

BRIDGING THE GAP: RELATIONAL MECHANISMS IN INTERLINKED-AMBIDEXTROUS VENTURE CLIENTING UNITS

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ABSTRACT

Emerging research on corporate venture clienting as a structured form of open innovation points towards its possibility to help foster organizational ambidexterity and subsequently strategic renewal for established companies by connecting explorative start-ups with exploitative core business. To better understand how companies realize this possibility, this study explores the role of relational mechanisms in Venture Client Units (VCUs) and their ability to enable organizational ambidexterity and drive strategic renewal (SR). Through qualitative, abductive research with the Flexible Pattern Matching Approach, the analysis of existing theory and empirical data from 34 semi-structured interviews of VCU representants derives theoretically and empirically grounded key formal and informal linking formats and facilitators that foster effective relational mechanisms of VCUs with internal and external stakeholders. Additionally, novel ambidexterity enablers are defined, including Focus, Resources, Business Intelligence, Market Intelligence, and Know-How. These support VCUs in balancing the dual focus on exploration and exploitation and consequently influence the VCU's ability for strategic renewal. With these findings, the research contributes to the research of interlinked-ambidextrous corporate venturing units by dissecting the relational mechanism into its singular components and showing their interactions for venture clienting as a basis for future quantitative research to test the proposed relationships.

Keywords: Organizational Ambidexterity, Relational Interfaces, Corporate Venturing, Boundary Spanning

1. INTRODUCTION

As structured approach for Open Innovation (OI), external corporate venturing (CV) has experienced increasing popularity in recent years to leverage external sources of innovation for the creation of new business (Battistini et al., 2013; Kanbach & Stubner, 2016). As an emerging and increasingly popular form of external CV, so-called venture clienting (VCL) emerged a decade ago when Gregor Gimmy (2021, 2023) coined the term (Gartner (2024)). A Venture Client, instead of equity, purchases a startup's solution ahead of the competition, often including proof-of concepts to test, validate and adapt it to its specific needs (Gimmy et al., 2017). This form of innovation has become increasingly professional, and many companies have established dedicated Venture Client Units (VCUs) to execute this approach (Gimmy, 2021). Through a planned innovation logic, such VCUs act as a connector between corporate and external parties, addressing internal business needs with external solutions through internal and external interlinking and boundary-spanning abilities (Weiss & Kanbach, 2022). That way, VCUs balance the exploration of new opportunities with exploitation of the core business ambidextrously to foster the SR of the parent company. One of the core enablers at play in such interlinked-ambidextrous VCUs are so-called 'relational mechanisms',

potentially including cross-unit links with other departments within the organization (business linking) and top management or corporate strategy teams (strategic linking), as well links to the external environment, such as the startup ecosystem (Jansen et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2023).

Despite their importance for successful venture clienting and eventually its fostering of SR through organizational ambidexterity, researchers have neither established a comprehensive understanding of relational mechanisms in VCUs nor analyzed their workings in greater detail (Steiber & Alänge, 2021). To address this gap in research, the study examines which relational mechanisms enable strategic renewal in interlinked-ambidextrous VCUs, and how. Through a combined theoretical and empirical investigation, the research dissects relational mechanisms into specific formats and facilitators and additionally uncovers ambidexterity enablers to leverage them for SR.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 *CORPORATE VENTURE CLIENTING FOR EXTERNAL STRATEGIC CORPORATE VENTURING*

Typically categorized as internal, cooperative, or external, CV as a structured form of OI involves the creation of new business for an existing organization through building, partnering, or investing (Lippitz, 2007; Sharma & Chrisman, 2007). If such new business is organizationally consequentially, ‘strategic’ CV changes the status quo of the company and thus fosters SR (Weiss et al., 2023). Therefore, external (strategic) CV can be seen as a structured form of OI to foster SR through the creation of new business for an existing organization via external means (Sharma & Chrisman, 2007).

For external CV, VCL represents a contemporary adaptation in external CV which is usually carried out in specialized units (VCUs). These specialized organizational entities within large corporations are designed to engage with startups through non-equity partnerships in collaboration with the (core) business of the company (Gimmy et al., 2017; Weiss & K. Kanbach, 2022; Weiss et al., 2023). Unlike traditional CV Capital, which involves equity investments in startups, VCUs focus on purchasing innovative products, services, or technologies directly from startups. The primary goal of VCUs is not to take ownership stakes in these startups, but rather to nurture and support their development, with the aim of establishing them as future suppliers that can fuel the corporation's innovative capabilities (Gutmann et al., 2020). This approach requires lower financial resources compared to traditional equity investments, which reduces risks while delivering tangible results more rapidly (Mais et al., 2023).

That way, VCL offers a structured yet adaptable framework that enables corporations to exploit existing capabilities of the core business while exploring new opportunities through non-equity partnerships with startups (Gimmy, 2021, 2023; Gimmy et al., 2017). Thus, VCL addresses the inherent challenge faced by mature companies in combining the exploitation of current competitive advantages with the exploration of new opportunities, usually coined as ‘organizational ambidexterity’ (March, 1991; Madsen, 2010; Kuratko & Audretsch, 2013).

