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The Cross-Border Economic Relations of Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises from a
Cultural Viewpoint

Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

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CONTENTS

The Aim of the Dissertation	3
The Structure of the Dissertation.....	4
The System of Hypotheses	6
Research Methodology	7
The Evaluation of the Hypotheses.....	10
Conclusions, New and Novel Scientific Findings	14
Research Limitations, Research Directions for the Future.....	16
References of the Thesis Book	18
The Author's Publications in the Topic of the Dissertation	20
The Author's Presentations in the Topic of the Dissertation.....	23

THE AIM OF THE DISSERTATION

Throughout the history of mankind, geography, ethnic differences and political boundaries have helped make distinctions among different people. Over time, societies have evolved into groups of people with distinguishable characteristics which set them apart from other human groups and communities.

It is only in the latter part of the 20th century that advances in technology, telecommunications and transportation have enabled these distinguished groups to more quickly learn about each other, to get more thorough information, whereas the improvement of science has enabled the systematization and the interconnection of the pieces of information as well as the exploration of regularities. As a result of this, internationalization, trans-border trade and cross-cultural business are all terms that have been coined over the past decade(s) to reflect the reality of the world economy (Ablonczy-Mihályka 2009). The business environment has increasingly expanded outside single nations or regions of the world to encompass many differing countries (Sims 2009). Consequently in today's world economy, economic growth and success depend on to what extent economic actors are able to work in international field and to take cultural differences into account to have more successful business relationships (Palazzo 2002).

Based on the above, cross-border economic relations can be found in the centre of the dissertation from a so-far non-researched aspect and territory in Hungary. Consequently during research I analyse the cross-border economic relations – especially those with Austrian partners – of small- and medium-sized enterprises (henceforth SMEs) of the West-Transdanubian region from a cultural aspect.

It results from the above-mentioned that the main aim of the dissertation is to fill a gap in the Hungarian culture research literature since the research is considered to be a non-researched field in Hungary due to both its territory and its respondents. As a result of this, the main aim of the empirical research is to introduce the business culture of SMEs of the West-Transdanubian region as well as the features of their relations with Austrians and the supporting and inhibiting factors of these relations by presenting the theoretical and methodological characteristics of culture research and by using some of its elements. Another aim is to introduce the opportunities and the difficulties of cooperations between diverse cultures as well as to present the most common problems and the potential ways to solve them.

One of the aims of the research by mapping the business culture of the enterprises is to prove or reject the assumption – in case of the analysed enterprises – that in the course of cross-border economic relations of SMEs operating in a border region, thus in intercultural situations the features of cultures change (Barinaga 1998 cited by Topcu 2005). Consequently the typical features of Hungarian national culture do not necessarily appear in the culture of the SMEs operating in the region. A further aim of analysing the business culture is to prove or reject the hypothesis that the business-behavioural specialities of the representatives of analysed SMEs do not show uniform features during intercultural interactions but they can be classified into different behavioural categories.

