

Buyer-seller partnerships in business markets: towards an integrated approach

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Abstract

While both academics and practitioners have demonstrated interest in buyer-seller partnerships, extant studies lack consistency and are often built on the basis of a single underlying theory, model or explanatory paradigm, which results in competing explanations of partnerships and which leaves the understanding of the phenomenon rather fragmented. This article contributes to theory on the nature of buyer-seller partnerships by reviewing contemporary literature and integrating several theoretical approaches into a joint framework for studying partnerships. In addition, an extended definition of a partnership is proposed, several research gaps are outlined and directions for future research are suggested.

Key words: partnership, buyer, seller, attributes, motives, TCT, RBV, framework.

1. Introduction and Objectives

It is often assumed that everyone intuitively shares the same understanding of what a buyer-seller partnership is (Lemke et al., 2003). Generally, there is an agreement that the term refers to relationships that are closer than any other (Lambert et al., 1996). However, studies of partnerships lack coherent explanation: the definitions appear to be vague (Lemke et al., 2003), and the outlined attributes of partnerships show limited acceptance across the studies. In addition, quite little is known about the motives and conditions that are *specific* to buyer-seller partnerships. When considered, motives and conditions are usually addressed in the light of a particular theory. Different approaches provide different results, which opens the question of whether actors' engagement in partnerships is motivated by a particular factor or a combination of these. In addition, there is a gap in information on whether the actors have similar motives for partnering, since most studies focus *either* on a buyer's *or* on a seller's perspective. This article seeks to extend understanding of buyer-seller partnerships in business markets by reviewing contemporary literature and integrating several theoretical approaches into a joint framework for studying partnerships. The following sections provide a definition of a partnership, discuss motives for partnering and suggest directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Difficulties in the conceptualisation of a buyer-seller partnership

The importance of establishing partnerships in business markets has been recognised in various studies (e.g. Mohr and Spekman, 1994; Ellram and Hendrick, 1995; Lambert et al., 2004; Duffy, 2008). In particular, developing partnerships has been identified as a contemporary trend (Graham et al., 1994) in manufacturing (Lemke et al., 2003) and logistics industries (Tate, 1996). Partnerships are generally seen as "close" relationships based on trust and collaboration, established to improve companies' competitive positions in the supply chain (Duffy, 2008). However, conceptualising partnerships is not easy (Lemke et al., 2003).

In a number of studies authors do not provide any definition of a partnership at all (Lemke, et al., 2003), or provide only abstract definitions. Ellram and Hendrick (1995) argued that “partnership is, by definition, a meeting of minds” between two parties (p.42) and Gadde and Snehota (2000) state that partnering is a means of making the most of relationships. Bantham et al. (2003) outlined the organisational framework for partnerships, while Campbell (1997) researched the roles of buyers and sellers in a partnership. However, no definition of partnership is provided in any of these studies.

Perhaps, the absence of definition can be explained by the fact that partnership is often treated as a self-explanatory term (Duffy, 2008). Moreover, Lemke et al., (2003) argue that it has become a “buzzword”. Similarly, Brennan, argues that “fashionable managerial expressions are prone to over-use, abuse and consequently, to devaluation” and that “the same fate awaits, or maybe [has] already [...] befallen buyer/supplier partnership” (1997, p.768-769). Indeed, the difficulties which practitioners face when asked to explain the meaning of a partnership (Rinehart et al., 2004) show that the interpretation of the concept is not a straightforward task.

When provided, definitions of partnerships are frequently criticised for being unclear, “abstract” and non-empirically based (Lemke et al., 2003). Indeed, conceptualisations and definitions provided across the studies show only limited agreement on key attributes that are supposed to reflect the nature of partnerships. Table 1 summarises some of the attributes outlined by previous research, including both: the most agreed-upon in the literature and those featured in early and in recent studies of partnerships. As follows from Table 1, out of 23, only 7 attributes, marked with the “star”, show some level of agreement across the studies. The lack of agreement can be linked to the absence of attempts to develop a multidimensional approach to partnership research (Donaldson and O’Toole, 2000). Researchers often base a definition of partnership on the results of a particular study, where attributes are often included a priori. Therefore, although a number of researchers have attempted to give a precise definition, no unique, widely accepted definition of partnerships currently exists. Guest and Peccei (2001) argue that partnerships have become “an idea with which almost anyone can agree, without having any clear idea what they are agreeing about” (p.207).

