
Editorial: Relational approaches to business network development: new insights and future research directions

Introduction

Many industries operating within global environments are facing major disruption from technological, ecological and social forces (e.g. Song *et al.*, 2023), and these have the potential to radically reshape current and future business practices within and across firms (e.g. Dubey *et al.*, 2021; Hu, 2022; Sharma *et al.*, 2022). Digital transformation (AI, blockchain, cybersecurity, etc.), energy transitions (renewable resources, carbon border adjustment mechanisms, etc.) and various socio-political change agents (consumer boycotts, trade policy, ESG regulation, etc.) are prime examples of such disruption that have started to impact the way firms are configuring both their operations and relationships (e.g. Cortez and Johnston, 2020; Xue and Li, 2022). From a business-to-business (B2B) perspective, these and other environmental changes mean firms need to reconsider existing business network development strategies to reconfigure global value chains (Kano *et al.*, 2020), orchestrate network resilience (Al Adem *et al.*, 2022) and reimage inter-firm value creation (Makkonen *et al.*, 2019), among other changes. In considering these and other potential global challenges along with firm responses within B2B settings, our call for papers sought out research examining different approaches to business network development, which aimed to challenge some of the existing and underlying assumptions to business strategy in this domain.

The aim of this special section was to attract papers which could help explain how firm and public policy decision makers can develop more effective strategies to take full advantage of emerging opportunities, while at the same time negate the potential threats associated with environmental disruption. Based on our own research and industry engagement, we identified several B2B-related issues which warranted further investigation. For instance, we recognize our understanding of central B2B concepts, like relationship marketing, are highly influenced by socio-cultural factors like religiosity and psychological contracts (PC), necessitating adjustment by managers establishing and nurturing relationships in new contexts (Kingshott *et al.*, 2021). We identify firms are taking new approaches to pursue crucial overseas business opportunities, such as leveraging relationships between

innovation intermediaries to increase relational proximity with international partners and overcome liabilities of newness and foreignness (Schepis, 2021). Furthermore, we recognize innovation platforms like living labs are also using relational governance practices to bring together diverse stakeholders to work on sustainability innovation, which represents a topic of increasing importance as we seek to address often contrasting economic and environmental goals (Cantù *et al.*, 2021). While B2B marketing and networks have been researched across various contexts, we follow the recent call by Möller and Halinen (2022) to advance the B2B domains of the marketing discipline by reconsidering our paradigmatic assumptions and reengaging with current business and societal challenges.

We received a total of 25 submissions to this special section, from across different research contexts and theoretical perspectives. A number was desk rejected due to lack of alignment with our call and/or quality issues; however, we were able to advance the majority to peer review. Thanks to the contributions of a large group of esteemed reviewers, papers were put through a rigorous review process over several rounds, and submitting authors were subsequently provided detailed guidance to improve their manuscripts. While many papers were unable to overcome the critiques identified during this process, we greatly appreciate the efforts of all submitting authors and wish them the best for the further development of their papers. In the end, five papers were selected for inclusion in this special section, each offering a unique perspective in line with our overall theme and representing a variety of approaches (two quantitative, two qualitative and one conceptual). We now introduce these five papers and provide a summary of their approach and main contributions. After, we consider the implications of this new research and propose several directions for future research.

Articles in the Special Section

Klarin and Sharmelly – organizational networking processes in turbulent environments: strategic sensemaking perspective

In their exploratory multi-case study, Klarin and Sharmelly (2023) investigated the organizational networking processes that entrepreneurs and organizations use in making sense of rapidly changing contexts. They focus on emerging markets, in particular the transition economies of Russia and India, whereby rapid change results in weak or absent institutional environments. Strategic sensemaking is considered critical to success in such markets; however, in contrast to developed economies, there is a greater reliance on informal networks. They draw upon Horak *et al.* (2020) to extend the literature on informal networking, by considering the interorganizational networking processes employed by top management teams to find a strategic fit in the firms' operational environment. In aligning with the theme of this special section, this paper takes a strategic sensemaking focus, framed at the meso level, considering ways in which CEOs and organizational directors shape the vision and direction of organizations by reducing equivocality.

