



A 22 year review of strategic alliance research in the leading management journals



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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the strategic alliance literature by providing a comprehensive review of over 800 articles that have appeared in 22 leading management journals over a 22 year period. Our study reveals that (a) there has been an upward trend to publish articles on this subject over time; (b) a large proportion of these articles are empirical in nature, with a growing number of them reporting on statistical studies that consider variable association and causality; (c) in terms of their methodological rigour we have witnessed relatively larger sized samples, higher response rates and more frequent use of probability sampling; and (d) although the majority of articles were written by authors within the same country and these tended to report on alliances involving North American businesses, we find that a variety of thematic areas have emerged, with cross cultural management and other human related facets receiving greater attention in recent times. Finally, we highlight the study's limitations and based on our review, outline several avenues where future research could be undertaken.

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1. Introduction

The increasing number of strategic alliances and their dismal failure record has fuelled growing interest and concern among scholars on this topic (Gomes, Weber, Brown, & Tarba, 2011). Over the last few decades, researchers from a diversity of theoretical, methodological and contextual backgrounds have explored a wide range of alliance themes (Christoffersen, 2013; Culpan, 2009; Parkhe, 1993a). Most of the earlier studies tended to focus on the pre-agreement phase, including broad aspects such as motives for collaboration, joint ventures (JVs) as strategic choices, partner selection and negotiations and contract (Doz, 1996; Doz, Olk, & Ring, 2000; Glaister & Buckley, 1996; Parkhe, 1993b). More recent research has increasingly shifted attention to aspects related to the post-agreement phase, such as the effective management of alliances, cross cultural understanding and company performance

(Brouthers & Bamossy, 2006; Buckley, Glaister, Klijn, & Tan, 2009; Christoffersen, 2013; Lee, Kim, & Seo, 2013; Luo, 2001; Reuer, Zollo, & Singh, 2002; Slater, 2012).

Some studies have also focused on topical areas such as franchising or licensing (Combs, Ketchen, Shook, & Short, 2011; Combs & Ketchen, 2003; Jiang, 2012; Shane, 1998; Xia, 2011), strategic alliances and organisational strategy (Datta, Musteen, & Herrmann, 2009; Nielsen & Gudergan, 2012; Poulis, Yamin, & Poulis, 2012; Ripollés, Blesa, & Monferrer, 2012; Yu, Subramaniam, & Cannella, 2013), the relationship between internal and external cooperation (Hillebrand & Biemans, 2003; Mudambi & Tallman, 2010; Stettner & Lavie, 2013), small business alliances and networks (Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000; Koka & Prescott, 2008; Lee, Abosag, & Kwak, 2012; Min & Mitsuhashi, 2012), knowledge and learning (Dussauge, Garrette, & Mitchell, 2000; Inkpen, 2000; Kale & Singh, 2007; Park & Lee, 2012), and the impact of governance on alliance effectiveness (Albers, Wohlgezogen, & Zajac, 2013; Barkema, Shenkar, Vermeulen, & Bell, 1997; Lui & Ngo, 2012; Park & Lee, 2012).

Recently, several emerging aspects including the temporal dimension (Shi, Sun, & Prescott, 2011), managing alliance portfolios (Das & Teng, 2002; Vapola, Pauku, & Gabrielsson, 2010; Wassmer, 2010), risk, trust and control (Anderson, Christ, Dekker, & Sedatole, 2013; Costa e Silva, Bradley, & Sousa, 2012; Das & Teng, 2001; Inkpen & Currall, 2004; Liu, 2012; Roy, 2012),

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knowledge management (Dyer & Hatch, 2006; Inkpen, 2008; Inkpen & Beamish, 1997; Kale, Singh, & Perlmutter, 2000; Meier, 2011; Shenkar & Li, 1999; Simonin, 2004), organisational justice (Luo, 2005, 2008), and cultural understanding have begun to receive more research attention. As a result, the subject area has evolved in a fairly fragmented approach where its collective impact has been difficult to recognise (Shi et al., 2011).

Given the diversity and complexity of the phenomenon and in an attempt to organise and structure the existing body of knowledge, some scholars have undertaken systematic reviews of the alliance literature. This has resulted in attempts to identify the theories used in previous studies in order to understand the rationale for forming inter-organisational relationships (Parkhe, 1993b), alliance portfolios, knowledge management and the behavioural aspects and effectiveness of international strategic alliances (ISA) (Combs et al., 2011; Meier, 2011; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011; Wassmer, 2010). As a result, resource scarcity and agency theories were found to appropriately address specific alliance forms such as franchising (Combs & Ketchen, 2003; Combs, Michael, & Castrogiovanni, 2004; Combs et al., 2011). Other theories underpinning research on strategic alliances, include transaction cost economics (TCE), the resource based view (RBV), knowledge based view (KBV), agency theory, social network theory, organisational learning, dynamic capabilities, agency theory, contingency theory, contract theory and resource dependency theory (Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011).