However, while there is increasing criticism of the absence of a “consistent definition of partnership based on empirical evidence” and “no commonly accepted theoretically derived definition” (Lemke, et al., 2003, p.16), it can be argued that it is hardly realistic to develop an “ideal” definition. Indeed, authors have begun to realise that there is no unique and perfect partnership for different situations and contexts (Makukha and Gray, 2004). Therefore, it might be more rational to take into account the contexts of partnerships when researching and defining them, and try to understand the nature of partnerships *within* a particular context.

Nevertheless, any research should arguably start with a general understanding and a general definition of partnerships developed on the basis of existing research. Therefore, the next section develops such a definition to provide the initial guidance for future investigation.

2.2. Definition of a buyer-seller partnership

Definitions of buyer-seller partnerships are usually formulated around attributes assumed to be the most important for reflecting partnerships’ nature. Table 2 complements Table 1, and provides examples of partnership definitions found in the existing literature. The majority of

definitions emphasise long-term duration, commitment, (inter)dependency, sharing principles, collaboration and mutuality of objectives and benefits. Similar attributes are marked as most-agreed upon in Table 1. Thus, these attributes seem to form the basis for partnership understanding, although the meaning of partnership can vary depending on context.

Partnerships have been largely seen as long-lasting relationships in both empirical and theoretical research. However, one could argue that longevity is recognised as an attribute of many types of buyer-seller relationships which are not partnerships. Indeed, Lemke et al. (2003, p.16) argue that, it cannot be assumed that a buyer and a seller “in a long-term relationship see themselves in partnership”. This idea implies that, as a time dimension, longevity is unlikely to be enough to reflect the nature of partnerships. Indeed, as argued by Izquierdo and Cillan (2004), the principal feature of close relationships is not duration, but rather “its anticipated prolongation to future periods” (p.976).

The inclusion of commitment into a definition of partnerships is also widely supported by various studies. For instance, in studies of relationship typologies, partnerships and “close relationships” are characterised by high levels of commitment. Surprisingly, trust appears explicitly in only two of the definitions presented in Table 2. However, it is the most-agreed upon attribute of partnerships, as outlined in Table 1. In addition, it has been recognised as key in distinguishing relationships, and partnerships have been found to be associated with high levels of trust (e.g. Laing and Lian, 2005). Therefore, the non-inclusion of trust into the definition of partnership seems to be an omission.

It can be noted that later definitions recognise behavioural elements of partnerships, as well as strategic and economic aspects. Mohr and Spekman (1994) have suggested that these behavioural elements distinguish partnerships from traditional transaction-based relationships. One of the most recent definitions of partnerships is provided by Ploetner and Ehret (2006), who see partnerships as new forms of collaboration that are more flexible than contractually-based forms like vertical integration, and exhibit higher levels of commitment than “ordinary buyer-seller relationships” (p.4). In addition, both Ploetner and Ehret (2006) and Spekman, et al. (1998) recognise shared vision of future as a key behavioural element of partnerships.

Finally, no relationship can be treated independently from its network. Indeed, in business markets partnerships are parts of the supply chain and affect its competitiveness (Gentry, 1996). Thus, buyer-seller partnerships should be placed in the context of the surrounding network. Following the discussion above, a definition is proposed:

Partnerships between a buyer and seller are close (Webster, 1970), collaborative (Anderson and Narus, 1991) relationships based on long-term commitment, trust, interdependence (Ploetner and Ehret, 2006), shared goals, and understanding (Brinkerhoff, 2002) of each other's needs and strategies, which are parts of “wider economic organization that takes a network form” (Vargo 2009, p.377; Hakansson and Snehota, 2000, p.75).

It can be argued that the definition above can be further strengthened through the extensive empirical research, which, according to many scholars, is currently scant. The discussion now moves to another pressing aspect of partnerships: motives and conditions for their initiation.