This paper forms part of special section "Relational approaches to business network development: new insights and future research directions", guest edited by Daniel Schepis and Russel P.J. Kingshott.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/0885-8624.htm>



Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
39/7 (2024) 1381–1385
© Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 0885-8624]
[DOI 10.1108/JBIM-07-2024-642]

The authors adopt a qualitative case study approach, focusing on a Russian pharmaceutical company and an Indian automobile manufacturing company over an extended period. Both are depicted as fast-growing and strategically important industries in the context of their respective countries; each with their own idiosyncratic institutional voids. Narrative analysis is used to examine in-depth interviews with senior managers, using both holistic-content and categorical-content data analysis approaches.

The paper demonstrates that firms initially rely on informal networks (*blat/svyazi* in Russia and *jaan-pehchaan/jan-pehchan* in India) and later formal networks (in the form of *bureaucratic* followed by *proprietary*) to make sense of the changes and uncertainties in turbulent environments. In offering a novel contribution, strategic sensemaking is presented as a cyclical process, dependent on organizational networks from the outset and continuing over several iterations. The study documents the entire process of sensemaking from environmental scanning to organizational performance, as well as feedback loops throughout the growth of an organization. These findings extend the B2B networking construct to a more inclusive organizational networking construct, which incorporates formal and informal networks, as well as intra and interorganizational relationships that are reflective of different institutional environments.

Sima, Chung and Liu – organizational learning, strategic Guanxi networking, co-creation marketing strategy and business-to-business export performance: evidence from emerging market export venture

Taking a different perspective of strategic networking, Sima *et al.* (2023) drew on the organizational learning and relational governance literatures to help explain the export performance of firms originating from within emerging markets. While existing literature has previously considered links between prior performance and current performance based on organizational learning and the effects of past success, most studies to date have only considered the export performance of firms from developed countries. Due to this gap, the impact of relational governance mechanisms, such as *guanxi*, has not previously been fully considered, despite their critical importance to Chinese-exporting firms. Given the prominence of Chinese firms in international trade and similarities between *guanxi* and social capital concepts in other developing markets, this paper addresses an important gap.

This paper uses a quantitative methodology to explore the role of export ventures' performance (past) on *guanxi* networking, cocreation marketing strategies and present performance. A secondary data set is used from a major Chinese manufacturer which represents many B2B ventures in emerging markets. The data covers all transactions between 2013 and 2014, including information relating to the firm's operations in 25 emerging markets. Profitability, ROA and ROI are taken as dependent variables, while preceding year performance, meeting frequency and co-creation of marketing strategy were taken as independent variables. Structural equation modeling is used by the researchers for the underlying analysis.

Findings suggest that *guanxi* networking and co-creation strategy mediate the relationship between export venture performance in the preceding year and export venture performance in the following year. The study offers directions for building strong *guanxi* networking capabilities and co-creation opportunities when the positive effect of past export performance is absent. Through these findings, the authors propose that strategic *guanxi* networking-related factors are included in the prior performance-current performance paradigm. In contributing to the organizational learning, co-creation and relational governance literature, the paper also extends theoretical implications into the significant context of Chinese export ventures.

Barry, Graca, Maskara and Benjamin – business-to-business informal networking influences on relational outcomes in emerging and developed nations: a multi-regional empirical study

Following the theme of informal networking practices across cultural contexts, Barry *et al.* (2024) examined how the strength of informal ties, together with formal institutional stability, affects B2B relational outcomes via favor reciprocity norms (FRN). Favor reciprocity is considered an important topic in B2B settings, given its influence on social exchange practices between buyers and sellers. This study extends the global relevance of B2B research, by taking into account indigenous socio-cultural (ISC) practices such as *guanxi*, *wasta* and *compadrazgo*, which address institutional voids in their respective contexts. In doing so, this paper responds to calls for studies which examine non-Western contexts and clarify context-specific differences to enhance our understanding of these central relational building concepts.

