

Collaborative practice for innovation in food industry

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Abstract

The work focuses on the collaborative innovation. It emphasizes the role of relationship and of the resource integration process for the development on innovation and aims to define a practice to support management in the development and fostering of networked innovation process in SMEs. This paper addresses the topic of collaborative innovation in the food SMEs by presenting the results of two studies. The study 1 concerns empirical evidences from 155 Italian food SMEs. It describes the state of the art of the innovation in the Italian food SMEs context. The study 2 relates an in-depth analysis of 10 Italian food SMEs. It frames the innovative behaviour of the firms investigated according to the practice theory.

Key Words: collaborative innovation, resource integration, practice, SMEs, food context

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Introduction and Objectives

Over the last two decades, there has been a radical change in the way in which academics consider innovation (Russo Spena and Colurcio 2010) and firms develop innovatory activities (Zeng, Xie and Tam, 2010). Innovation is the outcome of an interactive process between the firm and its environment (Mention, 2011) and requires the development of strong relationships among different parties from different organizations (Trott and Hartmann, 2009; Chesbrough, 2006). This approach is based on the topic of “collaborative innovation” that is considered as the dominant perspective in the innovation literature in last decade. It focuses on the access to networks to ride out the limits and the barriers to innovation (Colurcio and Russo Spena, 2013).

In the SMES context such approach becomes more and more important as participation in networks and engagement in partnerships allows SMEs to tackle new technological and market frontiers and to cope with the fast changing environment (Nieto and Santamaría, 2010; Van de Vrande et al. 2009; Lee et al., 2001). Previous study showed that SMES are more oriented to collaborate with other organizations (Nieto and Santamaría, 2010; van de Vrande et al. 2009), as the integration between internal and external resources (customers, suppliers, competitors, universities and others) improves the innovation ability of the organization (Colurcio et al., 2012). According to a marketing perspective, the interaction between partners is the antecedent of resource integration, “through their interactions, partners transfer knowledge and other resources in developing organisational learning; [...] knowledge, skills and other resources are integrated to put together a network of firms possessing a set of competencies capable of offering a value innovation that is an innovative value proposition which enable higher value co-creation” (Mele et al., 2010).

In this view, networks represent for SMEs a complementary response for the creation of successful innovations (Zeng, Xie and Tam, 2010) and for the triggering of resource-integration processes.

Despite of the rich and well-established body of research on the topic of collaborative innovation in the SMEs context, no studies, to the authors knowledge, have been found on collaborative innovation as a practical phenomenon and hence dynamics which cause such practices remain ambiguous. More generally, this is confirmed by the lack of contributions, within the practice literature, on the relevant topic of how to organize practice for strategic ends (Dougherty, 2004), such as innovation. Therefore, with the except for few studies (Russo Spena and Mele, 2012;), the strategic connection of the practice theory to the managerial issues of innovation and competitive advantage is still underdeveloped.

The route we choose to address this gap, is to focus on the analysis of collaborative innovation practices within a specific SMEs context, the Italian food business¹.

The empirical study we conducted is framed in a marketing perspective and focuses on the interactive process between the partners of the network and on the integration between external and internal resources of the focal company.

¹ Reasons we decided to investigate Italian food SMEs were mainly two. First, because food firms require the combined efforts of different partners of the network, like suppliers and retailers to realize successful innovations and to customise new products to the needs of the end-consumers (Colurcio and Russo Spena 2013; Gellynck and Molnar, 2009). Second, food SMEs are one of the most important sector in the Italian economy. In fact, despite of the higher level of product competitiveness from emerging countries - e.g. lower labor costs and greater market penetration capacity - (Capitanio et al. 2009), this sector contributes strongly to the development and competitiveness of the Italian economic system by representing the 13% of firms and the 10% of employees of the whole manufacturing system (Istat, 2011).