Table 1. The attributes of buyer-seller partnerships

Attributes of buyer-seller partnerships	Wong et al. (2010)	Laing and Lian (2005)	Rinehart et al. (2004)	Fontenot and Wilson (1997)	Fontenot and Jantrania (1996)	Wilson (1996)	Gentry (1996)	Mohr and Spekman (1994)	Graham et al. (1994)	Stuart (1993)	Anderson and Narus (1990)
Trust*	X	X		X	X			X			X
Commitment*	X			X		X		X	X		
Interdependence*	X		X	X						X	X
Power											X
Long-term perspective*	X	X					X		X	X	
Understanding	X										
Closeness	X										
Coordination								X			
Communication*	X		X					X			X
Cooperation*	X	X		X							X
Information sharing*				X			X		X	X	
Sharing of risks and rewards							X		X		
Shared values				X							
Satisfaction	X				X						X
Joint problem-solving								X		X	
Continuous improvement										X	
Bonds					X						
Goal congruence					X						
Investments		X	X		X						
Focus on continuity								X			
Wide range of transactions			X								
Personal relationships			X								
Organisational capability			X								

Table 2. Partnership definitions

Authors	Partnership is:
Webster (1970), in Engebretson & Wardell (1997, p.38)	"...a relationship resembling a legal partnership and usually involving close cooperation between parties having specified joint rights and responsibilities as in common enterprise".
Farrell & Scotchmer (1988, p.279)	"...a coalition that divides its output equally".
Brinkerhoff (2002, p. 216)	"...a dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational".
Anderson & Narus (1990, p.42)	"...[the] extent to which there is mutual recognition and understanding that the success of each firm depends in part on the other firm, with each firm consequently taking actions so as to provide a coordinated effort focused on jointly satisfying the requirements of the customer marketplace".
Ellram & Hendrick (1995, pp.41-42)	"...[an] on-going relationship between two firms that involves a commitment over an extended time period, and a mutual sharing of information and the risks and rewards of the relationships". "...by definition, a meeting of minds [between two parties]".
Fram & Presberg (1993, p.44)	"...long-term agreements that reduce conflict and promote mutually beneficial ties between two firms".
Stuart (1993, p.23)	"...strong inter-company dependency relationships with long-term planning horizons".
Mohr & Spekman (1994, p.135)	"...purposive strategic relationships between independent firms who share compatible goals, strive for mutual benefit, and acknowledge a high level of mutual interdependence".
Lambert et al., (2004, p.22)	"...a tailored business relationship based on mutual trust, openness, shared risk and shared rewards that results in business performance greater than would be achieved by the two firms working together in the absence of partnership".
Ploetner & Ehret (2006, p.4)	"...a specific type of relationship between a customer and his supplier, based on mutual dependency and trust, where both parties are committed to collaboration beyond a sequence of buying-selling transactions".

2.3. Motives and conditions for engagement in partnerships

Partnerships are seen as a relationship with the high level of coordination, complex information exchanges (Cannon and Perreault, 1999), and higher trust levels than in other relationship types (Fontenot and Wilson, 1997). However, the question arises of what makes firms engage in such a close relationship. Studies of partnerships have revealed cost savings and reductions in duplications of efforts as key motives for engagement (Makukha and Gray, 2004). However, Lemke et al. (2003), argue that industrial partnerships are about emphasising closeness, rather than just aiming for cost reduction. Research in manufacturing partnerships stress technological motives stemming from the need to invest in technology development, and the risks associated with this (Dodgson, 1992). Other studies revealed that supplier-specific motives are: securing market share (Brennan, 1997); getting access to information; increasing prestige (Tuten and Urban, 2001); reducing costs; and increasing stability (Lambert et al., 2004). Buyer-specific motives are: better prices, technological cooperation, and better understanding of their business by the supplier (Tuten and Urban, 2001). Motives outlined in empirical studies can be explained from various theoretical perspectives.