2.2 *INTERLINKED-AMBIDEXTROUS VENTURE CLIENTING UNITS*

To carry out structured VCL approaches and combine exploration and exploitation, VCUs actively bridge internal corporate needs with external startup solutions, ensuring seamless integration and collaboration across various organizational boundaries (Hill & Birkinshaw 2014; Weiss et al., 2023). Therefore, research underlines the interconnected

nature of these interlinked-ambidextrous units within the broader corporate structure and their external environment; including (1) relationships with internal business units or functions (business linking), (2) relationships with top management or corporate strategy teams (strategic linking), and (3) relationships with the external ecosystem (external linking) (Hill & Birkinshaw, 2014; Weiss et al., 2023). The required process of knowledge exchange and collaboration across organizational units is also referred to as 'boundary spanning' (Glaser et al., 2015).

2.3 RELATIONAL MECHANISMS IN INTERLINKED-AMBIDEXTROUS VENTURE CLIENTING UNITS

Formal and informal relational mechanisms realize the required boundary-spanning of interlinked-ambidextrous units (Jansen et al., 2012). Formal relational mechanisms are concerned with the structural design of collaborative exchanges. These mechanisms outline the explicit arrangements, agreements, and contractual obligations that govern partnerships (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Mohr & Spekman, 1994). On the other hand, informal relational mechanisms focus on the interpersonal and social connections between partners, emphasizing trust, mutual understanding, and shared norms (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Jap & Anderson, 2007; Lavie et al., 2012).

Past research consistently highlights the significance of specific formal relational mechanisms in collaborative exchanges. Among these mechanisms, three have been particularly emphasized: Depth of Cooperation, Frequency of Exchange, and Support. Depth of Cooperation refers to the extent and intensity of collaborative efforts between partners, which is crucial for fostering strong, mutually beneficial relationships (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Mohr & Spekman, 1994). Frequency of Exchange involves the regularity with which partners interact and share re-sources, facilitating ongoing communication and coordination (Cannon & Hom-burg, 2001; Lavie et al., 2012). Lastly, Support encompasses the assistance and resources provided by partners to each other, which strengthens the overall partnership and enhances its success (Lavie et al., 2012; Sherer, 2003).

Informal relational mechanisms are also vital in the dynamics of collaborative exchanges, with three key mechanisms emerging from the literature: Equal Power Distribution, Trust, and Importance. Equal Power Distribution refers to the balance of influence between partners, ensuring that no single entity dominates the relationship, which promotes fairness and mutual respect (Rotering, 1993). Trust is the confidence partners have in each other's reliability and integrity, serving as the foundation for effective collaboration and long-term partnership success (Dilk et al., 2008; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). The Importance of the partnership refers to the value that each partner places on the relationship, which motivates them to invest in and prioritize the collaboration (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). Such relational mechanisms for interlinking can be delivered through specific formats (Weiss et al. (2023). Formal formats, such as venture boards, events, or working groups provide organized platforms for collaboration and decision-making, ensuring that resources and strategies are aligned across the organization (Garg & Furr, 2017). Informal formats, including networking activities and informal communication channels, foster the development of social capital and enable fluid knowledge and idea exchange that enhance collaboration and trust (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005).

To illustrate the current state of literature, a theoretical framework combines the initially proposed categories for interlinking (strategic, business and external linking) with the formal and informal relational mechanisms, dissected into overarching facilitators and concrete delivery formats, together leading to the combined exploration of new and

exploitation of existing competitive advantages (ambidexterity) to foster SR (cf. Figure 1).