This study is twofold. First of all, it aims to contribute to the theoretical debate on collaborative innovation in SMEs context according a marketing view emphasizing the key role of resource integration for the development of a value innovation. Secondly, it aims to define a practice to support SMEs to manage network relationship for innovation and to extract value through resource integration process. In order to reach the second goal of the study, we adopt a practice-based view (Korkman, 2006; Schatzki et al. 2001). Paraphrasing Kjellberg et al., (2012) a practice approach invites a wider perspective on whose activities and which activities make and shape collaborative innovation. It allows us to frame the process aspects (Andersson et al. 2008) of collaborative innovation and to define how collaborative innovation practices emerge and how they can contribute to leverage the innovative performance of the Italian food SMEs.

Conceptual Framework

This study developed from two main theoretical streams of research, i) studies on innovation from a practice based view and ii) research on the innovation within the food context.

1. Innovation and practice theory

Practice theory draws on a view that social reality consists of nexuses of practices (Schatzki et al. 2001) that make action and order possible (Bourdieu, 1977). By focusing on how something happens and what consequences (Fuglsang and Eide, 2012) practice based theory has been with a central approach in studies of various phenomena (Kowalkowski et al. 2012). Although studies on innovation from a practice based approach are still in an infancy stage (Russo Spena and Mele 2012), practice theory is becoming a central notion for understanding innovation (Korkman et al. 2010; Russo Spena and Mele 2012).

According to Korkman et al. (2010), the practice-based view perceives innovation as a set of innovative practice (actions) that are formed as the resources of customers and providers interlink with different contextual elements (Reckwitz, 2002). Activities, together with actors, are a central theme in strategy-as-practice (Wikner, 2010). Actors interact through practical activities, such as actions or micro-processes towards a strategic goal and expect an intended outcome. Over time, actors develop patterns of actions and routines that can be identified as strategic practices. The concept of practice is not synonymous with action. It expands the unit of analysis to the system that fosters action (Dourish, 2001), involving the subject, the action, the tools and the context in which the integration of many resources occurs (Reckwitz, 2002). Hence, investigating innovation through the practice lens implies the joint analysis of these elements, as well as, the idea that innovation emerges from an interactive process performed by many actors.

According to this, we address the topic of collaboration as a key theme for the development of innovation practices. Paraphrasing the notion of market practice (Kjellberg et al, 2012) and combining it with the topic of collaborative innovation (Trott and Hartmann, 2009; Chesbrough, 2006) we stated that collaborative innovation practices are enacted through – routine, micro-level inter-actions between multiple actors who integrate their resources seeking to create value for themselves and other by developing something new and better.

2. Innovation in food industry

“However in SMEs, resource restrictions may limit the development of a wide range of innovations. The establishment of network relations can provide an avenue to address this problem” (Gronum, Verreyne, and Kastle, 2012).

External innovation partnerships provide SMEs with the stimulus and capacity to innovate (Zeng, Xie and Tam, 2010), by fostering firms access to resources, complementary skills, capabilities and knowledge that are not internally available (Døving and Gooderham 2008).

Indeed, collaborative networks affect positively the innovative performance of SMEs, by impacting on the degree of innovation novelty (Nieto and Santamaría, 2010, Colurcio, 2009) – e.g. inter-firms cooperation pursues radical and incremental innovations (Sammarra and Biggiero, 2008) – and on both product and process innovation (Whitley, 2002). Between the firm and partners - customers, suppliers, producers, services providers, university, etc. - relationships with suppliers are well recognised as able to enhance the SMEs ability to develop or improve products (Nieto and Santamaría, 2010) that are commercially successful (Faems, Van Looy and Debackere, 2005).

According to Avermaete et al., 2004, the concept of innovation we propose in this work, goes beyond radical and technology based product innovation, including incremental changes in product and process, in the organisational structure as well as the exploring of new market.