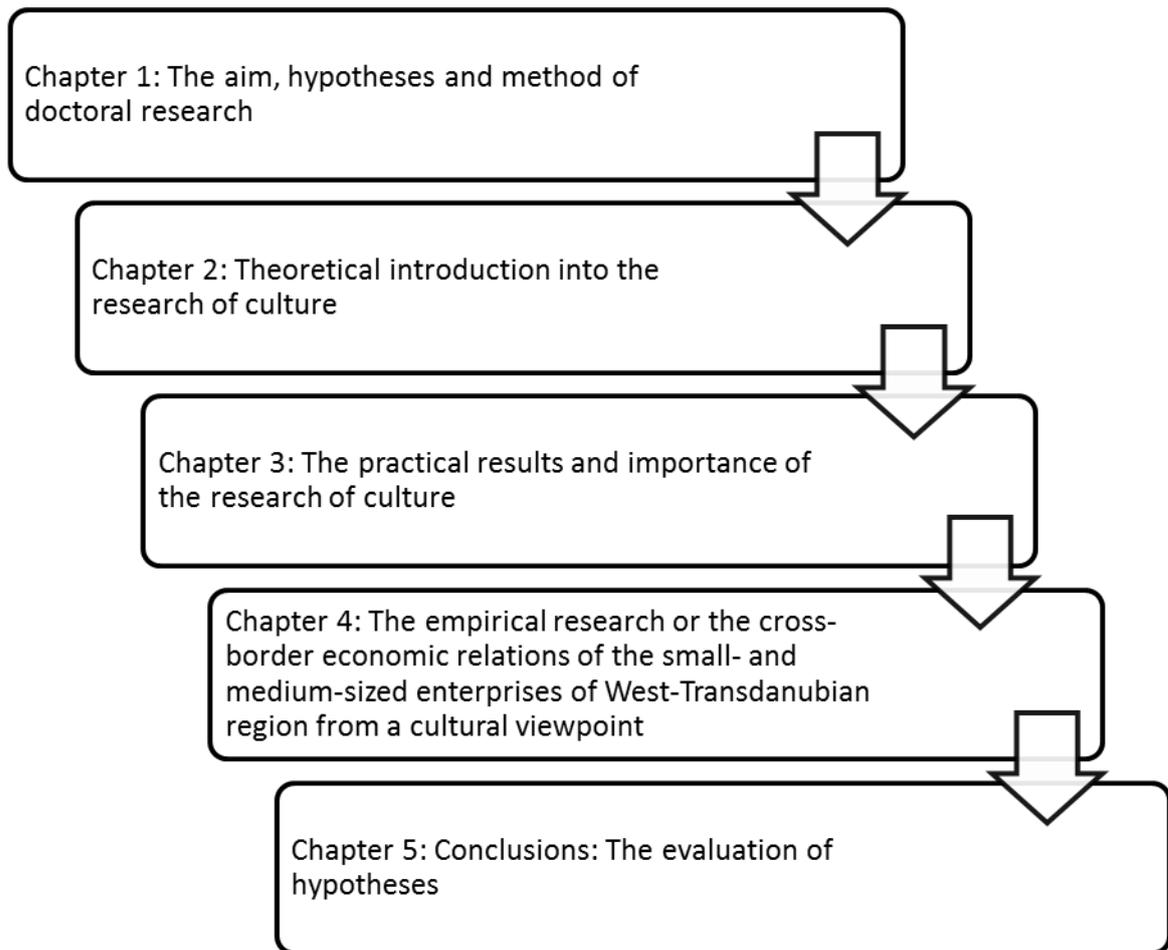
The aim of the doctoral research is to analyse the nature of cross-border economic relations, thus inter alia to reveal whose culture is determinant during relations and who is to solve the problem in case of problematic situations. It can be assumed that in the course of cross-border business relations the culture of the foreign partner – in this case the culture of the Austrian partner – will be determinant. The culture of the Austrian partner is likely to be determinant especially in case of communication, business negotiations and negative critical incidents. To prove or reject these assumptions is also an aim of the doctoral research.

The research is made actual by the fact that since the 20th-21st century the analysis of the cultural grounding of social-economic phenomena has become one of the main theoretical trends of the era (Bakacsi 2006, 35).

THE STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter 1 of the dissertation briefly introduces the aim, the hypotheses and the methodology of the doctoral research (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: THE STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION



Source: Own compilation

Chapter 2 presents the theory of the research of culture. Firstly, I introduce the definitions, the nature and the characteristics of culture; therefore I illustrate the elements, layers and levels of culture. In the second subpoint of the chapter I present the antecedents of the research of culture as well as the diverse approaches of cultures without completeness. To introduce the diverse interpretations creates an important basis for the deeper understanding of culture models. In the next subchapter I introduce only those culture models that are relevant from the point of view of the topic and the aim of the dissertation. These models mean the basis for empirical research. In the last subchapter I deal with the relation of culture and communication by putting a special emphasis on intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity. In connection with intercultural sensitivity I focused on two models from which the first is the most known and most often used one in the fields of intercultural communication and management, whereas the other one is a less-known but very useful model from the viewpoint of the development of intercultural sensitivity.

