Review and Support of the Relationship between Alliance Competence and Alliance Orientation

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of the formation of strategic alliances among companies. Specifically, it seeks to understand the relationship between alliance competence (Lambe, Speakman & Hunt, 2002) and alliance orientation (Kandemir, Yaprak & Cavusgil, 2006), following some of the most important guidelines of the leading exponents of theories based on resources and dynamic capabilities.

Once the concepts were developed we proceeded to establish a hypothesis that seeks to better understand the relationships between the constructs and how they interact to achieve alliances that are beneficial for the parties involved.

In particular, the findings corroborate the proposed relationships, supporting a direct link between market orientation constructs and senior management commitment to the alliances, as well as the commitment of senior management and competencies for alliances. As a fundamental contribution to this work, a mediating role of the alliance orientation construct was also detected between the relationship of senior management commitment and alliance competence.

Future research is proposed into the elements of the practical guidelines for alliances and the relationship of this construct with the others related to alliances and particularly to their performance.

KEY WORDS:

Alliances, Strategic Alliances, Alliance Orientation, Alliance Competence, Market Orientation, Senior Management Commitment.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic alliances are forms of competition that represent important competitive opportunities for businesses. According to Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997), strategic alliances serve for businesses to thrive through access to complementary assets. Moreover, companies have access to learning opportunities and upgrading of skills when they engage in strategic alliances (Branzei & Vertinsky, 2006). Alliances can even provide sources of advantages for companies (Helfat, Finkelstein, Mitchell, Peteraf, Singh, Teese & Winter, 2009).

There are numerous studies that consider alliances and their importance for companies. Some research links the operation with the success of alliances (Wittmann, Hunt & Arnett, 2009; Liu, Ghauri & Sinkovics, 2010; Lambe, Speakman & Hunt (2002); Varadarajan & Cunningham, 1995). However, these advances have left the alliance orientation partially aside, a construct that plays a fundamental role in the understanding of alliances and their operation (Bouncken & Fredrich, 2016; Lin & Darnall, 2015; Kandemir, Yaprak & Cavusgil, 2006). In particular, it is possible to observe a lack of connection between the constructs of alliance orientation and the competencies of joint ventures.

The overall objective of this study is to contribute to scientific knowledge through a conceptual and empirical review of the alliance orientation and alliance competencies constructs. In particular, we will conceptually analyze each concept from the viewpoint of resource-based and dynamic capabilities theories, then establish a model proposed with the major conceptual relationships.

Thus, this work explores the main relationship between the alliance competence and alliance orientation. Specifically, two associated models will be related and in particular the alliance orientation construct and its fundamental relations will be measured for the dynamic capabilities model. Hence the model proposed by Kandemir et al. (2006) will be used as a basis for understanding their relationship with the model proposed by Lambe et al., (2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A relationship with alliance competencies is implicit to alliance orientation. Conceptually, for Das & Teng (1998) the orientation of a partner refers to aspects of the alliance that the other partner sees as its priority and to which it could devote a greater amount of energy. Their rapprochement is based on risk and resource dimensions. Meanwhile, Lambe *et al.*, (2002), defines the competence of joint ventures as an organizational ability to find, develop and manage alliances. Therefore, in one instance, the priority level for the alliance is evaluated and on the other, the skill in its development.

Alliance Orientation

Kandemir *et al.*, (2006) suggests that alliance orientation is a construct that refers to the propensity of companies to have an orientation towards working with partners. The authors suggest that the company can benefit from its alliance relationships as a kind of learning resource. From this perspective, one sees alliance-oriented businesses as those that assign a high priority to present alliances and those that are possible in the future and which have advanced

competencies to deftly monitor their market to find and identify opportunities with associates, coordinate their activities with their alliances and learn from the experiences of working with alliances better than their competitors.

Along this line, Helfat *et al.*, (2009) stress that companies with significant relational competencies have systematic search and evaluation processes to assess the complementarity of potential partners. Similarly, the authors emphasize coordination as an important element for the operation of alliances, as well as knowledge management based on four stages for the alliances: articulation, coding, and compartmentalizing and internalization.

