

Small and Medium Enterprises Marketing Alliances

Past Research and Future Directions

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Abstract

Recently, strategic alliances have more and more drawn the attention of both the academic and industrial communities. Many streams of research have developed around this topic and some reviews of the body of literature have been done by different scholars, but they all refer to alliances in general, thus having a broad scope. In the last years, internationalization has become one of the most important focuses of firms, overall for SMEs, hence marketing alliances have started to gain acceptance and scholars to investigate them. However, a review of past research about this topic that outlines the main evidences, gaps and areas that need to be inquired has not been done yet. Consequently, this paper aims at carrying out a detailed analysis of the literature about marketing alliances, in order to organize the existing literature, synthesize research findings and suggest some interesting areas for future research

Introduction

In the last decades, the field of inter-organizational relationships has received increasing attention both by academics and practitioners. The literature about this topic is very broad and some attempts to synthesize it have been done by different researchers (e.g. Varadarajan and Cunningham, 1995; Kale and Singh, 2009). Different features have been taken into consideration such as the reasons why a firm enters into an alliance (e.g. Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Kale and Singh, 2009), the theoretical roots that stand behind strategic alliances (e.g. Lorenzoni and Lipparini, 1999), the managerial and organizational features involved in the alliance formation process (e.g. Grandori and Soda, 1995) and alliances outcomes (e.g. Kale and Singh, 2009).

In the same field, due to the recent growth of strategic alliances among many firms in the airline industry (e.g. Dennis, 2000), a stream of research about marketing strategic alliances has started to gain pace, together with the interest shown by the public sector and private firms. The role of marketing in strategic alliances had already been underlined many years ago by a study of Ernst and Young (1990) which identifies achieving market growth and/or increasing sales and gaining access to new markets as two of the most important reasons why firms enter a strategic alliance, as Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995) also report in their paper. In these years, the term *marketing alliance* was forged to denote cooperation in downstream value chain activities such as sales, distribution, and customer service (Hagedoorn, 1993) and it has maintained its meaning until nowadays when marketing alliances are defined formalized collaborative arrangements between two or more organizations focused on downstream value chain activities (Swaminathan and Moorman, 2009). Marketing alliances seem to play a significant role not only for sharing and reducing costs, but also for favoring the internationalization process of firms (Ring and Van de Ven,

1994; Kale and Singh, 2009), which could reveal very important for SMEs, since they give them the opportunity to compete effectively in divergent and often larger markets (Dennis, 2000) and, thus, enhance their competitiveness and growth (Kale and Singh, 2009). However, despite this issue has assumed great importance both from an academic and practical point of view, a review of past research about marketing alliances that outlines the main evidences, gaps and areas that need to be inquired has not been done yet. Thus, this paper aims at carrying out a detailed analysis of the literature about marketing alliances, in order to organize the existing literature, synthesize research findings and suggest some interesting areas for future research.

Methodology

As Pittaway *et al.* (2004) explain, the review strategy has a number of stages designed to provide a systematic and explicit method in order to shape a methodology meant to guide our literature review. For this reason, we shaped and followed a procedure made up of different steps. We started with the identification of keywords on the subject based on prior experience and then constructed them into searching strings. We combined the term *marketing* with the terms *alliance*, *network* and *relationship* and used them to start our research in different scientific data bases: Ebsco (Business Source Premier and EconLit), ISI Web of Knowledge and Scopus. We searched in the title, subject or abstract of papers published in academic journals. We obtained 488 articles and then used the inclusion and exclusion criteria in order to make a second selection; for example, we narrowed the subject to for-profit organizations and economy- and management-related issues. A large number of papers were in the field of social networks, which caused their exclusion and thus a significant reduction in the number of pertinent papers. After the full paper reading of the last potential articles, we arrived to our 35 most focused and relevant papers.

We began by analyzing the literature on marketing alliances in order to understand the most relevant issues related to this topic and then organizing them into a matrix. Second, we divided the papers into two main groups based on the methodology they adopt, cross-sectional or longitudinal, because this allows a more precise analysis and comparison of papers belonging to each group; furthermore this opens different scenarios for future research. Then, we tried to identify commonalities and differences along the most relevant dimensions we had previously defined. Third, we indicate potential paths for future research, having tried to understand the past literature and the current thinking about the topic.

Literature review

As anticipated, we divided papers about marketing alliances into two groups based on their methodology: most of the literature (24 papers) have a cross-sectional approach, while a smaller group of papers (8 papers) carry out a longitudinal analysis, having a dynamic approach (see *Table I*). Three papers (Thorelli, 1986; Varadarajan and Cunningham, 1995; Webster and Morrison, 2004) remain out of this dichotomy since they are older theoretical papers which address the theory at the base of marketing alliances.