Despite of the food sector maturity (Sucher, 2007; Colurcio et al. 2012), the lack of R&D investments and the product innovation riskiness (Grunert and Valli, 2001), food SMEs take on innovation to satisfy new regulatory standards, to become more efficient in processing activities, to develop new products and to better satisfy the customers' needs (Avermaete et al. 2004). Previous study (Colurcio and Russo Spina 2013) viewed the network relations as the more suitable way to innovate. Similarly, to other manufactures context, strategic alliances in the food industry concern mainly the supplier-buyer relationships (Cante et al., 2004; Colurcio, 2009). They, as revealed by Van der Valk and Wynstra, 2005, have the potential to affect the food firm competitiveness by increasing the product quality and by allowing SMEs to satisfy the new market demand for more complex products (Olsen, Harmsen and Friis, 2008).

Studies on innovation in food SMEs (Menrad, 2004; Capitanio et al., 2009; Baregheh et al. 2012) seem don't converge toward a common output. For some authors food SMEs are engaged in both product and process innovations (Menrad, 2004), whereas for others, food firms are mainly focused on incremental innovation and on process innovations instead of product innovations (Baregheh et al. 2012; Capitanio et al. 2009; Avermaete et al. 2004). By including the researches cited above, studies on innovation in food SMEs embrace different topics as the drivers and types of innovation (Baregheh et al. 2012; Capitanio et al. 2009; De Jong and Vermeulen, 2006); the innovation and export behaviour relationship (Wakelin, 1998); the networking approach to innovation (Colurcio and Russo Spina, 2013) and its effects on product and process innovativeness (Freel and Harrison, 2006); the link between innovation and the food SMEs performance (Najib and Kiminami, 2011).

Actually, there has been little previous research on innovation practices of food SMEs (Baregheh et al. 2012). The literature review reveals the lack of researches on collaborative innovation from a practice based view to define concretely the process aspects and the key elements of such practices as well as how they can contribute to leverage the innovative performance of food SMEs.

Methodology

Given the lack of prior empirical research addressing the practices through which collaborative innovation emerges in the SMEs context, we adopted an exploratory approach.

This paper addresses the topic of innovation and the effects of collaborative innovation in the food SMEs by framing two studies: study 1 and study 2.

Study 1

The study 1 concerns empirical evidences from 155 Italian food SMEs. It describes the state of the art of the innovation in the Italian food SMEs context. Data were collected through an online questionnaire that has been sent to 250 food SMEs (selected from Cerved Database 2010 by the geographical distribution). The questionnaire allows us to gather a large amount

of data to profile organizations (Saunders et al., 2003) and to frame innovation in the Italian food context. The questionnaire included many closed questions concerning the firms' perception of innovation, the firms' innovative behaviour (type of innovation, engagement in incremental and/or radical innovation etc.), the firms' involvement in networks that support innovation and the profile of companies (size, product range, revenue etc.).

We used a dichotomous variable to understand if firms had innovated from 2009-2012. Additional information were asked if not, to understand the reasons of such a conservative behaviour. Questions on types and on the degree of innovation were followed by specific queries relating to the presence of partners. Additional information were asked when respondents declared to have no external partners, as we consider this variable relevant to recognize what elements limit the raise of innovation networks. Final questions relate the profile of companies (size, product range, revenue etc.).

The number of questionnaires received was 180, but only 155 were fully complete. The resulting sample relates 155 processing food SMEs located in the north, central and south of Italy. The sample includes firms different in size (< 10 employees; small: < 50 employees; medium: <250 employees), revenue, geographical market served and products' range (drink and beverage, fresh and processed food) (table 1).

Table 1: Study 1 - sample profile

	Criteria	%
Product group	Drink and beverage	23,9
	Fresh food	17,4
	Processed food	58,7
Size: employees number	Up to 9	5,8
	10 to 50	83,2
	51 to 250	11
Revenue (€)	Up to 500.000 ,00	3,2
	501.000,00-1.000.000,00	1,9
	1.100.000,00 - 2.000.000,00	9,1
	2.100.000,00- 5.000.000,00	24,7
	5.100.000,00-10.000.000,00	24
	10.100.000,00- 50.000.000,00	33,8
Over 50.100.000,00	3,2	
Geographic markets served	Only regional	8,4
	National	16,8
	International	74,8

Source: Our elaborations

Study 2:

The study 2 relates to the in-depth analysis of 10 Italian food SMEs according to the practice-based approach. It focuses on the relationship with partners engaged by the SMEs within innovation network.

