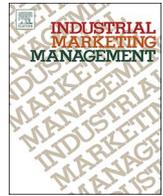




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/indmarman

Target and position article

Alliance capabilities: A review and research agenda

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Alliance capabilities
Strategic alliances
Alliance management
Systematic review
Micro-process
Practice

ABSTRACT

The ability to manage, integrate and learn from strategic alliances is essential in today's interconnected and globalized economy. Despite the managerial relevance of alliance capability, there remain several open questions related to the conceptualization of alliance capabilities, their antecedents, processes and outcomes, and future research needs. We address these issues through a systematic review of 94 articles from top-tier journals focused on alliance capabilities. This study makes three contributions. The study (1) defines the concept of alliance capabilities when operating in a dyadic relational context by reviewing the rich alliance capability literature, acknowledging and bridging the works conducted in different fields. We (2) identify the main processes, antecedents and outcomes of alliance capabilities and, through this analysis, pave the way for (3) the creation of a comprehensive research agenda to direct future research efforts. Overall, this study extends the existing literature by providing an integrative view of alliance capability research in various fields.

1. Introduction

The ability to manage, integrate and learn from strategic alliances has long been a central topic in business marketing (Möller, 2013; Palmatier, Miao, & Fang, 2007; Ritter & Gemünden, 2004), strategic management research (Anand & Khanna, 2000; Kale, Dyer, & Singh, 2002), entrepreneurship (Felzensztein, Stringer, Benson-Rea, & Freeman, 2014; Swan et al., 2007), and operations research (Gunasekaran, Lai, & Edwinceng, 2008; Spekman, Spear, & Kamauff, 2002). In a networked economy, it is increasingly important to have the ability to engage in collaborative value creation with regard to joint innovation, marketing alliances, customer care, or supply/value chain coordination (Lambe, Spekman, & Hunt, 2002; Möller, 2013; Niesten & Jolink, 2015; Ritter & Gemünden, 2004). The ability to manage, integrate and learn from alliances has significant effects on value co-creation and capture, innovation, supplier and customer performance (Sluyts, Matthyssens, Martens, & Streukens, 2011). Thus, both researchers and companies have become interested in processes, structures, tools and activities that are relevant to managing, integrating and learning in alliances (Draulans, DeMan, & Volberda, 2003; Kale & Singh, 2009), their antecedents and their outcomes.

Given the recognized relevance of alliance capability (Draulans et al., 2003; Schreiner, Kale, & Corsten, 2009), or relational capability (Kohtamäki, Partanen, & Möller, 2013; Paulraj, 2011) (alliance capability phenomenon has received several labels) (Niesten & Jolink,

2015; Rothaermel & Deeds, 2006), there is a surprising lack of consensus on the core processes involved in alliance capability, its antecedents and outcomes. This lack of consensus may result from the fragmentation of research into several disciplines or theoretical strands (Agostini & Nosella, 2015; Niesten & Jolink, 2015). Alliance capabilities have been addressed in research rooted in the US-based strategic alliances (Anand & Khanna, 2000; Kale & Singh, 2009), the industrial marketing and purchasing group (IMP) (Möller & Halinen, 1999; Möller & Svahn, 2003; Ritter & Gemünden, 2003), general marketing studies focusing on channel relationships (Johnson, Sohi, & Grewal, 2004; Sivasdas & Dwyer, 2000), and operations and supply management (Hartmann, Roehrich, Frederiksen, & Davies, 2014; Mu & Di Benedetto, 2012; Paulraj, Lado, & Chen, 2008). Thus, the field has become rich in concepts and empirical research. Although that richness may attract researchers by generating ideas for new studies, the diversity of research may add to the difficulty of determining what alliance capability means in a given study. This is not merely a “scholastic” issue, because without a shared vocabulary, a coherent theory of alliance capability cannot be created. Moreover, the richness of empirical research requires structuring and integration. Therefore, there is a call to integrate knowledge on alliance capabilities without sacrificing the richness and depth in the field. More specifically, there is a need to define alliance capabilities and to address the processes, antecedents, and outcomes of those capabilities.

To fill in the gap, this study intends to conduct a systematic review

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.10.014>

Received 8 March 2016; Received in revised form 25 October 2017; Accepted 27 October 2017

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(Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003) of alliance capabilities that focuses on top-tier journals and covers strategic, marketing and operations and supply management perspectives. To delimit this study, we avoid conducting a broad review of inter-organizational business relationships and networks (Möller, 2013; Oliver & Ebers, 1998; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011) that focuses on the management of alliance portfolios or business networks along the entire alliance lifecycle (Heimeriks, Bingham, & Laamanen, 2015). Instead, this study concentrates on the capabilities needed for managing dyadic strategic alliances in the post-formation stage. We define a strategic alliance as a purposive relationship between two independent firms involving exchanges, sharing, or the co-development of capabilities to achieve mutually relevant benefits (Kale & Singh, 2009: 46). This study intends to contribute by 1) defining the concept of alliance capabilities when operating in a dyadic relational context, 2) identifying the main processes, antecedents and outcomes of alliance capabilities, and 3) proposing a research agenda to direct future research efforts. Our study complements previous reviews (e.g., Niesten & Jolink, 2015; Wang & Rajagopalan, 2015), focusing on US-based alliance capability research by bridging the findings from strategy, marketing and operations research. We advance the field of alliance capabilities by encouraging qualitative, ethnographic works on micro-level processes, practices, and behavioral micro-foundations. The future alliance capability literature may have a great deal to add both to the macro-micro discussion that has surrounded the micro-foundations movement (Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015) and to practice theory (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