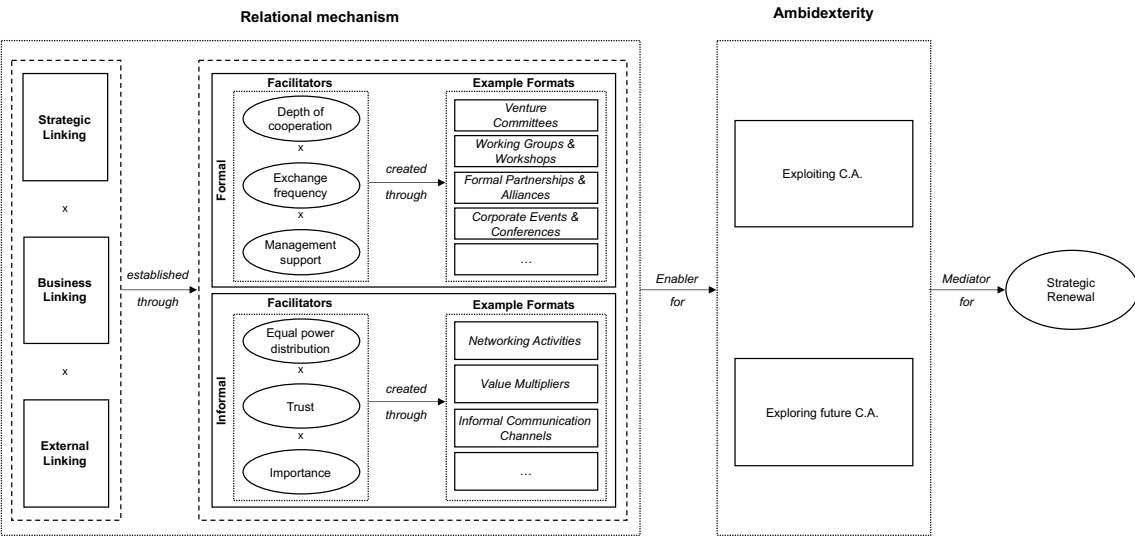


Figure 1: Relational Mechanism Theory Template (RMTT) based on Initial Categorization of Relational Mechanism in Interlinked-Ambidextrous Corporate Venturing Units (Own Illustration adapted from Weiss et al. 2023; Weber & Heidenreich 2016)

Despite offering theoretical patterns to examine relational mechanisms, the current literature lacks a focus VCU and thus misses the specific interlinks, facilitators and formats at play in this phenomenon, which are thus further investigated through empirical research.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Addressing the stated research question requires the empirical examination of the formal and informal relational mechanisms for boundary spanning in interlinked-ambidextrous VCU. To compare the presented theoretical patterns in the existing literature with new patterns from empirically collected data in an abductive manner, this study employs a Flexible Pattern Matching Approach (FPMA) as outlined by Bouncken et al. (2021) (Figure 2).

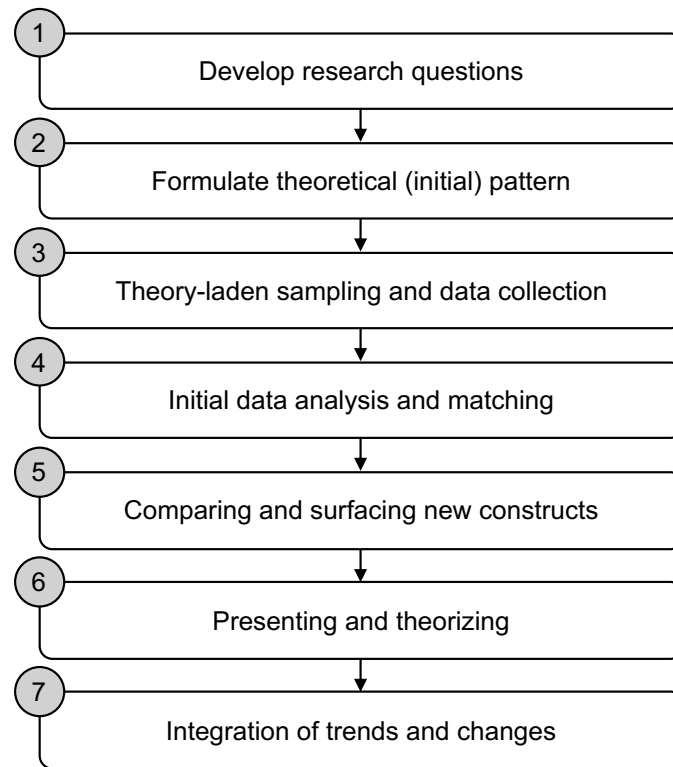


Figure 2: The Seven Steps in the FPMA Approach (own Illustration adapted from Bouncken et al., 2021)

The application of these steps is described in the subsequent relevant parts of the methodology section, besides the first two steps that are already completed in the previous parts of the study.

3.2 DATA SAMPLING & DATA COLLECTION

Theory-laden sampling and data collection: The initial patterns from the step before serve as a liaison between theoretical foundation and empirical research (Bouncken et al., 2021). Based on these, semi-structured interviews were used to collect relevant empirical data on interlinked-ambidextrous VCUs in three subsets to cover a large enough timeframe between Q4, 2020 to Q3, 2024. The resulting sample comprises 34 interviews with VCL experts working in or collaborating with VCUs and are, on average, of high seniority level, as can be observed in the job titles of the participants. A detailed anonymized overview of the participants is available upon request. This purpose-driven sample ensured a solid connection to the research area (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Initial data analysis and matching: In step four, the data gathered from interviews is analyzed iteratively by applying the constant comparison approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). This is recommended for the FPMA because it allows gleaning dominant patterns from data, adjusting the collection when a new line of thinking emerges, and identifying the point of saturation (Bouncken et al., 2021). The transcribed interviews are then compiled into informant-centric first-order concepts related to the research target, as suggested by Goia (2013). The first-order concepts are then clustered into second-order concepts, which were synthesized into the existing relational mechanism categories using the existing theoretical patterns as suggested by Bouncken (2021). Each identified

second-order concept is compared to the existing theory and can either agree, challenge, or present new information indicating a new domain opening (Shane, 2000). Using the constant comparison mode, the second-order concepts are expanded or modified when new patterns emerged, or existing patterns challenged.