Data and information were collected through telephonic, skype video-chat interviews and direct interviews to the marketing managers and innovation managers (or equivalent) of 10 agri-food SMEs (processing stages of the agri-food vertical chain) (Raynaud et al. 2005). The ten processing firms we focused on, have been selected between the 67 SMEs that innovate with partners (study 1). We interviewed two or more people per company, depending on how many people the SME indicated as experienced with network innovation and involved in its related processes. Each interview lasted approximately forty minutes.

The interview form has been characterized by an open (Witzel, 2000) and dialogical structure for the understanding of the experience(s) and stories of the respondents. Open questions related to the firms' engagement in the innovation network and mainly: i) the actors' characteristics (type of partners engaged: suppliers, retailers, customers and university/research centres etc; ii) the content of the relationship (business - sale agreements- technological, marketing, etc.); iii) the duration and evolution of the relationship; iv) the

effects of partnerships (e.g. economic, technological, cognitive and market) and v) the interviewees' opinion and commitment toward the relationship. Open questions reflect the research construct we elaborated on the basis of previous practice research (Russo Spena and Mele, 2012; Korkman et al., 2010) and of collaborative and network innovation studies (Colurcio and Russo Spena, 2013; Trott and Hartmann, 2009; Chesbrough, 2006). The research construct included actors, roles, activities (Kjellberg e Helgesson, 2007), the main content and the concrete value co-created through the relationship (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The research construct.



Findings

Study 1: The state of the art of the innovation in the Italian food SMEs

Empirical data showed some interesting insights about the innovation in the Italian food Smes. The 80,6% of the sample (125 firms) declared to have introduced product and/or process innovation from 2009 to 2012, recognizing innovation as one of the most important factor to improve market competitiveness. On the contrary 30 firms (19,4%) showed a conservative behavior. The 43,4% of the non-innovative firms identified the lack of resources as the main cause of it, while, for the 23,3% of the interviewees, the problem is due to the lack of government support. Just few people indicated the market crisis (6,7%) and the lack of partners (6,7%). In some cases (20%) interviewees indicated the peculiarity of their product (i.e. parmesan cheese, mozzarella cheese.) as the main factor that inhibits innovation.

We used dichotomous variables to understand if firms have developed product or process innovation or both. Differently from previous study (Capitanio et al., 2009), our data reveal the mild prevalence of the product on process innovation (81,6% vs 69,7), and that both types of innovations are contextually developed. Indeed, the 51% of the sample (64 firms) have declared to be involved jointly in product and process innovation. Moving on the topic of the network relationships, we asked innovation managers if the main innovation has been developed in cooperation with external partners. The half of the sample (53,6%), that include the 64% of the firms engaged on both product and process innovation, declared to have involved external partners (also more than one partners) for innovation development, while, for the 45% of interviewees external support is not necessary to innovate. Moreover, the resistance to cooperate can be linked to keep the new projects secrecy (5,2%) or to the lack of available partners (24,1%).

Study 2: Collaborative innovation practice: actors and roles

In the matter of innovation relationships, information showed suppliers (both of raw material, equipment and services) as the most preferred and strategic partner for SMEs (named by 5 firms). Suppliers are a relevant source of innovation; they provide important input in the realization of new products through new materials and new applications. Suppliers contribute

to innovation processes by providing different kinds of input (competencies, technology, and consultancy), as emphasized by the marketing manager of a dairy company:

“Our first partner in innovation is our packaging supplier: thanks to his proposal we have been able to develop a new cheese with great appeal. The supplier not only advised a new product (a window packet), but he helped us to use it as marketing tool. Through window packets, today we propose an offer of mozzarella cheese that is unique on the market”.