Chapter 3 introduces the cultural specialities of the two analysed countries with the help of the culture models presented in Chapter 2. Furthermore it shows a few case studies to illustrate the practical importance and use of the research of culture.

Chapter 4 presents the process, the methodology and the findings of empirical research. In the first subchapter the dissertation deals with the applied definition of culture and the approaches of the research of culture. The second subchapter shows the definition of SMEs. The first and second point of the third subchapter introduces the methodology of the research and makes a distinction between the methodology of quantitative and qualitative research. The third subpoint of the subchapter illustrates the findings of quantitative research, whereas the fourth one introduces the findings of qualitative research.

Chapter 5 includes the testing of the hypotheses together with their explanations, the theses, the new and novel findings of the research, the conclusions and the recommendations as well as the limitations of the research and the potential directions of the research for the future.

THE SYSTEM OF HYPOTHESES

In the focus of the dissertation we can find the SMEs of the West-Transdanubian region. The doctoral research deals with the question that how culture and its specialities affect cross-border business relations. Based on this, the research investigates whether the analysed SMEs are aware of the importance of cultural differences in the course of intercultural business interactions, and whether they make the necessary steps to avoid them. Furthermore it deals with that whether the SMEs recognise that the given problem is caused by cultural differences or other factors. Besides these, it also analyses which partner's business culture is determinant in the course of cross-border relations – it can be assumed that the Austrian partner's culture does so – thus it also investigates in accordance with the assumption that it is really the Hungarian partner who resolves the problem and whose culture is taken into account during problem-solving. Finally, it is among the scientific questions of the research to investigate whether the specialities of Hungarian national culture are really non-determinant in the business culture of the analysed SMEs and to determine whether during intercultural interactions the business behaviour of the representatives of SMEs can be really classified into diverse groups.

Based on the above scientific questions I drafted six hypotheses which can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1: THE SYSTEM OF HYPOTHESES

H1: Small- and medium-sized enterprises operating in West-Transdanubian region are aware of the fact that cultural differences have to be taken into account in the course of cross-border economic relations, therefore they make concrete steps.
H2: The specialities of Hungarian national culture are non-determinant in the business culture of the small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region.
H3: In case of intercultural interactions the business behaviour of the representatives of small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region is not uniform but can be classified into diverse categories.
H4: In the course of cross-border economic relations of the small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region, thus during communication and business negotiations, the business culture and the habits of the Austrian partner is determinant.
H5: In case of negative critical incidents caused by cultural differences, the Hungarian small- and medium-sized enterprises of the analysed border-region resolve the problems during which they take the business culture of the Austrian partner into account.
H6: The small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region are not aware of the fact that the given problematic business situation is caused by cultural differences or other factors.

Source: Own compilation

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My research is based on the following methodological bases:

- The elaboration of *domestic and foreign literature* regarding the following fields:
 - the definition, specialities, elements and levels of culture
 - the methods and models of the research of culture
 - the definition of the relation between culture and communication
 - the characteristics of Hungarian and Austrian culture based on the research findings of the most known researchers of culture
 - the introduction of case studies to illustrate the practical importance of the topic.
- *Questionnaire survey* among Hungarian SMEs operating in the West-Transdanubian region between July and October 2012. The size of the sample: 147 enterprises.
- *Interviews were held:*

- with representatives of 16 enterprises from those participating in the questionnaire survey, in two groups.
- in October 2012 in the following settlements of the region: Győr, Abda, Szombathely, Sárvár, Rábapaty, Zalaegerszeg, Gellénháza.