Kandemir *et al.*, (2006) propose certain characteristics typical of alliance orientation. First, that it is valuable, since its usefulness does not diminish with use. Second, it is difficult to imitate given the cognitive complexities associated with the process, which cannot be observed by competitors, referring to Li & Calantone (1998). Third, it is scarce, because few have these processes, referring to Eisenhardt & Martin (2000). One could perhaps add non-substitutability to these arguments since, following the proposal of Barney & Tyler (1990), the copy of a high-quality executive team with propensity to work with partners, precisely, would be unfeasible, meaning that the company cannot copy this resource exactly, Barney (1991). Thus, in line with the proposal of Kardemir *et al.*, (2006) and the proposal of Barney (1991), this alliance orientation constitutes a VRIN and would therefore be a source of competitive advantages.

The authors of the alliance orientation construct alliances define three dimensions:

Polling of alliances: Since companies may lose competitiveness if their resources and skills become obsolete for the environment, those that dominate the search of alliance opportunities may identify partners that complement their resources and strategies, repositioning themselves and retaining their markets. Thus, the complementary competencies play an important role, as proposed by Teece (1988), who notes that companies generate higher relational incomes when they find strategic partners that are highly complementary.

Thus, the polling of alliances is defined as the degree in which a firm proactively monitors the environment in search partnership opportunities. In this regard certain elements related to the systematization of the search should be highlighted: identification, collection and development, as proposed by Helfat *et al.*, (2009).

Coordination of alliances: In efforts to achieve benefits for both members of an alliance the coordination in combining different resources and creating new competencies becomes a key skill. Coordination involves the sharing of information, opportunities and activities so as to be more competitive. Hence, coordinating the alliance is defined as the degree to which a company systematically integrates strategies, synchronizes activities and expands the know-how of the alliance.

According to Teece *et al.*, (1997), the task of coordination is essential within the framework of the dynamic competencies. Although it is considered mainly for the internal organization, it is also considered for the external environment, particularly in alliances.

Learning as an alliance: Because alliance management is a complex process and because the details of the interaction are difficult to translate into a detailed contract, learning the management and interaction under the alliance becomes important. Learning includes the internalization of direct experiences with alliances, both successes and failures. Thus, learning as an alliance is defined as the degree to which a company acquires, interprets and uses learning how to handle the alliance within the organization.

Zollo & Winter (2002) use two companies as examples to demonstrate the different ways to develop the learning related to alliances, the first case considers Corning, a company that acquires the learning under alliances individually among workers, while in the second case, HP, uses dissemination mechanisms, such as seminars and participatory meetings to convey best practices on alliances, which are also collected in a written document.

Alliance orientation will be stronger when both sides have high levels of these dimensions, being able to contribute their skills to develop joint projects. Kandemir *et al.*, (2006), notes that the alliance orientation construct results in the performance of the alliance in the network, which in turn results in performance in the market. In this model, two aspects are recognized that can influence the performance of the alliance in the network - market turbulence and technological turbulence.
Hence, studies such as Passaillaigue & Estrada (2016), expose the link resulting from alliances between organizations that learn and intelligent organizations, highlighting the importance of focusing on the improvement of the organizational strategy, intellectual capital and its role in organizations, in order to obtain competitive advantages. In the same line of ideas, De Armas and Valdés (2016) coined the term Universities 2.0, for the case of intelligent organizations to incorporate collaborative tools and concepts related to sharing information, contacts and resources among the members of alliances for mutual benefit.

Alliance Competencies

The joint venture competence construct, proposed by Lambe *et al.*, (2002) contributes to the success of the alliance, given one direct positive effect and two indirect in the success of the alliance (through the acquisition of complementary resources and creation of idiosyncratic resources).

The authors of alliance competencies define three dimensions in this construct:

Alliances experiences: Experience with alliances is a cross-company resource because it provides knowledge on how to handle and use alliances (Simonin, 1997). Thus, the experience of alliances facilitates the competencies that sustain alliances. As reported by Day (1994) the experience of alliances contributes to the quality of "alliance management" in fields such as in the selection and negotiation with potential partners and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each partner. On the other hand, although one might think that knowledge of managing alliances may be available, this knowledge is more tacit (Polanyi, 1966). Thus, an alliance competency is a learning provided by experience. From this point of view, the experience of the alliance is that which allows a better assessment by potential partners (Gulati, 1995; Powell, Koput & Smith-Doerr, 1996).

Development of competencies of alliance managers: Day (1994) suggests that companies with alliance competencies have the ability to develop managers with management competencies that foster the management of alliances. In this way, companies can better manage the responsibilities and roles, favoring their articulation in dynamic markets. Thus, it is proposed that firms with competent alliance managers can negotiate, structure and ultimately run alliances in ways that enable the company to encourage attractive partners, promote good solutions to conflicts within the alliances and work with their partners to complement resources over time, achieving better competitive opportunities. In this regard, it must be considered that the competencies to handle alliances are important factors behind the success or failure of alliances (Anand & Khanna, 2000).