Comparing and surfacing new constructs: The comparison and generation of new insights stem from the foundational stages of initial data analysis and pattern matching. Data segments that deviate from existing theoretical constructs are set aside for further examination to uncover novel insights. In this context, the inductive approach is integrated to systematically distill insights by focusing on a) latent concepts and their relationships and b) hidden processes that emerge from the comprehensive analysis of the collected data (Gioia et al., 2013). Using the two-step open-coding process from Gioia (2013) and combining it with the FPMA allows for a deep dive into empirical data and theory for theory-building (Bouncken et al., 2021).

Presenting and theorizing: During this research step, the general story displaying the data was developed. The comparison between the theoretical patterns and the empirical data is portrayed. Figure 3 displays a detailed overview of the data structure of the analysis.

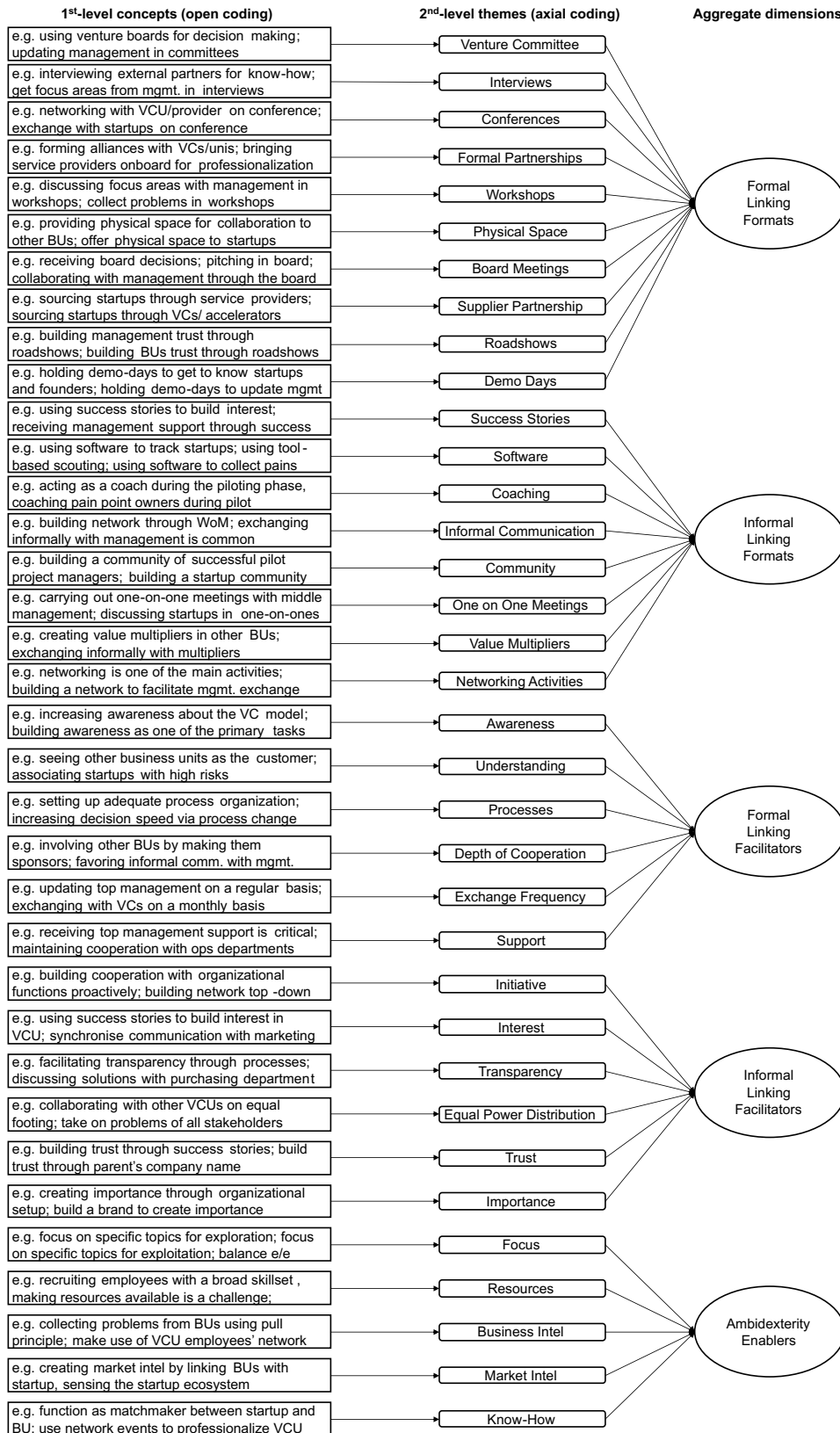


Figure 3: Data Structure (own Illustration)

Finally, data (in)consistencies were merged into a comprehensive framework portraying the relevant relational mechanisms for interlinked-ambidextrous VCUs and their interplay as presented in the findings.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 RELATIONAL MECHANISM FRAMEWORK FOR VCUS

As an interpretation of the derived and compared theoretical and empirical patterns, the VCU Relational Mechanism Framework breaks down relational mechanisms into several interrelated components, offering a comprehensive view of how VCUs establish and strengthen relational linkages to enable ambidexterity (Figure 4).