During secondary research I revealed the theoretical background of the topic and its relationships by collecting and elaborating domestic and international literature. In course of this I studied the literature of more scientific fields (e.g. social science, management science, regional science), therefore the elaboration of theoretical background is characterised by interdisciplinary approach.

As for primary research, since there is no uniformly accepted method or model of researching cross-border economic relations, the research approach and the aim of research determine the applied method. To do so, it is necessary to determine the definitions used. In my doctoral dissertation and during the empirical research I use the definition of Vitányi who interprets culture as follows: „*culture is the person's relation with the world created by objectification: thus its relation with nature modified by human, with the created material world, with technical-production processes and consumer habits, with the structures of community and society, therefore with sciences, arts, moral, religion, belief and the everyday attitudes and behaviour of people.*”¹ (Vitányi 1996, 5-6).

In my doctoral dissertation, from the various directions of the research of culture I apply the approach studying the interactions of two nations. My aim is to analyse in details what happens when two persons with different cultural backgrounds interact with each other.

From research approaches, the positivist approach determines the dissertation with interpretative features, since during empirical research the evaluation of responses regarding critical interactions (also) depends on the interpretation of the researcher. The research is psychologically oriented as it aims to compare the cultures based on given values, during which culture is seen a static, objectively existing and slowly changing element and the border of which corresponds with the border of national culture. The research is etic: it compares the cross-border business partners of SMEs operating in the West-Transdanubian region based on universal dimensions.

During primary research I applied more methods which by building on each other enabled the analysis of cross-border business relations from a cultural viewpoint. In the first phase of

¹ The author's own translation.

the research I applied a quantitative method (questionnaire survey) with the help of which I studied the business culture of the analysed SMEs as well as their opinion about cultural differences and the main characteristics and problematic situations of their business relations with Austrian partners. Seeing that regardless of size not only economic principles but individual specialities also affect the successful operating mechanisms of enterprises (Bencsik 2009, 244), during primary research I also made qualitative research. Thus quantitative survey was followed by a qualitative one (structured interviews) in order to get a more detailed picture of cross-border business relations and to better understand those cultural determinations which affect the relations and the thinking, habits and attitudes of participants as well.

The questionnaire consisted of four question blocks:

- demographical data regarding both the enterprise and the respondent,
- SMEs' thoughts about cultural differences and the steps made to avoid problems deriving from cultural differences,
- the characteristics of business culture in case of SMEs of the cross-border region,
- the characteristics, the problematic situations together with their resolving methods of Austro-Hungarian cross-border economic relations.

During the processing of questionnaires I mainly made easier, descriptive statistical analyses, but from multivariate statistical analyses I made principal component analysis to study the business-behavioural specialities of the representatives of analysed SMEs.

Sampling cannot be considered a random one since it focused on a target group based on pre-defined parameters (enterprise size, cross-border business relation, premises in the West-Transdanubian region). As a result of snowball sampling the initial group of respondents was chosen from the author's acquaintanceship, while the other respondents were chosen from those suggested by the members of the initial group of respondents. Sampling is of regional level.

In the second phase of empirical research I conducted qualitative research. I took into consideration that there are only a few rules and methodological conventions regarding qualitative research (Kvale 2005, 27), therefore I chose structured interview as a means of qualitative research, which was motivated by two aims. On the one hand, one of the advantages of this method is that the responses of interviewees are comparable. It is necessary because I applied stratified sampling during the interviews, thus I conducted the interviews in two groups and I compared the responses of the two groups. I made a distinction between the

two groups based on their answers to question 22 of the questionnaire („*Based on your experiences have the cultural differences between Hungarian and Austrian business culture caused problems in the course of business relations yet?*”). To the first group I put those respondents who responded ‘yes’ to this question (38 respondents), whereas to the second group I put those ones who responded ‘no’ to the question (109 respondents). Based on these I conducted 16 interviews altogether, 9 interviewees were chosen from the first group and 7 interviewees were chosen from the second group.