On the other hand, in some cases (agri-food network), when suppliers are micro-family businesses (farmers) lacking in resources and competencies, the food processing Smes represents the junction with the innovation network and the source of knowledge and competencies for the knowledge recombination, as demonstrated by the following quote of a fresh cut company’s marketing manager:

“At the beginning of the relationship, we were just self-focused. The important thing was quality products, punctuality of delivery, etc... Then, thanks to an open-minded commercial manager, the customer understood that in the long run, cooperation and daily talks with the production field would be necessary for good salads and for the continuous development of new products (fruits)”.

Only few times the interviewees have indicated other players as favorite partner such as experts or specialists (named by 2 firms) and marketing agencies (named by 1 firm).

Suppliers support innovation by providing SMEs with new technical solutions and new ideas triggering learning processes. Expert and specialists contribute to increase or to bridge a competence gap developing new knowledge and marketing agencies by supporting firms during the launch of new products and in approaching market. Just few interviewees mentioned large distributors (named by 1 firm):

“Thanks to the cooperation with company we developed a new offer of pasta (new shape, new size and new characteristics). The channel relationship we built together was the beginning, for us of a path oriented toward the value creation for our customers.

The involvement of universities and research institutes is very weak. In a company the relationship concerns the cooperation on a specific project, as showed by the following quote:

We collaborated with a university just for the development of a new product. It was great, but now we are not in touch. There are a lot of ties to cooperation, first of all the lack of resources.

Partnerships with customers is not a relevant data, it is not named by firms investigated.

For the all firms investigated, the development of a collaborative relationship is very helpful because it leads to the acquisition of strategic competitive information, which allows a better understanding of the firm’s context and opportunities.

All partners act as resources integrators. Although with different intensity and manner due to their specific purpose and status, they use and integrate the resources that they hold with the resources made available from the company. They integrate human – competence, skills and communication – as well as non-human resources – tools and equipment – to create a new organizational culture as the following quotes suggest:

“The things we learned from the supplier about the field are numerous and amazing things, but we showed them things that they could not have ever imagined about laboratories, packaging and communication. Working together in the field, as in a laboratory, we can do great things!”.

“Getting in touch with the supplier was a revolution. Before this friendly and cooperative relationship, we considered the raw material a non-flexible resource, a tie, but now we know that we can work miracles!”

Study 2: Collaborative innovation practice: activities

Different activities were jointly implemented by actors to co-innovate. Activities can create value in their own right or are instrumental in achieving value later on. Our analysis focused on the operational manners to work with partners, that we considered as an instrumental approach to foster collaborative relationships for the innovation development.

These activities include the setting up of inter-firms team works, the recurring exchange of information and knowledge and the conjoint training course.

Drawing from information provided by respondents, six firms have been engaged in developing projects and new ideas together with other companies team. However, all respondents were aware of the importance to improve mechanism for information and knowledge sharing, just four SMEs have been engaged in a common path of vocational training. Paradoxically, these activities have been developed more by firms engaged in recent relationships (from 2 to 5 years) instead of firms engaged in long and well-established partnerships (more than 7 years). Interviewees involved in these activities affirmed that partnerships up to now, are not changed or evolved. This can depend on the age of relations (recent) as well as on the specific purposes of the relationship (just on well-defined projects).

Study 2: Collaborative innovation practice: content

Moving on the content of collaborative innovation practice, five specific topics – business (sale agreement), technological, marketing, financial and R&S – mark out firms' relationships in the Italian food context. Four firms have been engaged in technological partnership, while for three firms the main content of collaborative practice for innovation regarded R&S. Just one firm has been engaged in business or marketing or financial partnerships. Of course these contents and their relevance vary according purposes, needs status and structural peculiarities of firms.

Study 2: Collaborative innovation practice: value

To analyse effects of the SMEs engagement in collaborative innovation and thus its leverage on the firms innovative performance, we focused on the opinion of managers about the relationship. Results about value in innovation practice concern the value perceived by interviewees and not market value or performance of the company.