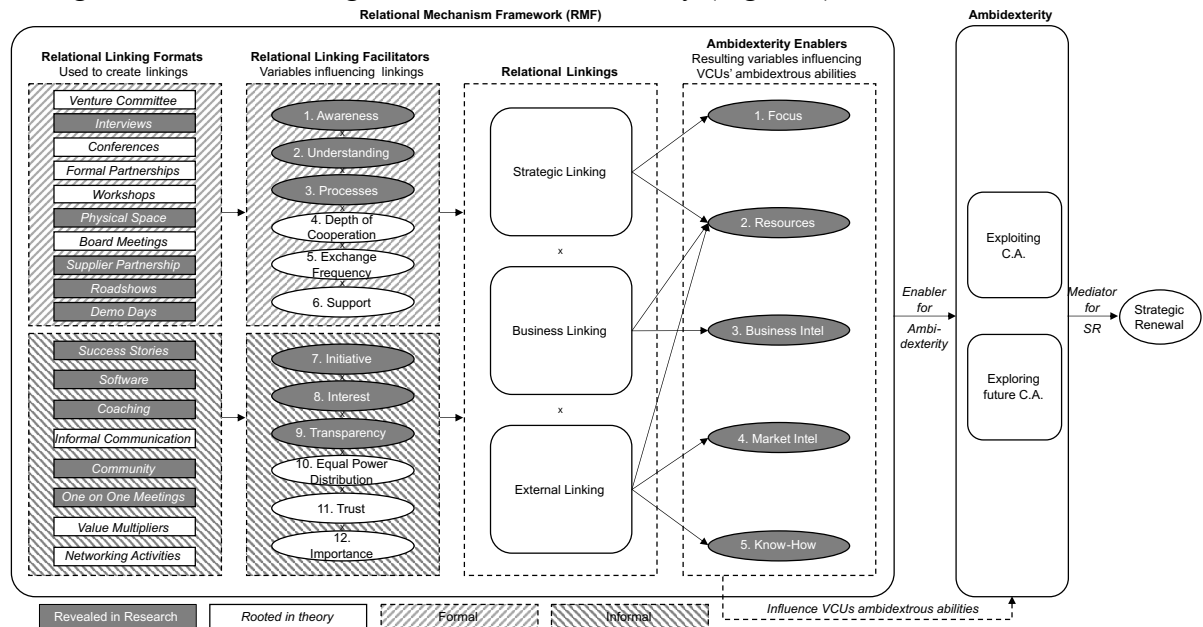


Figure 4: Relational Mechanism Framework (own Illustration)

Relational linking formats are at the core of the framework, which represent the specific tools and methods used by VCUs to create interlinks with internal and external stakeholders, serving as structured channels for communication and collaboration. Alongside these formats, the framework identifies relational linking facilitators, which are variables that influence the strength and effectiveness of these linkages.

The relationship between formats and facilitators is one of mutual reinforcement. Formats provide the structure for linkages to form, while facilitators enhance the quality and depth of the interaction within those formats. For example, a regular roadshow may serve as the format, but its success in creating lasting relational linkings depends on the level of trust and shared goals among participants. This, in turn, influences the broader relational linkings that form as a result of these interactions, with stronger facilitators leading to more robust and durable interlinks.

As another novel element, ambidexterity enablers (AEs) are identified, which are the outcomes of enabled interlinks that influence the VCU's ability to balance exploration and exploitation activities. Overall, this framework highlights the dynamic interplay between formats, facilitators, linkings, and AEs, illustrating how relational mechanisms drive SR in VCUs.

4.2 RELATIONAL LINKING FORMATS

While it cannot present an exhaustive, generalizable list, the framework specifies ten formal and eight informal formats from theory and empirical data on VCUs. Formal relational linking formats include

4.2.1 FORMAL RELATIONAL LINKING FORMATS

Formal relational linking formats typically have a clear purpose and structured objectives for the exchange, and include the following:

Venture Committee is one of the most common forms of formally linking different stakeholders with the VCU (including synonyms). The responsibilities and authority of Venture Committees vary along a spectrum. The level of formal authority and influence fluctuates depending on the composition of the committee and its specific objectives.

Interviews with standardized questions to engage with VCU stakeholders and gather critical insights in a structured way have not yet been widely adopted. In some instances, VCUs utilize interviews to engage with VCs, conducting discussions with fund managers to gain insights into market trends and developments (I01).