Table I: Distribution of papers based on the methodology and year of publication

Methodology	Prior to 2005	After 2005
Cross-sectional approach	12	12
Longitudinal approach	2	6

As far as the largest cluster of papers is concerned, most of them employ an empirical approach, mostly quantitative and in only one case qualitative (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2010), while there are only two theoretical papers (Mouzaset *et al.*, 2007; Ross and Robertson, 2007). In particular, quantitative papers use regression models to analyze data gathered from surveys, databases or interviews. The main dependent variables may be connected mainly to alliance features, alliance performance and firm performance proxied by different indicators. In particular, alliance features include issues related to form, mode and motivation (Palmer and Bejou, 1995), involvement and limitation of power (Young *et al.*, 1996), control (Berthon *et al.*, 2006), trust (Mehta *et al.*, 2005, Mouzas, 2007), commitment and cooperation among members (Mehta *et al.*, 2005). Alliance performance is largely connected to alliance success, which is in turn assessed through total satisfaction (Chen and Tseng, 2005), perceived effectiveness of the relationship (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993; Young *et al.*, 1996), expectation of continuation (Young *et al.*, 1996; Chen and Tseng, 2005), achievement of objectives (Sherer, 2003; Chen and Tseng, 2005), sustainable and expedient business relationships (Mouzas, 2007) and alliance survival (Eyuboglu and Buja, 1997). Instead, firm performance refers mainly to economic issues, as for example returns (Das *et al.*, 1998; Swaminathan and Moorman, 2009), sales growth (Lechner and Dowling, 2003; Tuliet *et al.*, 2010) and sales into foreign markets (Yu *et al.*, 2011), and much less to other matters, as for example capabilities (Corsten and Kumar, 2005).

Also independent variables are very diversified, but they can be clustered into two main groups: alliance features and partner features, as *Table II* shows. Alliance features encompass elements mainly related to human or organizational aspects. Among human aspects the most important is trust (Aulakhet *et al.*, 1996; Sherer, 2003; Corsten and Kumar, 2005; Henneberg and Naude, 2007; Mouzaset *et al.*, 2007); other features are commitment (Sherer, 2003), dependence (Eyuboglu and Buja, 2007) and power and conflicts (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993), while among organizational aspects the most important is alliance aim (Young *et al.*, 1996; Das *et al.*, 1998; Lechner and Dowling, 2003; Pangarkar, 2007); then we find governance (Devet *et al.*, 2000), or power and conflicts (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993), cross-functional teams (Corsten and Kumar, 2005), norms and control (Eyuboglu and Buja, 2007) and alliance centrality, density and efficiency (Swaminathan and Moorman, 2009).

Table II: Distribution of papers based on the independent variables

Independent variables	N° of papers
Alliance features	15
Partner features	8
Other	3

Most of these papers are not industry-specific, indeed they are multi-sector or don't specify the precise industry: looking at *Table III* which shows the distribution of papers based on the scope of analysis (manufacturing or service sectors) and year of publication, it is clear that the service sector has always received attention, while research on manufacturing industry has decreased after 2005. In the service sector, the most investigated are the Information Technology and tourism industries.

Table III: Distribution of papers based on the scope and year of publication

Scope	Cross-sectional		Longitudinal	
	Prior to 2005	After 2005	Prior to 2005	After 2005
Manufacturing	5	2	1	0
Service	4	4	1	6
Both	1	1	0	0
Not specified	2	5	0	0

The unit of analysis is usually the firm (e.g., Das *et al.*, 1998; Li *et al.*, 2010), but there are also papers considering the whole alliance (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993; Palmer and Bejou, 1995). In any case, mainly dyadic relationships among medium or large firms are investigated, with only few cases of multi-partner (He and Balmer, 2006; Kalligiannis *et al.*, 2006) and SMEs alliances (Scherer, 2003). Indeed, Ross and Robertson (2007) emphasize that previous literature has focused on single dyadic relationships; moreover, despite there is clear evidence that SMEs actively network (Bryson, Wood and Keeble, 1993; Gilmore *et al.*, 2001; Johannisson, 1986; Lee and Mulford, 1990; Szarka, 1990), Scherer puts in evidence that most of the strategic alliance literature focuses on large-firm alliances (Human and Provan, 1997) and Gilmore *et al.* (2006) still claim for literature about SME networking in relation to marketing activities. Furthermore, when specified, almost all alliances are vertical.