Some review articles have outlined the methodology employed in detail by specifying a review timeframe, outlining the key search words used (Robson, Skarmeas, & Spyropoulou, 2006; Shi et al., 2011) and explaining the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of articles reviewed (Meier, 2011; Wassmer, 2010). Other articles, however did not disclose these aspects (e.g. Combs et al., 2004; Lyons, 1991). One characteristic which was found to be common in most studies was the formation of a coding framework or adoption of frameworks proposed by other authors (Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011; Robson et al., 2006; Shi et al., 2011; Street & Cameron, 2007).

Although such reviews have provided an invaluable contribution to the existing body of knowledge, several shortcomings have been identified. Most examined the strategic alliance literature at different points in time, as a result, very little attention has been given to address the key themes surrounding such research and how it has evolved over time. Also, many of these studies have only tended to superficially address issues relating to the characteristics of authors and concluded very little on the methodological issues applied in researching the topic. For example, previous studies have neglected longitudinal research designs capable of portraying dynamic processes.

The aim of this present study is to assess the contribution of the leading mainstream management journals in terms of publishing research on strategic alliances over a twenty-two year period (1990–2012). Our decision to focus on the leading management journals is justified due to their rigorous review processes and that they only publish manuscripts of the highest quality in the management domain. The fact that these journals have been operational over a sustained period of time and they have significant impact, are further arguments to support our choice for their inclusion. The fact that we use leading journals from various management areas, including international business, marketing, organisation studies, strategy, operation research management and general management enables us to obtain a comprehensive, systematic and multidisciplinary view of the strategic alliance literature in assessing the contribution from various perspectives and methodological stances.

In summary, this study contributes to the strategic alliance literature in several ways. First, it brings to light the actual

involvement of the mainstream management journals as sources for publishing research that focuses on this area. Second, it identifies the characteristics of scholars that publish strategic alliance articles in such journals, which may help them to become more aware of work in the domain and foster potential future collaboration with other contributors. Third, it assesses the methodology of such articles, hence, making the most of the merits and preventing drawbacks associated with the extant strategic alliance literature. Fourth, the study will aim to establish trends concerning thematic developments in the strategic alliance arena from the perspective of leading mainstream management journals, thus generating knowledge that can be used as a reference for future research.

The remainder of this manuscript is organised as follows: The next section explains and justifies the research approach used in this study. This is followed by a presentation of the findings corresponding to the objectives along with subsequent discussion. Finally a conclusion is reached, before the limitations of the study are acknowledged and avenues for future research suggested.

2. The research approach

The objectives of this study are somewhat exploratory in nature and the approach attempts to bring to light the role and involvement of the leading management journals as a source for publishing research on the subject of strategic alliances. Specifically, the manuscript intends to provide further understanding regarding the characteristics of scholars that have published strategic alliance articles in such journals. It will assess the methodology used in such research and establish trends concerning the thematic development in the strategic alliance arena. This type of study has not been undertaken previously. Therefore, it should provide some fresh insights into the phenomenon surrounding strategic alliances.

The sampling frame in the current study consists of leading management journals in the areas of international business, marketing, general management, organisation studies, strategy and operation research management over a 22 year period, from 1990 to 2012. The journals selected include *Academy of Management Review*; *Academy of Management Journal*; *Administrative Science Quarterly*; *Journal of Management*; *Journal of Management Studies*; *Harvard Business Review*; *British Journal of Management*; *Human Resource Management*; *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*; *British Journal of Industrial Relations*; *Work, Employment and Society*; *Journal of International Business Studies*; *International Business Review*; *Journal of Marketing*; *Journal of Marketing Research*; *Journal of Consumer Research*; *Marketing Science*; *Journal of Retailing*; *International Marketing Review*; *Organisation Science*; *Organisation Studies*; *Leadership Quarterly*; *Human Relations*; *Strategic Management Journal* and *Management Science*.

The unit of analysis in this study was each article on the topic of strategic alliances that appeared in print in these journals (Babbie, 2012). Instead of using keywords to search for articles (as most review papers do), two trained researchers³ were tasked with searching each volume and issue. The titles, abstracts and keywords for each article were therefore initially screened and after a more careful examination of each, a total number of 805 articles were selected for inclusion in this study. The papers collected were divided into three time periods: 1990–1997 (174 articles), 1998–2005 (335 articles), and 2006–2012 (296 articles).

³ The two researchers were briefed by a Professor who had previously undertaken and published similar review articles in the management discipline. One of the team was an author and the other was a research assistant tasked with helping on this project.

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