Conferences serve many purposes and present very different perceived values to the VCUs. While conferences are a welcome exchange for some players, others have a different attitude concerning the value they get from them.

Formal Partnerships encompass a number of different approaches identified from the data, including external service providers, hubs, universities, or others that are widely accepted in the VCU ecosystem.

Workshops are organized by VCUs to collect problems from different departments or to identify desired focus areas from management for the VCU's exploration and exploitation process, suggesting that workshops represent an adequate format to establish strategic and business linkings.

Physical Space is used as a bridge to decrease the physical distance between startups and corporations, trying to enhance external linkings.

Board Meetings are used to exchange and collaborate with top management, albeit not very commonly used in VCUs.

Supplier Partnerships are especially used for sourcing startups with many relying on dedicated sourcing agencies, incubators, accelerators, and governmental organizations. However, as VCUs gain experience, the value of external service providers diminishes, with some shifting focus to direct collaborations with VCs and leveraging internal capabilities.

Roadshows present a useful way to inform other departments and decrease the misconception that startups are associated with being high-risk partners, thus providing business linking.

Demo Days are used to bring startups, specialist departments, and / or management together to present current projects and allow participants to exchange ideas.

4.2.2 INFORMAL RELATIONAL LINKING FORMATS

informal formats often arise without a specific reason. These are generally spontaneous, with both the setting and content being more opportunistic and unplanned than formal formats, including the following:

Success Stories, including the successful completion of a pilot project, the integration of a pilot into regular operations, or generating significant business impact through process optimization. However, a standard best practice on how to effectively measure and communicate success has not yet been established.

Software sometimes plays a central role for instance in the startup scouting process. In essence there are numerous software providers that can be used for communication, which also integrate scouting and documentation of pilot projects. However, software cannot overcome shortcomings in the process organization. More so, implementing dedicated software can reveal the inadequacies in the established processes.

Coaching is still a new form of linking with other units. This form of linking depends on high management support, which can be challenging to achieve since it also requires more resources from top management.

Informal Communication can include spontaneous talks in the hallway, coffee meetings, quick, short-message communication, and other, usually unplanned, exchanges. Despite having planned, target-oriented, and formal meetings with management, exchanging on a more casual basis is still valued. Apart from informal meetings with management, participants did not stress the importance of informal communication channels in the context of linking with other business units or with externals, suggesting that the preferred formats for business and external linkings occur more formally.

Community Building is described as an advancement from traditional networking. Synthesizing the data advocates that building a community of VCU supporters fosters cultural change within the company, with the goal of strengthening the VCU's standing.

One on One Meetings with middle management can facilitate the transition of strategic and business links. This is important as in a more formal setting, middle managers might not openly communicate all their insights.

Value Multipliers is the most commonly applied linking format. Regarding strategic linking, the CEO acting as a value multiplier can significantly impact the VCU's overall standing in the organization. In the context of business linking, value multipliers are created by recruiting employees who are motivated and able to contribute to the cause of the VCU. Having value multipliers in other business units holds many perceived benefits for the VCU. Once the VCU effectively raises awareness about their cause and achievements, the lobbying efforts by the value multipliers become less crucial.

Networking Activities for building, maintaining, and extending networks is regarded as one of the primary activities within the VCU.

4.3 RELATIONAL LINKING FACILITATORS

Previous research has already identified a set of formal and informal relational linking facilitators. This study extends the list of facilitators and shed some more light on their role in creating relational linkings in VCUs. The differentiation of formal and informal relational linking facilitators follows the same logic as with the relational linking formats. While informal facilitators stem from the social connections apparent in collaboration and communication (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Mohr & Spekman, 1994), formal relational linking facilitators are the inheritance from the structural design of the collaboration and communication of stakeholders (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Jap & Anderson, 2007; Lavie et al., 2012). The subsequent chapters describes the identified facilitators in detail.

4.3.1 FORMAL RELATIONAL LINKING FACILITATORS

Awareness: One of the first quintessential activities that all VCUs carry out is creating awareness, highlighting that many VCUs are opting to create their own brand, separate from the corporation and try to promote it for the intended purpose.

Understanding: Understanding the basic concepts of the Venture Client Model is equally important to being aware of it. Therefore, VCUs also tackle the challenge of creating an understanding of the key concepts in the realm of venture clienting. Likewise, misunderstanding also creates unrealistic expectations. Therefore, managing expectations by educating stakeholders about venture clienting is a fundamental factor in building strong links.

Processes: Setting up adequate processes is seen as one of the primary activities in setting up VCUs. Depending on the maturity and problems the VCU faces, the focus of which processes are changed, improved, or revised differs. Nevertheless, the goal of adapting processes is the same: bringing together the different cultures of corporates and startups.

Depth of Collaboration: The Depth of Collaboration is concerned with how closely the VCUs activities interlink with the activities of other stakeholders. In general, the interviews allowed to observe that the Depth of Collaboration plays a vital role in all three linking types. However, VCUs focus on actively managing collaboration depth of strategic and business links. External links are not actively managed, but develop from the nature of collaborating in pilot projects.