2.3.1. Transaction cost perspective

Current research states that under partnerships, transaction costs are minimised (Chen and Wu, 2010) and the dependence on the other party is better managed (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). Indeed, environmental uncertainty and investments in specific assets make firms dependent on each other in the realisation of their goals. These circumstances make firms look for greater *stability* and *efficiency* of exchanges, and reductions in dependence *asymmetry* (Izquierdo and Cillan, 2004). As argued by Buvik and Gronhaug (2000), the development of closer ties helps to achieve these objectives by decreasing the costs of adaptation to uncertainty, and control of the obligation fulfilment by the partner. While TCT provides no specific explanation for firms' engagement in partnerships, one could argue that partnerships are created when less close relationships are not enough to reduce transaction costs. This is likely to be the case in complex environments, where exchanges are highly influenced by various *contextual* conditions. According to Cannon and Perreault (1999), uncertainty and dependence for buying organisations can come from *internal situational factors*, which are related to specific selling and purchasing situations, or from *external characteristics of the market*. The key situational factors for buyers outlined are complexity of supply, and the importance of supply for the customer. The key external factors are supply market dynamism and availability of alternatives. Supply market dynamism is affected by factors such as changing technology and price, and fluctuations in product availability. Thus, buyers tend to enter relationships in order to manage these changes more efficiently (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). Lack of supply alternatives means that information about prices and quality is not easily accessible, which contributes to buyers' uncertainty and dependence. One could argue that when market and situational conditions are particularly complex, actors are highly motivated to engage in partnerships. Thus, some motivations for engagement in partnerships are likely to be externally based. However, while "externally rooted" transaction costs can be offset, partnerships are still exposed to "internally rooted" ones, like monitoring partners' actions. Ties are developed in partnerships through asset-specific investments, which still expose actors to potential opportunism. Thus, TCT provides only part of the explanation, focusing on the economics of partnerships and externally-rooted motives, without considering strategic and social aspects of firms' interactions and the motives stemming from them.

2.3.2. *Resource-based perspective*

Strategic motives of buyer-seller partnerships are often addressed through resource or competency-based theories which see partnerships as ways for actors to obtain the necessary resources, develop specific competencies and improve their competitive positions (Chen and Wu, 2010). Ploetner and Ehret (2006) argue that “one aspect ignored by transaction cost theory is that specific investments are not only a drawback, but are basically made in order to differentiate the company’s offerings” (p.6). Thus, specific investments potentially result in superior customer value and surplus profits for the supplier. Within the resource-based view (RBV) of the organization (Wernerfelt, 1984), or resource-dependence theory (RDT) (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), firms are assumed to engage in close cooperation because they *have to* (Donaldson and O’Toole, 2000). Thus, while resource-based theories do not explicitly highlight the motives and conditions for choosing partnerships over other forms of relationships, one could argue that partnerships can be chosen over other relationships when there is a *need* (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996), which cannot be realised otherwise. Therefore, if companies’ engagement in partnerships is motivated by need, they should be in rather difficult competitive situations. While there is little explicit discussion of buyer-seller partnerships from this perspective, in the discussion of the formation of alliances in general Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1996) argue that companies engage in alliances when they are in vulnerable strategic positions stemming from difficult market situations and adoption of risky strategies. Thus, the key motives here are likely to be risk reduction and improvement of a competitive position. The key conditions for partnering under such situations are likely to be mutual need and “strategic fit”, defined as “the overlap of partners’ interests in a certain area, while pursuing mutual goals” (Il et al., 2009, p.500). Some authors also outline the importance of “operational compatibility”, which refers to matches in corporate cultures and complementarities of goals (Il et al., 2009). One could argue that information about strategic and operational compatibility of potential partners is partially reflected in their *network identities*. Network identities are the means by which to reflect the perceived attractiveness of a company as a partner, based on its relations with other firms, its activities and resources (Anderson et al., 1994). Network identities contain a message about firms’ competences and goals and, thus, can inform companies about the aspects in which they can be connected. Anderson et al. (1994) argue that firms engaging in relationships consider two aspects: “anticipated constructive effects” and “anticipated deleterious effects” on network identity (pp.7-8). Constructive effects include signalling cooperative intentions of a firm and carrying out activities, the value from which can be transferred to other relationships, while deleterious effects include building a relationship that is perceived by other actors as harmful for their interests and withdrawing resources from other relationships. Arguably, companies will consider partnering when constructive effects prevail.