These papers shed light on antecedents of marketing alliance formation, contingency factors, marketing alliance outcomes and critical success factors. In particular, the main reasons that foster firms to establish alliance marketing are related to the diversification of promotion channels, cost reduction, image improvement, and business revenue increase (Chen and Tseng, 2005), while, as far as outcomes are concerned, access to new markets or clients, especially in the early days of the firm's life (Lechner and Dowling, 2003), and internationalization (Yu *et al.*, 2011) appear to be the most investigated variables. Moreover, it seems that in the airline industry the alliance's branding affects firms' individual brands either positively or very positively (Kalligiannis *et al.*, 2006) and that entering into a marketing alliance positively affects firm performance (Corsten and Kumar, 2005) in terms of returns (Swaminathan and Moorman, 2009), much more for SMEs than for large firms (Das *et al.*, 1998) and sales in foreign markets (Yu *et al.*, 2011). The factors that seem to favor the achievement of the above successful outcomes refer to balanced power and activity planning (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993), partner selection (Chen and Tseng, 2005), the attitude and personality of alliance members, the CEO's support and confidence (Scherer, 2003). However, the issue related to trust is object of contrasting results: indeed Aulakh *et al.* (1996) find that although trust and performance are positively related, trust is not the only factor contributing to the variance in partnership performance, since relational norms and monitoring mechanisms seem to play a more important role, and Mouzas *et al.* (2007) assert that trust in a business-to-business marketing is a multifaceted construct that needs conceptual clarification. *Table IV* includes the analysis of a selection of relevant cross-sectional papers. Not all papers have been included but the full table is available on request.

Other than previous papers which adopt a static approach and mainly look at the antecedents and outcomes of marketing alliances, the analysis of the literature on marketing alliances shows that there is a small group of papers that have a dynamic approach. Almost half of the papers carry out a longitudinal study of a single case (Torres, 2002; He and Balmer, 2006; von Friedrichs Grangsjö and Gummesson, 2006; Reid *et al.*, 2008), and half of multiple cases (Morrison, 1994; Gilmore *et al.*, 2006; de Man *et al.*, 2010), all having the alliance as their unit of analysis, except from one (Gilmore *et al.*, 2006). Even if all of these papers adopt a dynamic perspective, most of them investigate the development of the marketing alliance considering the relationship among dependent and independent variables as a black box, which means they develop a variance theory (Van de Ven and Huber, 1990) in terms of an input-process-output model. Indeed, six papers observe the alliance for a number of years ranging from 2 to 7 in order to mainly determine alliance and firm performance or alliance success factors, as in the previous group of static papers, but on a qualitative basis.

Those papers focusing on alliance performance aim at describing alliance outcomes in terms of benefits (Morrison, 1994) or brand (He and Balmer, 2006). In particular, Morrison (1994) investigates a number of cases in the tourism sector and finds firms obtain similar resource access and benefits thanks to the participation to different types of marketing

alliance and He and Balmer (2006) notice that both the alliance brand and individual airline brands benefited to some degree from mutual endorsement. This conclusion sheds also light on firm performance, as well as the study by Gilmore *et al.* (2006) who assert that proactive marketing networking is a key determinant of marketing sophistication in SMEs, especially during times of dynamic changes in the market place and more for medium-sized enterprises than for small ones. Most papers in this group focus on critical success factors of marketing alliances. If we analyze them in further detail, we perceive that in the craft industry success is increased if an alliance's strategic intent is clearly articulated, its role in organizational strategy is recognized and sufficient attention is given to its evolving nature (Torres, 2002). Von Friedrichs Grangsjö and Gummesson (2006) draw up the "7 Point Code of Conduct" for firms forging marketing alliances in the tourism industry, which includes active dialogues, efficiency, equality, trust, shared information, face-to-face meeting and fun. Instead, Reid, Smith and McCloskey (2008) propose different success factors, including the negotiation of differences in objectives of partners and their having a sense of equitable participation and involvement; moreover they suggest that the existence of simple quantitative and relevant key performance indicators is something members of a marketing partnership expect. There is only one paper focusing on a specific alliance feature which is observed during the evolution of a marketing alliance in the airline industry: De Man *et al.* (2010) study in deeper detail the issue related to governance and conclude with a series of propositions suggesting that a clear vertical division of labor, a fifty-fifty profit sharing arrangement, a team of alliance managers made up of both specialists and generalists, people fulfilling multiple roles in an alliance and an extensive use of informal channels will make an alliance governance structure more robust.