Propensity to identify partners: companies that have alliance competencies will proactively seek partners who have complementary resources in order to improve their competitive position (Hunt, 1997). Thus, firms that identify those partners will not only improve their competitiveness, but also improve their chances of success in alliances (Lambe *et al.*, 2002; Simonin, 1997). In addition, authors such as Day (1994), suggests that there would be better competitive opportunities by being the first to choose the best ally available.

In their model, Lambe *et al.*, (2002) propose that the competencies for joint ventures are preceded by the commitment of top management to the alliance; and consequently, the acquisition of additional resources, the creation of idiosyncratic resources and the success of joint ventures; that would also be directly influenced by creating idiosyncratic resources.

Proposed Model

In Figure 1, a conceptual model is presented with elements collected by Lambe *et al.*., (2002) and Kandemir *et al.*, (2006). The alliance orientation construct is extracted from the model presented by Kandemir *et al.*, (2006), which is one of the key points in this analysis.

Figure 1. Proposed Model
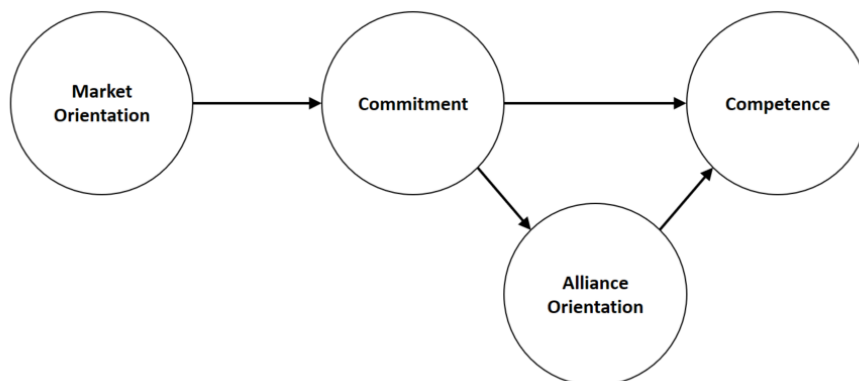
Source: prepared by the authors.

The constructs of the top management commitment to the alliances and competencies for joint ventures are extracted from the model presented by Lambe *et al.*, (2002). Additionally, the market orientation construct proposed by Narver & Slater (1990) was used, since, according to its authors, it corresponds to the most effective and efficient way to create the conduct necessary for creating higher value for consumers and thus a lasting and superior performance for the company.

According to the foregoing one should expect a relationship of mediation between senior management's commitment and alliance competencies. Table 1 shows a diagram with the requirements for generating strategic alliances, proposed as an orientation for strategic alliances and requirements for the development of strategic alliances, proposed as strategic alliance competencies.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of organizational theories and strategic alliances

Comparative	Resource-based	Dynamic competencies	Transaction costs	Knowledge-based
Requirements for generating strategic alliances	Develop competencies to detect where the resources are and which ones I need.	Search competencies of potential strategic alliances. Competencies to differentiate between beneficial and non-beneficial opportunities.	Ability to detect and evaluate transaction costs associated with the alliance.	Evaluate strategic knowledge to be gained and to be released with the alliance.
Requirements for the development of strategic alliances	Competencies to manage and leverage resources. Strategic alliances would allow access to resources the company is lacking.	Competencies to transform the basis of shared resources, improving the levels of competitiveness and adapting to new scenarios.	Keep control of the transaction costs under a strategic alliance that lasts over time.	Develop an awareness for the appropriate management of alliances.

Source: Prepared by the author.

Presentation of the Hypothesis

Market orientation and commitment of senior management to the alliance

In the proposed model, the commitment of senior management plays the role of antecedent to the joint venture competencies and is composed of a dimension of four items that point to (Lambe *et al.*, 2002): the commitment to use the alliance to achieve strategic objectives; the belief that the alliance is important for the future success of the company; support for the use of alliances when the company so requires and the motivation to establish joint goals with the alliance. As noted above, Narver & Slater (1990) indicate that the most effective and efficient way to create the conduct needed for the creation of superior value for consumers and thus continuous superior performance for the company, is market orientation. Therefore, a positive

relationship between market orientation and commitment of senior management to the alliances would be considered.

> H1: There is a positive relationship between market orientation and management commitment, based on the search for value generation.

