specialize in the global value chain, allowing them to achieve economies of scale and become more sustainable [54].

According to Chetty and Stangl [55], cooperation networks are essential to identify opportunities during the internationalization process of a company, they also add that several studies have verified that SMEs, due to the support they have from their network relationships, learn about internationalization, choose their internationalization method, acquire information about new markets and obtain resources from them to internationalize.

### 2.3. Sustainable International Expansion

As of the 1970s, the sustainability issue became relevant and started to compose the planning agenda of governments, companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations [56–59]. Despite its complex conceptualization, sustainability became known as a set of practices that comprise the balance between economic, social and environmental impact, known as Triple Bottom Line [60,61]. Regardless of the fact that to date many of these sustainable practices are not yet required by law, organizations must adopt practices that meet not only the interests of shareholders, but of the entire society that may be impacted by irresponsible actions [62,63]. In other words, managers must make their decisions respecting the stakeholders' welfare, because these are not only meaning to a business end [64]. In fact, globalization has increasingly promoted a rapid and constant re-adaptation of markets, challenging companies to reconsider their values, strategies and management models in order to achieve competitive advantages [65]. Internationalization not only enables an increase in long-term corporate competitive sustainability, but also serves as a way to survive the current changes in the business world [66].

It is acknowledged that the internationalization process, which companies go through, impacts their structures due to the competitive demands of the international market. In other words, when expanding their borders, organizations have to adapt to new legal, social and cultural demands, since it encompasses, in addition to international involvement, the strategic adaptation of resources and structure, with this view proving to be the most appropriate for analyzing the convenience and opportunity of internationalization [67,68]. Today, corporate sustainability is a competitive advantage in the present and in the term, as it seeks to satisfy the needs of organizations without compromising the needs of future generations, covering, the economic, social and environmental factors [69]. The process of internationalization of firms is related to the globalization phenomenon, leading companies to seek internationalization as a solution to expansion and even survival, considering the competitive context in which they operate. they are inserted. This context makes internationalization a strategic issue of the company, in order to in order to enhance sustainability and gains in the competitiveness of economies [70].

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Type of Study

For the development of this study, we opted for a qualitative approach through the case study. The study focuses on four cases (manufacturing SMEs) in the northern region and four cases in the central region of Portugal. For Yin [71], a case study is a form of qualitative approach that examines a current phenomenon in its context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined.

According to Perren and Ram [72], qualitative methods have been gaining interest by entrepreneurship and small business researchers, as the qualitative technique allows gathering information that leads to findings that certainly could not be measured or translated into numbers [73]. As research with a qualitative approach, the sample size can be small, since depth and richness are the key elements, with no need to generalize or replicate [74]. According to Yin [71], qualitative methods should be used when there

is a need to in-depth analysis of certain processes, certain characteristics of organizations and/or the vision or experience of individuals.

To carry out this study and to select the cases, the following criteria were used:

1. Identification of SMEs in the manufacturing industry with strong links to the territory and a high dependence on exports;
2. Selection of companies located in the north and center of Portugal;
3. Selection of companies with different characteristics: Despite being companies in the same sector of activity, it was decided to select companies with different characteristics, such as size, countries that internationalized and market segment;
4. Selection of companies that used cooperation networks to internationalize;
5. Selection of companies for convenience: ease of access to information;

In this sense, the companies that participated in the study are mature SMEs located in the north and center of Portugal with a great involvement in the territory where they are located and with a great involvement with internationalization. Despite having a large international involvement, these companies continue to use cooperation networks to increase or improve their exposure to the outside world in order to reduce risks and make their growth more sustainable (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Profile of respondents.