During the structured interviews I asked the questions to the letter and in specified order. My aim was to receive answers to most of the questions of the interview sheet, however, there were questions which cannot or wanted to be answered by the interviewees. In the latter cases I did not ask other e.g. specific or probing questions resulting from the use of structured interviews (Gelei 2002) since on the one hand I did not want to influence the thoughts of the interviewees and on the other I did not want them to answer something irrelevant just to answer to the question. I recorded the responses with the own words of the interviewees at the time of the response, thus I gained more pieces of ‘soft’ information for the analysis.

During the analysis of the interviews I used the approaches of meaning condensation and meaning categorisation as methods of data analysis. The use of meaning condensation was motivated by the possibility of thematisation, whereas the use of meaning categorisation was motivated by the possibility of structuring. Besides these, in some cases I also used the methodological approach of meaning interpretation to reveal the underlying meaning of the responses.

I conducted the interviews in October 2012. Potential interviewees were chosen from the respondents of the questionnaire survey by snowball method.

THE EVALUATION OF THE HYPOTHESES

The empirical chapter of my dissertation can be considered as the test of scientific questions and hypotheses and as a tool to provide a deeper understanding of cultural differences. Based on empirical research every hypothesis could be verified or rejected (Table 2).

TABLE 2: THE EVALUATION OF HYPOTHESES

Hypotheses	The evaluation of hypotheses
<i>H1: Small- and medium-sized enterprises operating in West-Transdanubian region are aware of the fact that cultural differences have to be taken into account in the course of cross-border economic relations, therefore they make concrete steps.</i>	Verified
<i>H2: The specialities of Hungarian national culture are non-determinant in the business culture of the small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region.</i>	Verified
<i>H3: In case of intercultural interactions the business behaviour of the representatives of small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region is not uniform but can be classified into diverse categories.</i>	Verified
<i>H4: In the course of cross-border economic relations of the small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region, thus during communication and business negotiations, the business culture and the habits of the Austrian partner is determinant.</i>	Rejected
<i>H5: In case of negative critical incidents caused by cultural differences, the Hungarian small- and medium-sized enterprises of the analysed border-region resolve the problems during which they take the business culture of the Austrian partner into account.</i>	Rejected
<i>H6: The small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region are not aware of the fact that the given problematic business situation is caused by cultural differences or other factors.</i>	Verified

Source: Own compilation

Having evaluated the hypotheses I framed five theses (Table 3) which respond to the scientific questions of the doctoral research.

TABLE 3: THE SYSTEM OF HYPOTHESES AND THESES

Hypotheses	Theses
<p>H1: <i>Small- and medium-sized enterprises operating in West-Transdanubian region are aware of the fact that cultural differences have to be taken into account in the course of cross-border economic relations, therefore they make concrete steps.</i></p>	<p>T1: <i>I stated that despite the analysed small- and medium-sized enterprises are aware of the importance of cultural differences they do not recognize when the problematic business situation is caused by cultural differences.</i></p>
<p>H6: <i>The small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region are not aware of the fact that the given problematic business situation is caused by cultural differences or other factors.</i></p>	
<p>H2: <i>The specialities of Hungarian national culture are non-determinant in the business culture of the small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region.</i></p>	<p>T2: <i>The research verified that the specialities of Hungarian national culture are non-determinant in the business culture of the analysed small- and medium-sized enterprises of the region; moreover the business culture is not uniform within the region since five main types of business behaviour appear in the analysed region.</i></p> <p>T3: <i>It was proven that there are differences among the business behaviours of the representatives of analysed enterprises in case of intercultural interactions based on their deal- or relationship-focus.</i></p>
<p>H3: <i>In case of intercultural interactions the business behaviour of the representatives of small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region is not uniform but can be classified into diverse categories.</i></p>	