Senior management commitment and alliance orientation
Whereas the commitment of senior management sees the alliance as an important part for the success of the company, alliance orientation, which involves finding and identifying alliances should be a consequence. Hence, the following hypothesis.

> H2: There is a positive relationship between senior management commitment and alliance orientation, given by the intention and enhancement of alliances by senior management.

Alliance orientation and alliance competencies

The competencies construct for alliances defined in the Lambe *et al.* (2002) model includes three dimensions: experience with alliances, development of alliances and identification of alliances; which together comprise the organizational skills developed to find, develop and manage alliances. These skills are closely related to the dynamic alliance competencies proposed by Anand (2001), who proposes that these competencies allow the company to choose good and reliable partners and structure their relationships to improve performance.

The association between alliance competencies and alliance orientation can be seen in their dimensions. Learning is an element of alliance orientation that is associated with experience, through the latter's reflection. The greater the orientation towards learning, the greater the openness to experience (Huber, 1991). Thus, it is possible to assume that the alliance orientation can be an antecedent of alliance competencies.

> H3: There is a positive relationship between alliance orientation and alliance competencies given by the intention and enhancement of alliances promoted by the alliance orientation.

Finally, it is considered that the relationship found in the Lambe *et al.*, (2002) model, where the commitment of senior management has a positive impact on the alliance competencies in the companies. Resulting in the following hypothesis.

> H4: There is a positive relationship between senior management commitment and the alliance competencies, proposed and tested in the Lambe et al. (2002) model.

METHODOLOGY

The scale available in Kandemir *et al.*, (2006) was used to measure the alliance orientation construct, whereas the scales used by Lambe *et al.* (2002) were used for the top management commitment to alliances and joint ventures competencies constructs. The scale designed by Narver & Slater (1990) was used to assess market orientation construct.

Sampling procedure

The sampling procedure for data collection in this research was intentional (Forster, 2001), ensuring that the components of the sample had recently had roles in companies at intermediate and high levels. To do so, they were invited to join a group of graduates of a masters program of a Chilean university and members of a professional social network. The sample classification based on Revision 4 of the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC) is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample sizes and classification according to ISIC

	ISIC	Economic Activity Account ISIC	%
A	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	4	3,01%
B	Mining and quarrying	7	5,26%
C	Manufacturing	12	9,02%
G	Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	1	0,75%
H	Transportation and storage	4	3,01%
J	Information and communication	2	1,50%
K	Financial and insurance activities	11	8,27%
M	Professional, scientific and technical activities	9	6,77%
N	Administrative and support service activities	25	18,80%
P	Education	43	32,33%
Q	Human health and social work activities	4	3,01%
R	Arts, entertainment and recreation	2	1,50%
S	Other service activities	9	6,77%
	Total	**133**	**100%**

Source: Prepared by the author.

Data collection procedure

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire designed and distributed by *Qualtrics Research Suite*, a service that is provided in an online format. Using this program, an email with a

link to the questionnaire was distributed to respondents. The email briefly explained the purpose of the investigation and the addressee was invited to anonymously and voluntarily participate.

The sample was obtained following an invitation sent to a database composed of 810 executives to participate in this research. 55% of these records came from a database of graduates from a masters program at Universidad de Viña del Mar and the remaining 45% came from a database of professional social network to which access was granted for the research.

A total of 293 persons, corresponding to 36.17% of the database used, responded to the survey over the course of 17 days. The questionnaire conducted two filters. The first was related to having worked for more than 6 months in any company. This filter was established to ensure that participants were familiar with the functioning of the company. The second filter was related to have interacted in the context of their work, with an alliance. To answer this question, respondents were guided by a simplified definition of the alliance concept, based on the proposal by Lambe *et al.*, (2002). After reviewing the data provided, 142 records that had not met any of the criteria set were eliminated.

The remaining 151 surveys were analyzed record by record, using statistical tools, looking for straight line or other sources of response bias (Cole, McCormick & Gonyea, 2012) that could lead to undesirable effects on indicators, such as the alpha of Chronbach (Stratton, Witzke, Jacob, Sauer & Murphy-Spencer, 2002). Thus, a final sample of 133 records was obtained for analysis.

The average age of the sample was 39. 59% were men and 41% women. 77% had the masters degree, 12% had some kind of intermediate degree, 8% were professionals or technologists and 4% had a doctorate. 48% were from Colombia, 38% from Chile, 8% from Ecuador and 7% from other Latin American countries.