Exchange Frequency: Determining the exchange frequency with the VCUs stakeholders has been widely discussed in the interviews. The fundamental finding revealed in the analysis is that there is no common understanding of how often exchanges with management, other business units, or startups should occur. However, a regular exchange is quintessential in creating linkings with management, while frequency varies strongly. The analysis shows that while there is no standardized approach to exchange frequency with stakeholders, regular and consistent communication is essential for maintaining strong connections with management, external partners, and other business units. Geographical proximity and the ability to hold ad-hoc meetings when necessary further support the importance of maintaining a flexible yet steady exchange cadence.

Support: Discussing Support in the context of organizational linkings revealed several different insights. Concerning strategic linking, getting top management support is seen as the underlying success factor for the VCU. In both dimensions, strategic and business linking, leveraging existing social capital within VCUs is a key focus, as internal networks play a vital role in gaining support and driving initiatives forward. Utilizing social capital within the VCU enables smoother collaboration, faster engagement, and more effective promotion of the VCU's objectives.

4.3.2 INFORMAL RELATIONAL LINKING FACILITATORS

Initiative: Managing the VCU's initiative in linking with stakeholders has been most often mentioned in the relations with organizational departments. In more general terms, the VCU has success factors that depend on the participation and willingness of other departments. Additionally, instead of linking with random stakeholders inside and outside the company, a strategic proactive initiative is seen as best practice.

Interest: Extending the findings on awareness in the context of relational linkings about the VCU, as described in the previous chapter, VCU's should create Interest to facilitate relational linkings. Presenting success stories to stakeholders is the most common way to successfully build interest in the VCU. Beyond raising awareness, sharing success stories effectively generates interest and cultivates further relational linkages, leading to additional projects for the VCU.

Transparency: The interviews revealed another novel relational linking facilitator. VCUs try to create as much transparency as possible. In practice, this goal is achieved through a threefold approach. Firstly, VCUs aim to set up processes that facilitate expectation management. Secondly, VCUs try to facilitate transparency by quantifying goals and achievements. Thirdly, VCUs facilitate transparency through open and honest communication. Synthesizing these insights reveals that Transparency does not only facilitate the strategic, and business linking, but also in external linkings. While there is currently no common practice applied to successfully facilitate transparency, managing expectations through open and honest communications with startups appears to be seen crucial.

Equal Power Distribution: The interviews underscored the significance of Equal Power Distribution in fostering effective collaboration, particularly when working with other VCUs. The insights suggest that when VCUs collaborate on equal footing, the usual power dynamics that influence interactions with other stakeholders are diminishing. Some VCUs aim to extend this approach to their relationships with internal business units,

fostering an environment of equality. Also, fostering equal power distribution with startups is key to overcoming challenges and maintaining strong, productive relationships.

Trust: Trust emerged as a fundamental facilitator for relational linking, particularly when VCUs aim to showcase their value through success stories. Trust is also often built through the VCU's association with its parent company. In addition to leveraging the corporate brand, VCUs foster trust by recruiting employees with high social capital who are already well-established within the company. To further strengthen trust, VCUs employ a variety of strategies, such as roadshows, upskilling workshops, educational trips to startup hubs, and the use of value multipliers. These efforts are designed to not only build trust within the organization but also to enhance credibility and cooperation with external stakeholders. These diverse strategies collectively contribute to establishing strong, trust-based relationships that are essential for the VCU's success.

Importance: The organizational setup of the VCU is frequently mentioned as a key facilitator of its perceived importance within the company. Practices collectively underscore the importance of organizational setup, location, branding, and strategic alignment in enhancing the VCU's standing within the company.

4.4 AMBIDEXTERITY ENABLERS

In addition to expanding the existing research on Relational Linking Formats and Relational Linking Facilitators, this study identifies key variables emerging from the VCU's relational linking process which affect the VCU's ambidexterity. The findings reveal that relational linking contributes to five distinct AEs. The interviews highlight these five variables as crucial influences on the VCU's ambidextrous capacity to effectively achieve SR.

Strong relational linkings result in a clear *Focus* for exploration and exploitation, sufficient *Resources* to achieve the desired goals by management, adequate *Business-Intelligence* about the business' pain points, extensive *Market-Intelligence* about the external dynamics of the industry, and *Know-How* about how to best employ the VC model. The quality of relational linkages thus plays a crucial role in enabling the ambidextrous capabilities of the VCU. Overall, this framework highlights the dynamic interplay between formats, facilitators, linkings, and AEs, illustrating how relational mechanisms drive SR in VCUs.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTION

The theoretical and empirical research in this study underlines the general notion on the importance of relational mechanisms for VCUs by deriving specific and interconnected formats, facilitators and ambidexterity enablers that allow VCUs to foster SR. Hereby, the study provides a breakdown of the broad theoretical concept of relational mechanisms into more specific components and allow to examine their relationship.