Participants	Number of Employees	Activity Sector	% Export	Location
Interviewee 1	71	Manufacturing-Textile	90%	Guimarães
Interviewee 2	58	Manufacturing-Textile	90%	Esposende
Interviewee 3	24	Manufacturing-Furniture	95%	Valongo
Interviewee 5	16	Manufacturing-Acoustics	95%	Paços de Ferreira
Interviewee 4	34	Manufacturing-Ceramics	85%	Ílhavo
Interviewee 6	100	Manufacturing-Cutlery	80%	Caldas da Rainha
Interviewee 7	76	Manufacturing-Cutlery	90%	Caldas da Rainha
Interviewee 8	145	Manufacturing-Food	75%	Campo Maior

North

Center

### 3.2. Data Collection and Processing

For data collection, primary data was obtained through individual and semi-structured interviews. The interviews allowed for the collection of more complete and spontaneous answers through the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, thus avoiding problems related to the interpretation of the questions [75]. According to Tuli [76], good data collection allows obtaining a set of information that addresses the topic under study and captures its contextual complexity.

The interview guide used in this study was divided into three parts. The first part is related to the identification of the interviewees and the company under study. The second part contains open questions about the internationalization process in order to understand the main motivations, barriers and advantages of internationalizing. The third and last part contains open questions about how the company under study used cooperation networks to internationalize. In Table 2, it is possible to observe in more detail some of the questions asked in the interview guide.

**Table 2.** Questions asked in the interview guide.

1st part	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of respondents</li> <li>• Identification of companies</li> </ul>
2nd part	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the main motivations for betting on internationalization? Why?</li> <li>• What were the main advantages of internationalization? Why?</li> <li>• What were the main barriers you encountered in the internationalization process? Why?</li> <li>• How did your company's internationalization process take place?</li> </ul>
3rd part	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In your opinion, are cooperation networks important for the sustainability of a company? Why?</li> <li>• Does your company currently internationalize in partnership (cooperation networks)?</li> <li>• What were the main advantages and disadvantages of this cooperation? Why?</li> <li>• In your opinion, if you had internationalized in partnership would it have been easier/difficult for your company? Why?</li> </ul>

The interviews were conducted with those responsible for the internationalization of companies, and were applied between February and May 2021, with an average duration of 50 min (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Characterization of respondents.

	Gender	Age	Academic Education	Position in Company
Interviewee 1	Male	44	Textile engineering	Commercial department
Interviewee 2	Male	52	Master in Economics	Commercial department
Interviewee 3	Male	38	Master in Management	Communication and marketing manager
Interviewee 5	Male	42	Degree in music production and technologies	Administrators
Interviewee 4	Male	50	Degree in Marketing	Commercial department
Interviewee 6	Male	39	Degree in Public Relations and Advertising	Administrators
Interviewee 7	Male	36	Master in economics and management	Administrators
Interviewee 8	Male	52	MBA	International Manager

The interviews were subjected to content analysis, through the organization of sources and data coding with NVIVO 11.0 software. NVivo is one of the recommended software for analyzing qualitative data that provides a workspace and reflection to organize, visualize and analyze unstructured qualitative data [77,78]. There are several qualitative studies, e.g., [79–81] that in recent years have used this software. Based on this software, it was possible to extract useful and segmented information, which resulted in the creation of tree nodes (trees of nodes), which label and branch the collected information.



## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Motivations for Internationalization

The globalization and competitiveness of the markets, increasingly dynamic and fast, have been forcing companies to internationalize, in order to achieve sustainable growth [82]. According to Moghaddam et al. [83], companies only move towards internationalization if they have some motivations, such as: to increase the company's competitive advantage; decrease or vary the risk by diversifying; combat the earlier end of a product's life cycle. In this context, Figure 1 shows the motivations for internationalization pointed out by the interviewees in the study.