RESULTS

After collecting data and sorting them, we proceeded to conduct a preliminary review through a factorial analysis of main components, using the SPSS v17 software. This analysis sought to compare alliance orientation constructs with competencies for joint ventures and ensure that each dimension was independent. The result was as expected, checking the difference between the two constructs. Following that, we proceeded to analyze the data using the least square structural equation by SmartPLS v3.2.6 software. This methodology was considered, given the characteristics of the sample and the method proposed by Hair & Hult (2016), using the route weighting scheme.

During the analysis one of the variables of the market orientation construct was eliminated, since it was unsuitable for the model fit. The AVE calculated in the resulting model were around or above 0.5; while the alphas of Cronbach were in values of around 0.9, meeting the general standards for reliability and validity of the constructs, as specified in Table 3.

Table 3. Reliability and validity of the constructs

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Alliance Orientation	0.891	0.901	0.911	0.535
Joint Alliance Competence	0.874	0.879	0.899	0.498
Joint Senior Management Commitment	0.940	0.941	0.957	0.848
Market Orientation	0.939	0.944	0.947	0.560

Source: Prepared by the author.

The Fornel & Larcker (1981) criterion was used to review the convergent validity, which indicates that the square root of the AVE of each construct must be greater than the correlations between constructs (see Table 4), verifying the convergent validity of the constructs in the model.

Table 4. Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Alliance Orientation	Joint Alliance Competence	Joint Senior Management Commitment	Market Orientation
Alliance Orientation	0.732			
Joint Alliance Competence	0.601	0.706		
Joint Senior Management Commitment	0.591	0.558	0.921	
Market Orientation	0.585	0.459	0.639	0.748

Source: Prepared by the author.

Then a Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio analysis was conducted. The values obtained support the proposed model, since the Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt (2015) criterion states that values less than 0.9 confirm that the model is discriminatively and nomologically valid (see Table 5).

Table 5. Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio

	Alliance Orientation	Joint Alliance Competence	Joint Senior Management Commitment	Market Orientation
Alliance Orientation				
Joint Alliance Competence	0.662			
Joint Senior Management Commitment	0.632	0.606		
Market Orientation	0.617	0.486	0.670	

Source: Prepared by the author.

The SRMR indicator is used to evaluate the adjustment of the model. According to Henseler *et al.*, (2014), when the values of this indicator are less than 0.1, the model is seen to be correctly adjusted. The results obtained (SRMR = 0.094) are consistent with this criterion, proving the correct adjustment of the model as described in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Results of the model
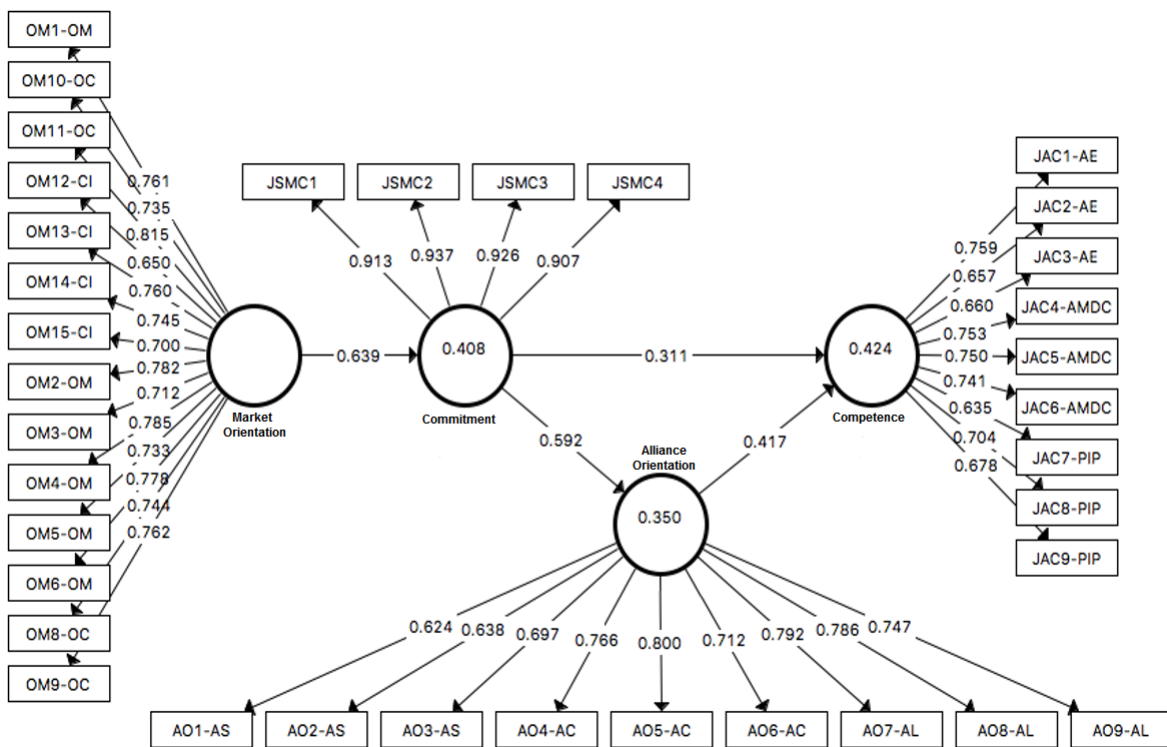
Source: Prepared by the author.