We identified benefits partners produce and the specific type of skills and knowledge firms developed together with partners. The most important benefits that respondents have identified in a collaborative approach to innovation are the co-generation of new ideas for the development of new and incremental product and of the process innovation (named by 4 firms); ii) the improvement of economic and market performances of firms, such as, the ROI (named by 2 firms) the revenue and the market share (named by 1 firm); iii) the engagement in new business relationships (named by 1 firm); iv) the support to access to new markets and technologies (named by 1 firm); and finally v) the acquisition of new knowledge and new competencies (named by 1 firm) such as the technological, informatics, marketing and business skills.

Discussion

The studies we briefly reported above, hint two major insights.

The study 1 surveys and profiles the approach of the Italian food SMEs to innovation in order to identify the types and the degree of innovation developed and the effects of firms involvement in innovation networks.

It defines the main elements of a practice to support management in the development of collaborative innovation in SMEs: actors, roles, activities, content and value.

The research revealed the positive involvement of the Italian food SMEs in innovation process and their positive approach to collaborate with partners for innovation. Despite the existence of some barriers - economic, technical and cultural - that, enforce the conservative behaviour of a part of the interviewees, for the most part of companies, innovation activities are recognized as a priority to ensure the organisational success, the performance improvement and the survival in the competitive arena. SMEs use their knowledge and skills reactively according to the rules, procedures and clauses drawn down together with partners. The main benefits of such a practice may include the co-generation of new ideas, the

improvement of the revenue as well the exchange of knowledge and the creation and absorption of competencies, skills, abilities etc.

The information coming up from direct interviews with managers showed that structural firms' characteristics (differences in size, revenue, products, and markets served) don't represent a barrier for promoting or being engaged in practices of collaboration.

The study 2 stressed main elements – actors, roles and activities – that enhance the collaborative practice for innovation in the Italian food context.

Specifically, we recognized the aware of respondents about the key role of partners for the innovation development. Suppliers of equipment and raw material are the main partners of Italian food SMEs. They act as co-innovator partner, supporting processing firms to implement new ideas and especially new technical solutions. This is consistent with data on innovations investment in Italy, and confirms that the predominant Italian innovative food model is based on the firm's ability to absorb and integrate equipments' technology within their production process. According to Whitley (2002) vertical cooperation has a higher significant impact on both product and process innovation.

The recurring share of information and knowledge is the prevalent activity implemented by firms and partners to co-innovate. It can be considered as the essential activity for co-innovation, by affecting all innovation types product, process, incremental and radical. In fact, knowledge that is created through people fully and actively engaged into the complete flow of activities that constitute the practice, is the source of potential innovation (Dougherty, 2004).

Interviewees reveal that more is the effort required to innovate more firms are pushed to foster more complex and articulated activities including the setting up of inter-firms team works and the conjoint training course. According to Laursen and Salter (2006), this study shows that openness through networking is complementary and beneficial to the innovation outcomes of firms, furthermore it is recognized as the only possible way to fit the changing market requests and reach a wider set of results (Colurcio et al., 2012).

Managerial Implications

The studies emphasized the main elements – actors, roles and activities – constitute the collaborative practice for innovation in the Italian food context, to foster a shared understanding of what the practice is and to keep these activities doable and meaningful.

As pointed by Ellström (2010) "*practice-based innovations can arise as a result of the interplay between, on the one hand, officially prescribed work processes – the explicit dimension – and, on the other hand, the work process as it is performed in practice with a considerable element of variation and improvisation*". By considering the main features of the Italian SMEs food context – small size, family firms, resource scarcity etc – we believe it is important shift the collaborative innovation practice from the implicit to the explicit dimension to codify and recognise it as a part of the organization formal structure. By this way SMEs should frame and implement collaborative innovation practice to replace episodic with continuous innovation. Of course this implies a continuous process of knowledge exchange constantly challenged by the variations and modification of network relations and by the firms innovative response to the market.

Limitations

However, several limitations of this study should be addressed. One of which is that results are derived from a sample of ten food SMEs. Further studies will be addressed to extend the samples of SMEs investigated and to analyse in depth all actors included in the network.

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