<p>H4: <i>In the course of cross-border economic relations of the small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region, thus during communication and business negotiations, the business culture and the habits of the Austrian partner is determinant.</i></p>	<p>T4: <i>I confirmed with my analysis that since the business culture of each partner is non-determinant during Hungarian-Austrian economic relations thus problems occurred are solved by one or the other party based on the situation and in the course of this the considered business culture also depends on the situation.</i></p>
<p>H5: <i>In case of negative critical incidents caused by cultural differences, the Hungarian small- and medium-sized enterprises of the analysed border-region resolve the problems during which they take the business culture of the Austrian partner into account.</i></p>	<p>T5: <i>My research verified that in most cases the differences in time perception and communicative style as well as the differences between the separation of private and professional life cause conflicts and problematic situations during Hungarian-Austrian cross-border economic relations.</i></p>

Source: Own compilation

Thesis T1 demonstrated that the analysed small- and medium-sized enterprises of West-Transdanubian region are aware of the importance of cultural differences, nevertheless, they do not recognize when a problematic situation is caused by cultural differences.

Thesis T2 verified that the specialities of Hungarian national culture are non-determinant in the business culture of the analysed small- and medium-sized enterprises of the region; furthermore it also proved that the business culture is not uniform within the region since there are five main types of business behaviour in the analysed region.

Thesis T3 confirmed that the business behaviour of the representatives of analysed enterprises in intercultural interactions differs based on their deal- and relationship-focus.

Thesis T4 corroborated that since the business culture of each party is non-determinant during Hungarian-Austrian cross-border economic relations, the solving of the problems occurred is situation-dependent during which the considered business culture also depends on situation.

Thesis T5 demonstrated that in most cases the differences in time perception and communicative style as well as the differences between the separation of private and professional life inflict conflicts and problematic situations during Hungarian-Austrian cross-border economic relations.

CONCLUSIONS, NEW AND NOVEL SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS

In my dissertation I set the aim to analyse small- and medium-sized enterprises of the West-Transdanubian region from a cultural viewpoint by putting the emphasis on Hungarian-Austrian interactions. Before the survey I studied the importance of culture, the main models of researching culture as well as the relations between culture and communication and I also showed the main specialities of Hungarian and Austrian culture. After that I introduced the practical importance of researching culture by illustrating some case studies. Having studied the theoretical framework I defined the frames of my empirical research which was conducted from Hungarian aspect. I conducted the primary research in two phases, quantitative and qualitative research. During quantitative research I analysed the characteristics and the problematic areas of Hungarian-Austrian cross-border business relations as well as the business culture of the SMEs of the region. In course of the qualitative research I analysed to what extent the SMEs of the region are aware of the backgrounds and the causes of negative critical incidents.

Theses resulting from the research responded to the scientific questions of the dissertation. It was verified that the analysed enterprises are aware of cultural differences and they also make certain steps to have more successful business relations. On the other hand it was also demonstrated that during problematic situations the analysed SMEs do not recognize if the problem is inflicted by cultural differences. I also proved that in the business relations Hungarian SMEs are not inferior to their Austrian partners since the business culture of each party is non-determinant during business relations, moreover problem-solving is dependent upon the situation thus the considered business culture during problem-solving also depends on the given situation. It was also corroborated that the business culture of the analysed SMEs of the region differs from Hungarian national culture and it shows similarities with Austrian national culture (e.g. monochronism, low-context communication).

The new and novel scientific findings of the dissertation are related to literature review and empirical research; and these are the followings:

- During literature review I stated that regarding West-Transdanubian region there are no database which contains the precise number of Hungarian small- and medium-sized enterprises, their cross-border business relations and their main foreign partners. Therefore it cannot be stated with which countries these SMEs have cross-border business relations so to my mind it would be very useful to compile a database containing the above information.