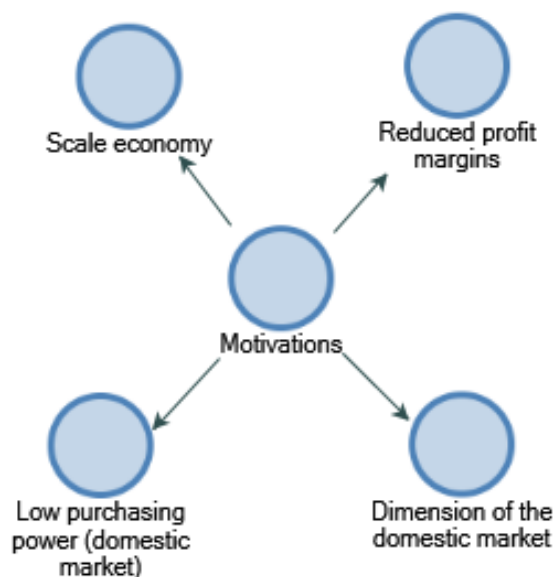


Figure 1. Motivations for internationalization.

Figure 1 allows us to have a more holistic view of the motivations of the interviewed companies regarding internationalization. With regard to the size of the market, interviewees state that the Portuguese market does not have the capacity to absorb all their production. Associated with this inability to absorb the products produced by these companies, the low purchasing power of Portuguese consumers was also identified. Thus leading to the fact that these companies, in order to sell and sell their products in the national territory, will have to practice lower margins, thus reducing the return on all their investment. For this, as mentioned by the interviewees, companies tend to internationalize in order to reach markets with economies of scale, in order to be able to sell their products and produce in a way that they can maintain their competitiveness.

Interviewee 3: "(... ) The motivation is simple, we do not have an internal market that can absorb our products. Our salaries do not allow us to buy this product, but that's not all, the Portuguese still don't take much care of the house, maybe they even invest in a high-end mobile phone, but they don't think it's important, a sofa, or a bed (... )"

Interviewee 5: "(... ) because this has to do with inputs and outputs, what we have to have upstream and downstream, to justify the production flow, it was the idea of those who founded, to create a large factory with a strong export bias. (... )"

Interviewee 8: "(... ) we have to grow, because our market is small, so if we remain hostage to the national market, we become an easy prey for any company. Knowing that most mergers and acquisitions are often used to grow and reach new markets, whether to internationalize or just to grow quota, and, therefore, we became a very desirable target for everyone. Therefore, the more we grow, here we gain another relevance in terms of scale, in addition to lower costs, we enter into another type of economy of scale that lower costs in light of the relevance of our projects (... )"

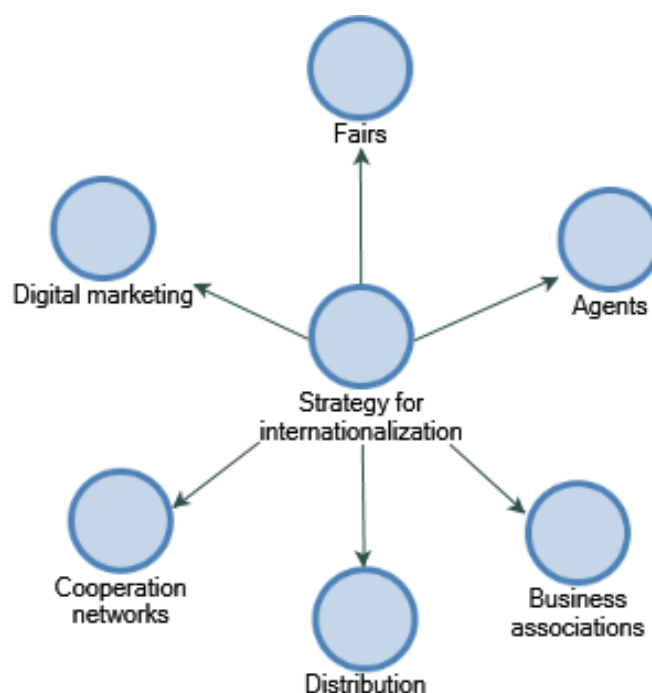
#### 4.2. Strategies for Internationalization

When a company opts for internationalization, to be successful it is necessary to draw a vigorous, coherent and clear plan [84]. According to Ayoub [85], when companies intend to internationalize, their choice depends on accessible modes of internationalization and on the competitive sphere that the company can face in international markets.