Taken together, the results of the analysis confirm the discriminating and convergent validity in all the constructs considered in this model. In particular, one can observe from the results that 42.4% of the variance of alliance competence is explained by the senior management's commitment and alliance orientation. Furthermore, 35% of the variance in alliance orientation is explained by the senior management's commitment, while 40.8% of the latter is explained by market orientation. Additionally, it can be seen that the effects of market orientation on senior management's commitment, the commitment of senior management to competencies and senior management's commitment to alliance competencies are significant, supporting the hypothesis raised in the model, as set forth in Table 6.

Table 6. T statistics

	T Statistics	P Values
Joint Senior Management Commitment -> Joint Alliance Competence	2.825	0.005
Joint Senior Management Commitment -> Alliance Orientation	10.829	0.000
Market Orientation -> Joint Senior Management Commitment	10.284	0.000
Alliance Orientation -> Joint Alliance Competence	3.975	0.000

Source: Prepared by the author.

DISCUSSION

Alliance orientation is a fundamental construct for understanding how the alliance competencies are developed and finally how the latter achieve successful strategic alliances that are key to the competitive success of companies as demonstrated by Eisenhardt & Martin (2000), strategic alliances are examples of "true" dynamic competencies.

While the competencies are direct means by which concrete results are obtained in situations of strategic alliances; their formulation would not be possible without the alliance orientation. Consequently, the commitment of senior management to promoting the conditions necessary for the development of alliances is essential, not only for the development of competencies for the alliances *per se*, but also to reinforce the means to achieve them, represented by the alliance orientation.

When delving into each construct, its dimensions and respective items, one can understand the close relationship between alliance orientation and joint ventures competencies.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

When the dimensions are observed in the alliance orientation constructs and are compared with joint venture competencies, a kind of agreement is initially seen with each dimension proposed. However, the proposed emphases are different. In the case of alliance orientation dimensions, these are shown as part of a propensity construct to work with other partners, while in the case of competencies, their dimensions are displayed as a skill to find, develop and manage alliances.

Therefore, the latter is responsible for the ability to develop alliances, while the alliance orientation in an intermediate stage prior to the formation of alliance competencies.

Given the foregoing, it makes sense that these constructs should have a direct relationship and, moreover, that the relationship should be based on joint venture competencies, where the alliance competencies allow the execution of an alliance orientation.

This work has important theoretical implications. Firstly, the relationship shown between the alliance orientation and alliance competencies exacerbates the importance of the predecessor construct: the commitment of top management. The latter not only has a direct impact on alliance competencies, but also has an indirect impact on the alliance competencies through alliances orientation. Thus, it is also necessary to consider this alliance orientation construct in the nomological networks related to strategic alliances.

From the business perspective, it is essential to understand that management commitment alone is not enough to generate alliance competencies. To do this it is important to develop alliance orientation. Therefore, to successfully achieve alliance competencies, both the commitment of senior management and alliance orientation have to be sought.

Notwithstanding the results obtained, this study is not without certain limitations. Firstly, the data used for analysis, although collected in a targeted manner and also including a rigorous cleansing of the data, may not be representative. In addition, the sample was not based on companies but rather medium- and senior-level managers. This could also cause certain distortion in the results.

Future research could delve further into alliance orientation and its relationship with related constructs that were deemed beyond the scope of this study, such as the performance of alliances, complementary resources and idiosyncratic resources.

Regarding Alliance orientation, it would be particularly interesting to understand which focuses and activities are required in practice for its incorporation into the organization, thus understanding the means necessary to develop this concept.

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