- In connection with empirical research the most important new scientific finding of the dissertation derives from territorial and corporate delimitation since a research like this has not been made for either West-Transdanubian region or SMEs yet. Therefore the cultural analysis of Hungarian-Austrian cross-border business relations of analysed SMEs of the region is considered to be a new scientific finding. Within this new scientific findings are the followings:
 - I proved that although the analysed SMEs are aware of the importance of cultural differences and they make steps to consider them, they do not recognize during critical incidents if the problem is inflicted by cultural differences.
 - I demonstrated that 116 SMEs from 147 make some concrete steps to know cultural differences, which mainly – in 72% of the cases – means that they study the culture of the foreign partner in advance and they negotiate by considering them.
 - I proved that during Austro-Hungarian cross-border business relations problematic situations are mostly inflicted by cultural differences and within this by the differences in time perception and communicative style as well as by the separation of private and professional life.
 - I revealed that even the similarities (e.g. monochronism, low-context communication) with Austrian culture can cause problems during business relations.
 - I stated that problematic situations are solved by one or the other party depending on the situation and it also depends on the situation that whose business culture is taken into consideration during problem-solving.
 - I demonstrated that cultural differences are important enough to ruin economic partnerships.
 - I determined critical interactions related to cultural dimensions with regard to Hungarian-Austrian business relations.
- The identification of the business culture of analysed SMEs of West-Transdanubian region can also be seen as new scientific finding as the literature review proved that this type of research does not exist.
 - Regarding business culture it is a novel finding that the business culture of analysed SMEs differs from the specialities of Hungarian national culture.

- Regarding the identification of the forms of business behaviour of the representatives of analysed SMEs in intercultural interactions, the followings can be considered as new scientific findings:
 - The business culture of analysed Hungarian SMEs of the region is not uniform, but five types of business behaviour can be identified.
 - The types of business behaviour can be drawn up by one dimension of Gesteland (2005), although I used the dimensions of Hofstede (1980), Trompenaars (1995) and Hall (1975 and 1990) when framing the attitude-statements.
 - A distinction can be made between the business behaviour of the representatives of analysed SMEs based on their deal- or relationship-focus.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS, RESEARCH DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

During the research I had to face some obstacles. One of the main obstacles of the research was the methodological determination deriving from the limited access to corporate databases. Since there is no database which would separate SMEs from micro enterprises, there is no database which would contain how many Hungarian SMEs from West-Transdanubian region have foreign partners; therefore the basic population was unknown. This was the reason for applying snowball sampling method, consequently representativeness is materialised only with regard to the analysed SMEs.

Another obstacle of the research was snowball sampling method as it inflicted a low number of participants in qualitative survey. During questionnaire survey I only knew a few of the respondents personally and from them only a few was willing to participate in qualitative survey as well, which caused a low sample size in case of qualitative survey.

In my dissertation I dealt only with a small part of cross-border business relations, therefore in the course of the research more future directions of the research arouse with which the knowledge about culturally-affected cross-border economic relations could be further developed and deepened.

The most important research directions for the future can be as follows:

- A future direction of the research can be to examine the cross-border business relations of Hungarian SMEs of West-Transdanubian region, the findings of which could be used by organisations supporting SMEs.

- Related to the previous one, by knowing the exact number of Hungarian SMEs of the analysed region another direction could be to make a representative survey about the business culture of the SMEs and the specialities of Hungarian-Austrian economic relations.
- Another direction could be to make clusters with the help of the factors to analyse how many and what kind of individuals are in each cluster and based on this to define specialities regarding the clusters. By doing so more detailed information could be gained about the SMEs and their business culture as well.
- A cross-table analysis would be useful too as important conclusions could be made in connection with the business culture of the analysed SMEs and the business behaviour of their representatives as well.
- It would be also beneficial to make a difference between the business attitudes of men and women and younger and older respondents, therefore the generational and gender differences could be revealed, which could provide new or novel scientific results and some valuable practical suggestions for SMEs as well.
- Another future direction of the research could be to make the same survey from the viewpoint of the Austrians; consequently more precise pieces of information could be gained together from the two surveys regarding the culturally-affected being of Austro-Hungarian business relations and the thoughts of Austrians about the problematic fields of the relations.

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