2.3.3. *Relational perspective*

According to the relational perspective (RP), companies’ competitive advantages depend on the network of relationships in which they are embedded (Dyer and Singh, 1998). Thus, in order to enhance competitive advantage, firms invest in relation-specific assets and develop “sharing routines” through close collaboration (Zacharia et al., 2009, p.103). In addition, firms often build relationships willingly, rather than reluctantly (Morgan and Hunt, 1999). Thus, apart from the *need* the literature has emphasised *willingness* to engage in partnerships (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997). Such a position is associated with relational (Dwyer, Schur and Oh, 1987) or social (Granovetter, 1985) perspectives. The proponents of these perspectives

state that exchanges take place within social contexts where opportunism is an exception rather than a rule (Heide and John, 1992). In contrast, collaboration and commitment often form the basis for partnerships where the key motive is to achieve higher mutual benefit and value (Anderson and Narus, 1991) and to continue valued relationships (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997). Such motives relate to the desire for *reciprocity* in partnerships (Oliver, 1990). The conditions for partnership development can be linked to strong social positions of firms, which include personal relationships and strong reputation and status (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996). Personal relationships contribute to trust, while strong reputation and status make the company attractive for potential partners. Social positions are products of the whole network activity, and thus are important indicators of a firm's quality and suitability for a partnership. Moreover, not only personal relationships between partners, but also the networks of personal relationships that each company has, might be important, and can be another condition for engagement in partnerships. The following conditions have found empirical support: partners' reputations and technology (Wilson 1995), joint problem solving, meeting partner's demands, smooth logistics while (Humphreys et al., 2001) personal relationships, convenient location and specific services provision (Lemke et al., 2003). Such empirical evidence, however, remains scant.

2.3.4. A joint framework for studying motives for engagement in partnerships

This paper has outlined self-explanatory perception of the term, lack of agreement on the key attributes of partnerships and insufficient empirical research as the key obstacles in partnership conceptualisation. The lack of agreement on the attributes can be linked to the absence of a multidimensional approach to partnership research (Donaldson and O'Toole, 2000). Researchers try to base a definition of partnership on the results of a particular study, where attributes are often included *a priori*, and which is guided by a particular theoretical approach. Similar to the difficulty related to conceptualisation of partnerships, motives for their initiation are usually studied in the light of a particular theory, which results in competing explanations of partnerships and leaves the research into the motives for partnership formation rather disjoint. To overcome these issues motives and conditions for engagement in partnerships have been addressed through three theoretical approaches. On the basis of the analysis the combined framework is proposed in Table 3.

Table 3. Motives for engagement in partnerships

	Motives for engagement in partnerships	TCT	RBV	RP
Externally-rooted motives	Minimization of transaction costs	X		
	Greater control over dependence on the other party	X	X	
Strategy-based motives	Uncertainty reduction	X		
	Obtaining the necessary resources		X	
	Improvement of competitive position		X	
Relationship-based motives	Achievement of higher mutual benefit			X
	Continuation of valued relationships			X

The motives can be divided into externally-rooted, strategy-based and relationship-based. As follows from Table 3, the motives seem to be rather complementary, which, arguably, means that addressing partnerships through a unique theoretical approach would lead to serious omissions in their understanding. An integrated approach proposed in the framework can help to avoid this problem. The framework can potentially be used to identify the relationships between motives and to reveal if particular motives prevail in different types of partnerships.

2.4. Further Research

Drawing from multiple sources, existing partnership definitions and attributes have been analysed and a provisional definition of a partnership has been proposed. The definition included the most agreed-upon attributes of buyer-seller partnerships and calls for further verification through conceptual and, particularly, empirical research. However, while there is increasing criticism of the absence of a “consistent definition of partnership based on empirical evidence” and “no commonly accepted theoretically derived definition” (Lemke, et al., 2003, p.16), it can be argued that it is hardly realistic to develop an “ideal” for different contexts (Makukha and Gray, 2004). Therefore, it might be more rational to try to understand the nature of partnerships within a particular context.

On the basis of the literature analysis and integration, a joint, multidimensional, framework for studying motives for engagement in partnerships has been proposed. It can be argued that the framework can assist in providing a more complete view of partnerships. However, due to non-empirical nature of this paper, the question remains open of whether actors’ engagement in partnerships can be motivated by a single factor or particular combinations of these. To answer this question further research based on the proposed theoretical framework is needed. Empirical research is needed to reveal the motives and conditions for *both* actors’ engagement in partnerships, since current studies focus *either* on a buyer’s *or* on a seller’s perspective. Finally, the approaches point to the fact that actors’ engagement in partnerships is often triggered by difficult contextual situations. Therefore, engagement in partnerships should be studied in relation to contextual characteristics.

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