With regard to internationalization strategies, companies have some options to choose from as to their way of entering markets. When companies choose to internationalize it depends on the chosen strategy, some offer more control, more risks, more investments or more commitment to the company and others less [86]. In previous studies, several factors were identified as important for when an SME intends to internationalize, such as strategy, company structure, human resources skills, trust, social network and orientations both at the business level and at the level from the market [87].

As for the framework of international strategies, there are several modes of entry into international markets, which we can classify as export entry mode (direct export or indirect export), contractual entry mode (licensing, franchising, technology transfer or resource skill human rights, service contracts, patents, production contracts, infrastructure supply contracts, subcontracting or turnkey contracts) and foreign direct investment entry modes (acquisitions, strategic alliances or joint ventures) [88–90].

When a company intends to internationalize it must, according to [86], take into account several factors and have well-defined strategies, such as the entry strategy, the marketing-mix plan, the target market/product in that market, the control to be used to measure and supervise continuous performance, among others. Figure 2 illustrates the main strategies for the internationalization of the companies under study.



**Figure 2.** Strategies for Internationalization.

According to most interviewees (Figure 2), the strategies that the companies under study had to internationalize were through participation in international fairs, cooperation networks and collaboration with agents, who make the connection between the producer and the distributor. The choice of these countries involved the ease of language and proximity. According to Dimitratos [91], companies that are located at international borders present benefit levels of performance because of the internationalization environment established between the companies.



Interviewee 7: ( ... ) the first country we went to was Morocco ( ... ) we started selling through an agent. ( ... ) We are currently entering other countries through partnerships with local companies.

Interviewee 8: ( ... ) therefore, our strategy to internationalize involved participation in international fairs in partnership with other companies in the sector ( ... ).

However, there were two interviewees who reported that in the internationalization process they resorted to digital marketing and business associations in the sector.

Interviewee 4: ( ... ) our internationalization process took place through a strong commitment to digital marketing and the support of the business association in participating in international fairs. With the support of the association, we were able to participate in fairs that we would hardly be able to participate on our own. ( ... )

#### 4.3. Barriers to Internationalization

According to Kahiya [92], there are several barriers to internationalization, which means that there are barriers that prevent the company from developing international operations. These barriers can be divided between internal and external. Internal barriers are composed, for example, by the lack of knowledge, information, practice in foreign markets, deprivation of means, among others [93]. External barriers, on the other hand, are integrated, for example, by cultural inequalities, legal disparities and difficulty in finding a business partner [94].

Figure 3 illustrates the main barriers to internationalization that the study companies found.

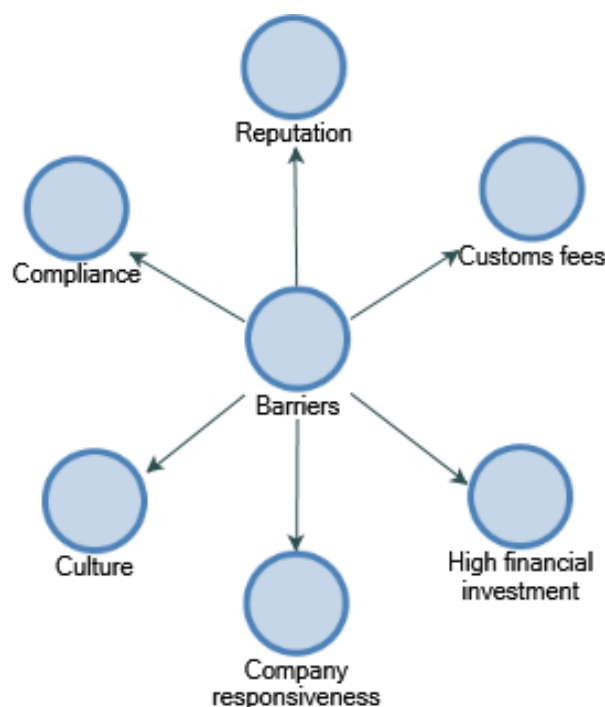


Figure 3. Barriers to Internationalization.