The study identifies five AEs (*Focus*, *Resources*, *Business Intelligence*, *Market Intelligence*, *Know-How*) resulting from variables from relational linkings that VCUs create with internal and external stakeholders. This novel finding is significant as it illustrates some practical and theoretical implications. From a theoretical perspective, the AEs represent a new insight into how organizational ambidexterity is achieved and build a good foundation for future research. The study suggests a relationship between AEs and VCUs' organizational ambidexterity and, consequently, SR. The examined VCUs unveiled that by managing the AEs, they are better able to achieve ambidexterity. This insight is particularly valuable, as organizational ambidexterity is viewed as a key mediator for SR. The ability to effectively manage the seemingly contradictory demands

of exploration, which requires flexibility and autonomy, and exploitation, which is characterized by structured routines, is essential for ensuring long-term corporate success (Madsen, 2010). From a practical perspective, it gives VCUs an unprecedented guiding structure for improving their ambidextrous performance by concentrating on the five variables.

Besides, the study allowed to dive deeper into the components of relational mechanisms in interlinked-ambidextrous VCUs, examining the relational linking facilitators as components determining the linking's strength. Previous research has identified a range of formal and informal relational linking facilitators. Weber broadly identified the *Depth of Cooperation*, *Exchange Frequency*, and *Support* as formal relational mechanisms facilitating innovation. In addition, the study highlights informal relational mechanisms such as *Equal Power Distribution*, *Trust*, and *Importance* as key factors in fostering innovation (Weber & Heidenreich, 2016). This study expands on these mechanisms, describes them more precisely as relational linking facilitators, and provides additional insights into their role in establishing relational linkings within VCUs. In addition to the formal relational linking facilitators described in the literature by (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Mohr & Spekman, 1994), the study identifies *Awareness*, *Understanding*, and *Processes* as the formal relational linking facilitators. In the initial stages, VCUs must prioritize raising *Awareness* about their existence and the concept of venture clienting. Due to the novelty of this model, creating *Understanding* by educating stakeholders on its core principles is crucial and serves as a key facilitator in establishing relational linkages. Additionally, the frequent emphasis on developing formal *Processes* tailored to the unique nature of VCUs in the study highlights their importance in fostering strong and effective linkages.

Moreover, this study extends the understanding of informal relational facilitators, specifically those centered on the interpersonal and social bonds between partners, as outlined in the literature by (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Jap & Anderson, 2007; Lavie et al., 2012). As described in the findings section, relational linkings are also facilitated through creating *Initiative*, and *Transparency*. The interviews reveal that VCUs are contingent upon the participation and cooperation of other departments, which VCUs counter by showing *Initiative*. Linkings with key stakeholders, such as Legal or Procurement, are proactively facilitated by involving them early on. Additionally, VCUs expand on building *awareness* by creating *interest*. The findings from the study emphasize that by, for example, effectively sharing success stories, VCUs spark *Interest* and foster further relational linkages, ultimately resulting in additional projects for the VCU. On top of that, *Transparency* also facilitates linkings. In this domain, VCUs mostly focus on managing expectations. Communicating openly and honestly presents the basis for managing the expectations of all stakeholders. A lack of *Transparency* creates unrealistic expectations that could potentially scare away collaboration partners, endangering the VCU's overall success.

In much the same way, the study allows to extend the list of Relational Linking Formats used to create relational linkings first categorized by (Weiss et al., 2023). On the formal spectrum of Relational Linking Formats used by VCUs the list could be extended to include *Interviews*, *Physical Spaces*, *Supplier Partnerships*, *Roadshows*, and *Demo Days*. On the informal spectrum, the list was complemented to include *Success Stories*, *Software*, *Coaching*, *Community*, *One on One Meetings*.

Consequently, this study contributes to both academic literature and industry practice by providing a detailed exploration of how formal and informal relational mechanisms function within VCUs.

Despite the comprehensive insights provided, there are several limitations to this study. Firstly, as a qualitative study, the significance of the relationships between relational mechanisms and SR is not to be quantified. Future research should focus on conducting quantitative studies to measure the strength of these relationships, provide details on the relationships between single formats and facilitators, and assess the direct impact of AEs on SR outcomes. Additionally, this study does not account for the different maturity levels of the VCUs, as the VCU concept is still comparatively new. Considering the varying development stages of VCUs and the evolving maturity of the VC model, future research may explore how these factors influence relational mechanisms. This line of research holds the potential to deepen our understanding of how relational mechanisms adapt and change as VCUs mature over time.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to the understanding of VCUs by offering a detailed framework for the dynamics of relational mechanisms that enable ambidexterity and consequently SR. Additionally, by identifying the AEs that result from relational linkings and breaking down relational mechanism into singular components, this study was able to generate a promising base for future research. As the VC model continues to evolve, deeper insights into these relationships will be critical for fostering innovation and long-term success in large corporations, as well as increase the startups likelihood to find markets for their innovations.

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