Papers in this subgroup are more recent and focus mainly on the service sector (see *Table V*), overall on the airline and tourism sector, preferring multi-partner alliances among SMEs even if also large firms are sometimes considered. There are only one paper that is really based on a process theory explaining an observed sequence of events in terms of some underlying generative mechanisms or laws, particular circumstances or contingencies (Tsouskas, 1989; Langley, 1999). It is the theoretical paper by Wang and Xiang (2007) who propose a theoretical framework encompassing preconditions and motivations to alliance formation, the process of alliance formation and outcomes; the process is divided into five stages: assembling, ordering, implementation, evaluation and transformation, and for each of them the organizational and managerial factors are investigated. Even though Morrison (2004) develops a tripartite model of small hotel firm distribution channel, formed in two steps, it is distant from a process theory explaining the evolution of an alliance over time.

Conclusions and paths for future research

The analysis of the literature makes some shortcomings emerge, which gives opportunities for future research. Having marketing collaborations been identified as a key component of marketing strategy (Fang *et al.*, 2008), this is a topic deserving further investigation from different points of view.

The most important gap in the field is related to the lack of papers that analyze the development of marketing alliances, taking a process perspective and thus investigating the sequence of events leading to an outcome. Moreover, since Tsouskas (1989) talks about circumstances or contingencies determining the process and the outcome, it could be useful to carry out a very focused analysis of contingency factors, in order to understand, for example, if a different location of member firms or a different temporal orientation can have a different impact on the subsequent development process.

Table IV: Review of a selection of relevant cross-sectional papers (11 out of 24)

Author(s)	Sector	Input	Output	Keyresults
Bucklin and Sengupta (1993)	IT	Imbalance, Conflicts, Payoffs, Prior History, Compatibility	Alliance performance (Success)	Imbalances in power and conflicts limit alliance success; high payouts are necessary to make the effort worth; that greater formality, longer lived relationships; exclusivity in the arrangements may help reduce damaging perceptions of imbalance among partners
Palmer and Bejou (1995)	Tourism	Country specificity	Alliance features (Form, mode and motivation)	No one unique approach for creating marketing collaboratives is applicable in all business environments. The subsequent coverage, mode, and form of a collaborative will reflect the environment in which stakeholders operate
Aulakh, Kotabe and Sahay (1996)	Multi-sector	Alliancefeatures (Trust)	Firm performance	Although positively related, trust doesnot have a unique contribution in explaining variance in partnership performance above that explained by norms and mechanisms
Young, Faye and Faye (1996)	n.d.	Alliancefeatures (Aim)	Alliance features (Involvement and limitation of power)	The relational nature of involvement and limitation of power are highest in co-marketing alliances, next highest in vertical supply alliances, then JIT relationships, and lowest in traditional supply agreements
Das, Sen and Sengupta (1998)	Multi-sector	Alliance announcements and Alliance features (Aim)	Firm performance (Returns)	Abnormal returns increases following the announcement of marketing alliances, whereas there is no change in the variance for technological alliance announcements, and the market reaction is greater to SMEs alliances than to larger ones'
Berthon, Pitt, Ewing and Bakkeland (2003)	n.d.	Partner features (Specific assets, Relational norms)	Alliancefeatures (Buyer control)	Norms play a not significant role in the exchange relationship between the buyers and their sole supplier and yet, there seems to be little that indicates need for governance mechanisms to attenuate the effects of opportunism
Sherer (2003)	Multi-sector	Alliance features (Trust, Commitment, Selection choice, IT, Environment)	Alliance performance (Success)	The most important success factor in manufacturing networks of SMEs is the character (honesty and reliability) of the participants in the network, more than capabilities. Then confidence and CEO support are also important
Mehta, Larsen, Rosenbloom and Ganitsky (2005)	Multi-sector	Partnerfeatures (Cultural differences)	Alliance features (Trust, commitment and cooperation)	The greater the cultural differences between channel partners, the lower the levels of trust, commitment, and cooperation
Mouzas, Henneberg and Naude (2007)	Multi-sector	Alliancefeatures (Trust)	Alliance performance and Alliance features	P1: Inter-personal trust is a relevant but not in itself sufficient condition for the development of sustainable business relationships. P2: Reliance is a necessary and sufficient condition for the development of expedient business relationships. P3: Manifestations of consent contribute to an increased reliance in business relationships.
Swaminathan and Moorman (2009)	IT	Alliance features (Centrality, density, efficiency, reputation) and Partner features (marketing capability)	Firm performance (Returns from alliance announcement)	The announcement of a marketing alliance creates positive firm abnormal returns, as well as firm marketing alliance capability
Yu, Gilbert and Oviatt (2011)	n.d.	Partner features (Tech and marketing knowledge)	Firm performance (Foreign sales)	Marketing alliances help ventures conduct business operations successfully in international markets