According to the interviewees, the main barriers they encountered at the time of internationalization were cultural differences, the lack of reputation in the destination country, compliance, customs fees that exist in countries outside the European Union, the high investment that is needed and the lack of responsiveness to meet certain deadlines required by foreign markets.

Interviewee 2: “( ... ) there are other barriers, customs, there are also countries that have a very high protection rate for certain types of goods, in which the products are completely out of the market to protect domestic production ( ... ).”

Interviewee 8: “( ... ) some barriers ( ... ) the culture, that’s it, food products have a certain type of cultural pattern that can be accepted by a fringe of a niche or by the mass market of a given country as a whole ( ... ).”

#### 4.4. Cooperation Networks for Sustainable Internationalization

According to Thorne [95], market demands for quality, cost reduction, innovation and internationalization gave rise to companies changing their organizational form, requiring more and more resources. The resource dependency theory demonstrated the importance of organizations establishing cooperative relationships in order to have easy access to certain scarce resources, without which they could not survive [40]. Cooperation networks have been fundamental to overcome the scarcity of resources, build reputation and improve the company’s sustainability [96]. The understanding of sustainability is not limited only to the social and/or environmental context, since one of the objectives of a company is to obtain profit. Thus, the strategic use of these concepts can provide advantages to organizations in relation to their competitors, in the form of differentiation or even cost reduction [97]. Thus, it is required of companies that invest and of companies that seek international markets that provide sustainability and thus growth of confidence, and broaden the sources of funds and reduce the cost of capital [98].

In the case of the companies under study, it was unanimous among all interviewees that cooperation networks are essential for the sustainable success of internationalization. Somehow, all companies resort to partnerships with other companies to succeed in internationalization in a more sustainable way, as can be seen in the excerpts below:

Interviewee 6: “( ... ) we have a long cooperation with a company that does everything for us worldwide ( ... ) it’s a way for us to exercise the product without added concerns ( ... ).”

Interviewee 5: “( ... ) in fact, no one is going to throw away the dishes to buy mine. Therefore, this cooperation was really essential to reach other markets in a more sustainable way.”

Interviewee 7: “( ... ) “I see partnerships as something very positive and fundamental for our sustainable development, and then we gain know-how from one country to another. And then we have a range of products that reach more markets.”

Interviewee 1: “( ... ) The textile industry, like any other, has to innovate. Constantly ( ... ) Internationalization, the networks and partnerships that have been created abroad, have allowed us to maintain an innovative process, and in turn sustainability, not only economically, but also socially and environmentally ( ... ).”

Some of the interviewees also add that they have resorted to some business associations to internationalize.

Interviewee 3: “We had help from AICEP (business association for internationalization support), and the Association of Wood and Furniture Industries of Portugal (AIMMP). These associations brought together several companies in the sector to participate in international fairs. So we were able to reduce a significant cost. [ ... ]”

Interviewee 8: “Yes, we have partnerships with some associations, such as Portugal-Foods, AICEP and AEP. What all these associations have been looking for is the creation of partnerships to facilitate entry into certain types of markets or to participate in certain events. I think that in this role the associations themselves have been able to perform an excellent job in Portugal of trying to get entrepreneurs to talk to each other. [ ... ]”