2. Methodology

This study follows the well-established guidelines for a systematic review (Tranfield et al., 2003), which involve defining search terms, identifying the target journals, and establishing criteria for article relevance. We systematically searched the top-tier journals (CABS3 and CABS4 level) in marketing, entrepreneurship, strategic management, organization, innovation, operations, supply chain management, and management and applied the following 18 search terms, which are aligned with Niesten and Jolink (2015: 3): “alliance capability*” OR “alliance competence*” OR “relational capability*” OR “relational competence*” OR “relationship capability*” OR “relationship competence*” OR “collaborat* competence*” OR “collaborat* capability*” OR “CRM capability*” OR “CRM competence*” OR “customer-relationship management capability*” OR “customer-relationship management competence*” OR “customer relationship management capability*” OR “customer relationship management competence*” OR “supplier-relationship management capability*” OR “supplier-relationship management competence*” OR “supplier relationship management capability*” OR “supplier relationship management competence*”.

Searches were conducted based on article titles, keywords, and abstracts. Abstracts were included because they are considered to contain the most relevant concepts of a study. The initial search identified 109 articles, 15 of which had to be discarded based on a more detailed analysis of their abstracts. Thus, 94 articles on alliance capabilities were included. Considering that we focused on top-tier journals, this is a significant number. From the search and final data, we excluded studies focusing on capabilities related to management of networks and alliance portfolios. In addition, we excluded all the generic inter-organizational relationship and network literatures. It is also noteworthy that we excluded general customer relationship management (CRM), supplier management, and R&D alliance studies that do not explicitly focus on the required capabilities.

3. Alliance capabilities: A critical review

The current inter-organizational literature has been developing since the late 1970s, and a vast amount of research (including multiple reviews on inter-organizational collaboration) has focused primarily on

relationships (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Khanna, Gulati, & Nohria, 1998; Majchrzak, Jarvenpaa, & Bagherzadeh, 2014; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011) or networks (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Ebers, 1997; Zaheer, Gözübüyük, & Milanov, 2010). The scope of alliance research has involved numerous theoretical perspectives, including the resource-based view and strategic capabilities (Das & Bing-Sheng, 2000), organizational learning theory (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Kale & Singh, 2007), the interaction approach (IMP school, Håkansson & Snehota, 2006; Johnsen & Ford, 2006), the transaction cost approach (Rindfleisch & Heide, 1997), the resource-dependency framework (Gulati & Sycht, 2007), social exchange theory (Das & Teng, 2002), and the social capital approach (Jiang, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2011; Uzzi, 1997).

The explicit use of alliance, relational and network capability constructs can be traced back to the late 1980s. The management of alliance relationships was addressed with the alliance capability construct of Dyer and colleagues (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Kale et al., 2002) in the strategy field. During the same period, Håkansson (1987), Gemünden, Ritter and Heydebreck (1996; see also Ritter, 1999; Ritter & Gemünden, 2003), and Möller and Halinen (1999; see also Möller & Svahn, 2003) began to examine the role of capabilities in the industrial marketing field. Since then, the number of alliance capability studies has expanded significantly, covering a wide range of issues related to customer and supplier relationships, supply chain management, collaborative product development, R&D and innovation (Niesten & Jolink, 2015).

3.1. Definitions and dimensions of alliance capabilities

The literature on alliance capabilities is relatively recent, with the initial articles published in the late 1990s and the number of publications increasing from 2005 onward. Indeed, more than 86% (81 of 94) of the articles in our review were published between 2005 and 2017. In addition, the number of empirical studies is still limited but is expanding (we included 66 empirical studies in our dataset, of which 44 utilized only quantitative methods, 16 only qualitative methods and 6 both quantitative and qualitative methods; the remaining 28 articles were conceptual). Broadly speaking, the field of alliance capability has been significantly influenced by disciplines such as 1) management, strategy and entrepreneurship, 2) marketing, and 3) operations and supply management. Of the 94 studied articles, 44 (47%) were published in management, strategy and entrepreneurship journals, 26 (28%) were published in marketing journals, and 24 (25%) were published in operations and supply management journals.

Although it is rooted in management and marketing disciplines, the literature on alliance capabilities has utilized various concepts to reference the alliance capability phenomenon (see Table 1 for a detailed compilation of the definitions). The terms alliance capability and alliance management capability have typically been used in management and strategy publications (Kale & Singh, 2007, 2009; Wang & Rajagopalan, 2015), whereas labels such as relational capability (Jiang et al., 2011; Storey & Kocabasoglu-Hillmer, 2013) and relational competence (Phan, Styles, & Patterson, 2005; Wittmann, Hunt, & Arnett, 2009) have been mainly used in the field of marketing.

In the previous literature, alliance capabilities have been utilized to reflect both strategic/operational capabilities and dynamic capabilities. The former term builds on the resource-based view (RBV) (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984), whereby competitive advantage is considered to be created by strategic capabilities (such as alliance capability), which have been generated in combination with processes and competencies (Kraaijenbrink, Spender, & Groen, 2010; Long & Vickers-Koch, 1995). At the micro-level, processes consist of structures (e.g., alliance function), routines (e.g., alliance evaluation), tools (e.g., the alliance evaluation template) and activities (e.g., using an alliance evaluation template to evaluate a specific alliance) (Danneels, 2010; Eggers & Kaplan, 2013; Felin, Foss, Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012). These processes have sometimes been deemed micro-processes (Argote & Ren, 2012; Vaara, Kleymann, & Seristö, 2004) and at other times, practices

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