The authors thus undertake a cross-country study, based on online data from Hong Kong, Portugal, Colombia and Kuwait. This country selection captured differences in economic development and the strength of informal ties in each setting. A random sample of 401 buyers and managers was used, which helped examine the impact of underlying relational constructs such as favor reciprocity, commitment, benevolent trust and exchange performance satisfaction. The study tested a typology representing the four inherent states (Clubs, Sociocracies, Clans and Compadres) within a relationship marketing model using structural equation modeling.

Findings conclude that in developed economies with robust formal institutions, adverse aspects of FRN are heightened unless informal networks are motivated by strict socio-moral obligations. This supports the idea that contractual governance serves more as a competing substitute than a complement to relational governance. In contrast, trust-building processes are more important in regions with low uncertainty tolerance, as its presence helps to mitigate these negative effects. This paper highlights the role of institutional forces, trust building and conditions surrounding positive and negative aspects of reciprocity practices. Through the lens of social exchange theory, the paper reveals how suppliers from developed nations require more than cultural communication insights when engaging in business in emerging markets.

Polater, Yumurtacı Hüseyinoğlu, Kingshott and Schepis – drivers of geographical indication food supply chain performance: a business-to-business network perspective

Relational dynamics are also explored by Polater *et al.* (2024), specifically within the context of Geographic Indication (GI) food supply chain networks (FSCN). Food supply chains are a priority for every nation, and, due to numerous recent disruptions means approaches to improving resilience and sustainability are even more critical. B2B researchers have shown increased attention to GI contexts in particular, given their embedding in complex relational and institutional governance structures, and the need to better understand relationship marketing in creating value for diverse stakeholders. This paper sets out to first identify the factors influencing GI FSCN performance and then using the dual lenses of social exchange and social capital, explore the role of underlying relational dynamics in network performance.

A qualitative study was developed based on 30 in-depth interviews with key informants across a variety of organizations within Turkish GI FSCNs. The sample covered a variety of different stakeholders relevant to GI networks, representing producers, retailers, intermediaries and supporting organizations. A grounded theory coding approach was used for the analysis, teasing out central themes that helped underpinning the development of a conceptual framework.

The study identifies several formal and informal mechanisms which govern GI FSCNs. These two broad forms of governance were found to influence network performance, which were broken down into logistics, production, business and socio-economic performance dimensions. In addition, transparency, GI traceability, trust and PC violations were proposed to mediate the link between governance and network performance outcomes. By taking a relational marketing perspective to investigating this important GI context, this paper shows the relevance of informal governance mechanisms and the need to consider them alongside more formal structures in improving network performance. Moreover, the underlying conceptual framework that emerged from the research findings offers a more holistic framing for others seeking to measure performance in similar networks.

Dessaigne – agency in business networks: combining IMP research with a relational sociological perspective to challenge views on sustainability and ethics

In the final paper of this special section, Dessaigne (2024) examined the important topic of agency in business networks. This conceptual paper aims to clarify the ontological assumptions relating to interaction within business networks in IMP research, refining these assumptions from a relational sociological perspective. The author scrutinizes the IMP scientific paradigm to consider what it really means to be in relation to other actors within business networks, thereby supporting more theory-driven research in this domain.

A problematization contribution strategy (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011) is used to challenge implicit assumptions of IMP business networks research regarding social ontology and provides future researchers with a transdisciplinary

perspective on agency in business networks. Using sustainability as an example, this paper highlights the importance of local interactions to illustrate how business networks can change through the process of meaning sharing.

The paper therefore helps to bridge IMP and relational sociological perspectives, extending our knowledge of what being interdependent within business networks implies in terms of sensemaking and network dynamics. In focusing on symbolic interaction processes within local interactions, the relational sociological perspective adopted by the author enhances the robustness of the ARA framework and encourages better theorizing regarding the actor dimension. This bridging also contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of the relationship between local communication and business network patterns, offering guidance for future research concerned with relations, interdependences and interactions.