#### 4.5. The Main Advantages of Cooperation for Sustainable Internationalization

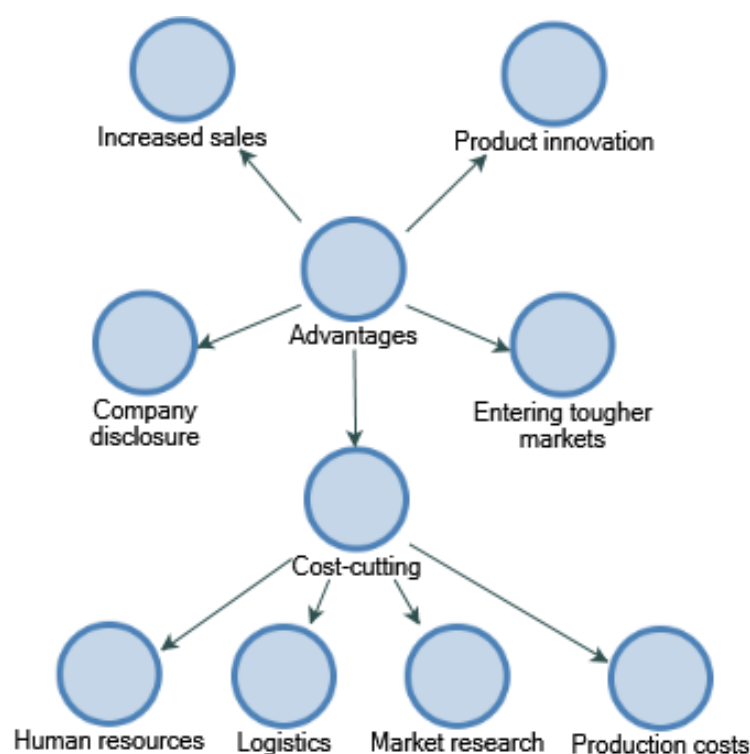
According to Kotha et al. [99], cooperative activity is more associated with this internationalization strategy than competitive activity. From this same cooperative activity, companies come to increase their knowledge due to the joint dynamic created with their partners.

When in this cooperation process, companies renounce opportunism, and effectively focus on cooperation and building a long-term relationship, thus creating conditions for

this same cooperation to bear fruit for both players, that is, a win-win [50]. It is essential to emphasize that all firms are involved in a certain limited set of business relationships with their most important clients and with their supplier companies, which in turn have and maintain relationships with other companies, so that each one represents a part of a business network. The internationalization process of companies from the interaction of the competitive advantages of companies and those that correspond to the networks [100]. Companies establish and develop positions in foreign markets depending on their characteristics, to the extent that these are different in the case of highly internationalized companies, or not, and the degree of internationalization of the network to which they belong. Therefore, networks allow us to establish the relationship between the internationalization strategy of the company and the degree of internationalization of the network in which it is inserted, thus allowing the economic sustainability, and not only, of international companies [23].

Whether for the country of origin or in the export-focused market. Thus, in order to control, or alleviate all barriers to internationalization, how to minimize the costs of this process, it seems extremely beneficial to join forces between partners [101].

Figure 4 demonstrates what were pointed out as advantages of cooperation for a more sustainable internationalization, in the case of the companies interviewed in this study.



**Figure 4.** Main advantages of cooperation for internationalization.

According to Figure 4, it is possible to verify that the interviewees highlighted as the main advantages of cooperation for internationalization the promotion of the company, the increase in sales, the development of innovative products, the entry into more difficult markets and especially the reduction of costs, such as human resources, market studies and logistics.

Interviewee 7: “( ... ) Each market has its need, and this is identified by them (agents/distributors). We do not have the logistical capacity to do this. Here we have an active role in daily conversations, and here we begin the product development work. I see partnerships as something super positive and fundamental to our sustainable development, and then we gain know-how from one country to another. And then we have a range of products that reach more markets. ( ... )”

Interviewee 8: “( ... ) when we’re in cooperation, sometimes when the results don’t show up, there are some who tend to leave because they think they can do it alone ( ... ) when we cooperate it is important to be united until the end ( ... ) in Portugal it is normal to find some who like to wear the yellow jersey and try to go ahead ( ... ) when there’s a fall they never get up ( ... ) the pluto is always stronger ( ... ).”