Table V: Review of longitudinal papers (all)

Author(s)	Sector	Focus	Keyresults
Morrison (1994)	Multi-sector	Allianceperformance (Outcomes)	<i>Strategic resource access</i> : Local access to a centralized international network; Overseas marketing offices; Facility to package and sell components of tourism product; Videotext interactive system for member information update; Comprehensive product information database. <i>Strategic benefits</i> : Access to highly sophisticated computerized systems; Participation in a global marketing network; Support of neutral and non-discriminatory partners; Training and support programme; Avoids vulnerability of a centralized system through local access; <u>Operational efficiencies</u> ; <u>Members retain independence of business ownership</u>
Torres (2002)	Craft industry	Critical success factors	Success is increased if an alliance's strategic intent is clearly articulated, its role in organizational strategy is recognized and sufficient attention is given to its evolving nature
Gilmore, Carson and Rocks (2006)	Food	Firmperformance	Proactive marketing networking is a key determinant of marketing sophistication in SMEs, especially during times of dynamic changes in the market place. The medium-sized firms within this channel have a higher level of marketing sophistication than small-sized firms, influenced by the extent they network
He and Balmer (2006)	Airline	Firm and alliance performance	Both the alliance brand and individual airline brands benefited to some degree from mutual endorsement; alliance brands are more complicated than was originally thought, and offer challenges in terms of management
von FriedrichsGrangsjö and Gummesson (2006)	Tourism	Critical success factors	"7 Point Code of Conduct": Enter into active dialogue; Be efficient; Be equals; Trust each other; Share information; Meet face-to-face; Have fun
Wang and Xiang (2007)	Tourism	Alliance process and features	Theoretical framework for marketing alliance development
Reid, Smith and McCloskey (2008)	Tourism (public-private sector)	Critical success factors	1.Effective tourism marketing partnerships require that partners negotiate their way through legitimate differences in objectives. 2.Partnerships require a sense of equitable participation and involvement. 3.The existence of simple quantitative and relevant key performance indicators is something members of a marketing partnership expect
de Man, Roijakkers and de Graauw (2010)	Airline	Alliancefeatures (Governance)	P1. A clear vertical division of labor in an alliance will make the alliance governance structure more robust. P2. In a contractual alliance, a fifty-fifty profit sharing arrangement will make the alliance governance structure more robust. P3. When the team of alliance managers consists of both specialists and generalists the alliance governance structure will be more robust. P4. When people fulfill multiple roles in an alliance, the alliance governance structure will be more robust. P5. Extensive use of informal channels will make an alliance governance structure more robust.

Due to the fact that alliance outcomes are one of the most investigated issues, also the impact of different marketing alliance aims on the process could deserve further investigation. Furthermore, the identification of organizational and managerial factors entering in the process and their evolution or change during the different phases of the process could be worth examining. We would suggest a qualitative analysis based on longitudinal case studies, which would make it possible to carry out a comprehensive analysis, so as to compare different scenarios and understand which factors are more likely to bring to a successful alliance formation.

The issue related to alliance success is still debated, since this construct has been operationalized in many different ways, using different indicators, as for example perceived effectiveness of the relationship (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993; Young *et al.*, 1996), expectation of continuation (Young *et al.*, 1996; Chen and Tseng, 2005) and achievement of objectives (Sherer, 2003; Chen and Tseng, 2005). In the literature about marketing alliances, there are few papers describing how success (or failure) has been achieved specifically, as suggested by previous literature (Reid *et al.*, 2008). As a consequence, a clear operationalization of the construct would be useful, as well as the understanding of how different alliance features may affect alliance success.

If we go back to the first group of papers having a static approach, since most papers have a broad scope, more focused studies specifying the scope of analysis could reveal more detailed information and help contextualizing the results. Besides, since there is a gap about SMEs multi-partner alliances, it would be interesting to shed more light on SMEs drawing up marketing alliances in order to face resource constraints and try to be more competitive. As yet research has rarely examined horizontal alliances, this could represent another research opportunity in order to build a complete body of literature about marketing alliances.

Furthermore, despite there are only a small number of papers (He and Balmer, 2006; Ahnet *et al.*, 2010), they seem to indicate a positive impact of marketing alliances on firm brand, which deserves further investigation. Besides, also the issue related to brand alliances could represent an interesting area of future research in order to understand whether and in what conditions they could be beneficial or detrimental to firm brand recognition.

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