Future research directions

The brief summaries of the five papers in this special section serve to highlight some of the potential perspectives used to examine how business networks can be developed. However, some common themes are also evident and worth expanding on as they offer insights into potential future research directions in this important domain of the marketing discipline. First, while our original call for papers took an open approach to potential topic areas and issues related to strategy in business networks, we note that the final papers have all taken a relational focus in helping to explain how such networks operate. This indicates that business relationships, as the building blocks of B2B networks, remain a topic of research interest that has sustained over decades (Möller and Halinen, 1999). The complex dynamics and characteristics that underpin business relationships have long challenged marketers and motivated the scholarly quest to explain their influence on organizational outcomes (Holmlund and Törnroos, 1997). Despite attracting research from multiple perspectives (Ojansivu, *et al.*, 2020), it is acutely evident from the manuscript submissions received that B2B marketing remains a very relationship-orientated domain, largely reliant on human interactions and the sociocultural contexts they are embedded in. However, we do anticipate that to fully understanding those business networks grounded in these social exchange perspectives, future research also needs to recognize the role that human and “non-human” modes of engagement between firms (e.g. Kingshott *et al.*, 2020) play in the context of attaining organizational and business network outcomes.

Second, in acknowledging the enduring importance of such relational perspectives in studying business networks, the special section articles also indicate that future research should continue to consider how B2B relationships might be influenced by changes in the global business environment. For example, how can grand challenges such as industrial decarbonization be addressed through new types of collaborative partnerships between diverse stakeholders like energy producers, manufacturers, government and start-ups? And, how can they manage added pressures like competing

goals, multiple externalities and time constraints from international agreements? Similarly, as geopolitical tensions and business growth objectives push many firms into exploring distant international markets, how might managers overcome with cultural, ethical and legitimacy challenges in establishing new relationships? We also anticipate that technological advancements are likely to impact business relationships, presenting new questions relating to impacts on relationship development processes, power structures within affected value chains and organizational boundaries between partners. As firms or industry groups seek to take more proactive and strategic approaches to coordinating these unfamiliar relationships, further attention should be paid to relevant concepts at different network levels such as strategic alliances, network orchestration and market shaping (e.g. Mollinger-Sahba *et al.*, 2021; Schepis *et al.*, 2021; Flaig and Ottosson, 2022). These trends, and many more yet to be realized, will challenge our understanding of B2B relationships and network development and continue to provide scholars fruitful avenues for research.

Third, it is worth reflecting on the theoretical implications raised by the papers in this special section and spotlight how these may also guide future research. Several papers have investigated the effects of indigenous socio-cultural (ISC) practices, including *guanxi*, *wasta* and *compadrazgo* (i.e. Barry *et al.*, 2024); *blat/svyazi* and *jaan-pehchaan/jan-pehchan* (Klarin and Sharmelly, 2023) and *guanxi* (Sima *et al.*, 2023). Given such avenues for investigation are still in their infancy, we concur with the respective authors advocating further research is required to better understand aspects like effects of firm size, collaborative marketing activities and ongoing sensemaking processes. As Dessaigne (2024) suggested, a relational sociological perspective can be useful for investigating these cross-cultural issues, given its attention to culturally embedded interactions and their associated symbols, schemata and emotions. Finally, several papers have also explicitly highlighted the relevance of informal networks in B2B marketing (Barry *et al.*, 2024; Klarin and Sharmelly, 2023; Polater *et al.*, 2024), and accordingly further research is needed in relation to better clarifying the influence of different institutional environments, interrelationships between informal and formal networks and their ongoing governance arrangements. In conclusion, these special section papers all point to global complexities and the need to consider how contextual factors challenge our assumptions around the role of relationships between organizations in business network development, therefore we hope this special section encourages further research and contemplation in this important and nascent domain of the marketing discipline.

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