In the field of logistics, some of the interviewees refer that this point is asserted as a fundamental point in what is the outsourcing of the company’s operations. Thus, using external partners, these companies can easily export their products and get feedback from someone who is in the field, so that these products also undergo some re-adaptations for an increase in market acceptance. Thus, managing to make your product reach all markets, without the need for a Herculean effort, reducing the company’s investment, using cooperation and distribution networks, in order to minimize the logistical costs of this process. As an example, we quote interviewee 1:

Interviewee 1: “( ... ) with the adaptations we made, our salespeople collect an order from a customer anywhere in the world, and it goes into production right away, with this adaptation we gain 2 months from the competition ( ... )”

## 5. Discussion

As a framework for the findings obtained in this investigation, we can verify that cooperation networks help companies to internationalize in a more sustainable way, mainly opening new opportunities for foreign markets. Manufacturing’s dependence on resources, be they financial, intellectual capital, or raw materials, is latent and often does not accept that differentiated strategies be put into practice, thus preventing, or at least reducing, business sustainability [102]. One can affirm that there are several ways that companies can become more and more sustainable. One of these is internationalization. The choices taken are related to the range that commercial strategies can guarantee to any organization that wishes to position itself in the face of the needling imposed by international markets. The industrial sector was forced to adapt itself to leaner structures, but based on contexts of competitiveness and sustainability in order to expand or even maintain its relationship with the existing market [103].

The advantages of cooperation networks include the identification of opportunities in international markets, lower costs, a greater increase in the accessibility of resources, a greater amount of knowledge and shared information, the creation of new product lines and greater competitive consolidation, which goes against what Reis and Amato [65] and Morinishia and Guerrini [7] stated. Thus, cooperation networks become the engine for companies that mainly seek internationalization [55]. Effectually, cooperation network has numerous benefits for the intervening companies, but for this to happen coordination is needed, as the companies in a network have different preferences, procedures, perspectives and motivations, and in some situations, they may compete with each other [104]. According to Morinishia and Guerrini [7], trust is the main pillar in cooperation networks between companies for their success. In order to make the business strategies of companies feasible, benefiting a balance between competition and cooperation, trust is what makes it possible for all partners to respect each other and have faith in the commitments made to each other, promoting economically viable networks.

When companies operate in a network due to the benefits that arise from social relationships, different opportunities for dialogue and business can arise [34]. The relationships of cooperation networks generate various understandings between the linked parties, which can give rise to movements of information and services, producing relationships between the parties that share values, norms and, most importantly, trust [105].

Chandra et al. [87] refer companies from developed countries take less time to internationalize. Even so, they also state that when the internationalization process takes place in developing countries, this process is slower, due to the fact that these countries are more limited in terms of resources, have a deficit in what is the international orientation, as well as suffering some inertia in national and foreign political decisions and support,

thus claiming to be more vulnerable and time-consuming in the cross-border onslaught process [87].

Analyzing the findings of this study, we can mention that in the field of motivations for internationalization, most of the companies interviewed point out as determining factors the fact that they have to choose low margins to be present in the national territory, as well as the related low purchasing power of the Portuguese. We can also mention that the companies addressed, when internationalizing, intend to reach economy of scale markets, so that they can lower the production price. Showing unanimity, the companies interviewed allege the (small) size of the Portuguese market as the main motivation for internationalization.

In order to reach international markets, companies have to adopt their strategies according to the market they intend to enter. These strategies, which fit the methodology of foreign direct investment, distribution, agents, cooperation with various stakeholders, boosting associations, however, most also opt for the exploratory factor, which fits the international fairs and events of their specialty.

However, at the beginning and during the internationalization process, there are some difficulties inherent to the process. In order to mitigate these difficulties that can become barriers, companies are aware that the cultural factor will have to be taken into account. Companies are aware that the legal/customs costs inherent in the price of the article in the foreign market have to be considered. It even goes so far as to mention that sometimes, when these costs are accounted for, they exclude participation in this market due to the protectionist measures of that market. In this regard, compliance is essential for these companies to protect themselves from possible international threats in this field. In short, the culmination of these points translates into the reputation that the company manages to acquire and achieve in international markets.

In order to minimize all the externalities/difficulties mentioned above, companies use cooperation networks to share, promote and dynamize processes and crucial mechanisms for exploring and entering new markets. The importance of cooperation and the networks mentioned above, is confirmed by the fact that there is a sharing of knowledge, resources and know-how of these markets to be explored so that, at any time, it is possible to receive inputs as well as valid information to prevent or anticipate any change in market trend.

With this, following what Velinov et al. assert [106], as was evident in the interviews carried out, companies that intend to internationalize, or intend to solidify their international presence, are well aware of the importance and relevance of sustainability and what it represents for markets, as well as for international consumers. In other words, this asserts itself as a determining point in the internal business organization, as well as being a mandatory requirement in terms of the permanence and entry of companies in international markets.

## 6. Conclusions

This study aimed to understand how cooperation networks influence the internationalization of companies in the manufacturing sector.

According to the findings obtained, it is possible to conclude that cooperation networks are essential for the internationalization of the manufacturing industry. Companies that participated in the study believe that cooperation networks helped reduce costs and gain access to certain resources that were essential for the success of internationalization. Moreover, in the midst of the dynamic context of competitiveness, focused on the sustainability of organizations from the development and training of people and innovation skills and differentiation, there are the inter-organizational cooperation networks. These networks consider cooperation between organizations, from the sharing of skills and capabilities of people and groups involved in these organizations as an integral and fundamental part for differentiation and sustainability in the corporate market, with a view to opening new markets. According to Srivastava and Tyll [107], companies need to have cooperation networks when they want to enter international markets in order to overcome

institutional complications both in the receiving country and in the country of origin. The relationship between the network players is configured in a dynamic process that allows the sharing of risks, the establishment of new competencies, besides providing advantages in cost or revenue. Furthermore, relationships in cooperation networks involve elements such as trust, commitment and communication between companies, as a factor for value creation in networks.

The findings suggest also showed that the main motivations for the internationalization of Portuguese manufacturing companies are related to the small size of the Portuguese market, the low purchasing power of consumers and the need for this sector to obtain economies of scale. In addition, respondents report that the strategies they had to internationalize were through agents, participation in international fairs, with the support of business associations and mainly with cooperation networks. With regard to barriers to internationalization, respondents mentioned that reputation, culture, compliance and poor financial investment are the main obstacles they had to overcome.

It is hoped that this study may have both theoretical and practical implications. As theoretical implications, it is expected that this study will contribute to the literature through a better understanding of how companies in the manufacturing sector reach other markets. Furthermore, given that few studies have integrated networks and the perspective of internationalization in examining the factors influencing the internationalization of SMEs, it is expected that this study will provide a very accurate view of both capacity (e.g., network) as well as the limitation in the identification of international opportunities and in the future market. Our study also contributes to the existing literature on networks, highlighting how certain networks can enhance the internationalization of SMEs, as well as which factors restrict their internationalization capacity.

In addition to theoretical implications, this study offers important practical implications. First, SMEs must cultivate the capacity to develop and manage networks with external partners. In addition to training and utilizing an international network in order to increase international performance, this study provides valuable implications for management teams or managers of SMEs in manufacturing or technology industries.

Throughout this study, some limitations were found that should be taken into account, both in interpreting the findings and in future investigations. The first limitation identified is related to subjectivity, although all precautions were taken, studies of a qualitative nature always present some subjectivity in the analysis of findings and in the coding and categorization system of interviews. Another limitation is related to the fact that the manufacturing sector was analyzed, but with different branches of activities (e.g., Furniture and textiles), but at the same time it allowed for a broader perspective of the sector.

Based on this study, it would be interesting to deepen the investigation into other branches of activity or within the branch of manufacturing, but focus individually on each sector of activity. Another suggestion would be to replicate the study in another country, to understand if they share the same motivations and cooperate in the internationalization process, even though they have different cultures.

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