

PROS AND CONS OF RELATIONSHIPS

The case of account executive systems in the Japanese advertising industry

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Abstract

This paper shows that cohesive business networks and tightly coupled relationships could have a negative influence on firms' flexibility and innovativeness. In order to examine how network formation influences firms' innovativeness and creativity, we conducted a longitudinal case study on a business relationship between a major advertising agency and its two clients: a major toiletry manufacturer and a major food company in Japan.

In the Japanese advertising industry, the account executive (AE) system is employed where account executives from agencies work in their clients' advertising departments, and are deeply involved in all the promotion process and even in the product development process of their clients. Through our case study on some stable relationships under the AE systems, we found the stable relationships tend to foster conservativeness in planning medium mix and creating advertisements. In addition, some innovative attempts came from the outside of the relationships. Our studies imply the importance of heterogeneity of collaborative partners' experience and backgrounds. It seems important for firms to keep their business open to new business partners in order to access new and diverse information and knowledge. Of course, the implication does not deny the importance of stable relationships and cohesive networks. We conclude that firms should enhance the level of adaptation by building tightly coupled relationships while keeping their business open to new business partners in order to maintain flexibility and to access new and diverse information and knowledge.

Keywords: Account Executive System, Advertising Industry, Adaptation, Flexibility, Structural Holes, Innovation

Work-in-progress paper

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a business interaction has been a key in the IMP group, which means a process whereby various resources including technologies, skills and knowledge are exchanged between firms. Needless to say, various types of business interactions are observed. Moreover, we can also observe many kinds of relationships supporting business interactions.

The IMP researchers generally think that interactions affect the outcomes and performance of corporate relationships (Håkansson ed., 1982; Ford et al., 1998). It is assumed that institutionalization and adaptation occur through interactions in long-term and tightly coupled relationships between firms, which, in turn, enable the firms to reduce transaction cost (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995a). Therefore, tightly coupled relationships have been assumed to affect positively the outcomes and performance of firms.

Then, do cohesive business networks, which mean networks of strongly interconnected elements, and tightly coupled relationships always have a positive impact on firms' performance? Such relationships might be an impediment to introducing radical innovation and changes as Hannan and Freeman (1984) argued the problem of "Structural inertia" interrupting organizational changes and reorganization in the face with environmental changes and innovation.

This paper focuses on a type of inertia and a kind of impediment to introducing radical innovation and changes in business networks. We discuss about how stable relationships between firms can affect their flexibility and innovativeness through our case study on business networks in the Japanese advertising industry.

PARADOXICAL ARGUMENTS ABOUT BUSINESS NETWORK FORMATION

The IMP researchers have generally thought that institutionalization and adaptation occurred through interactions in relationships, whereby the firms could improve their performance. In the 1980s, long-term corporate relationships whose typical example was *Keiretsu* in the Japanese business, especially in the Japanese automobile industry, gained a strong reputation (Burt and Doyle 1993; Gilson and Roe, 1993; Laage-Hellman, 1997). *Keiretsu* composed of tightly coupled relationships between firms lead to "lean production" (Womack et al., 1990). To reduce the total owning cost in production and sales stages contributes to the strength of product development competences or production cost competitiveness (Gadde and Hakansson 1993).

Indeed, tightly coupled relationships could facilitate institutionalization and adaptation that lead to lower production and transaction cost. However, such relationships do not always have advantages. The negative side of relationships has been argued among the IMP researchers (e.g., Blois, 1998; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995b). Håkansson and Snehota (1995b) pointed out that there were five negative factors: 1) unruliness, 2) undeterminedness, 3) energy, 4) Exclusiveness, and 5) stickiness, which cause a relationship to become a burden.

We can also find a similar argument in research on the problem of "structural inertia" interrupting organizational changes and reorganization in the face of environmental changes

and innovation (Hannan and Freeman, 1984). The issue of inertia is caused by institutionalization and routinization within organizations. Organizational inertia has been focused on by some researchers (e.g., Henderson and Clark, 1990; Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). Although researchers focusing on inertia have treated the issue with inertia within organizations, we think that there is the same kind of inertia in business networks as well as within organizations.

In conjunction with flexibility associated with the issue with organizational inertia, Utterback and Abernathy's (1975) argued that a firm who found that it had achieved high productivity at the cost of decreased flexibility and innovative capacity. Leonard-Barton (1992) also pointed that firms could enhance profits by developing core rigidities together with highly specialized resources while incurring the price of reduced flexibility. We will adapt this argument to the issue with flexibility in inter-firm networks. With adaptation of the argument about organizational flexibility to inter-organizational one, it could be argued that firms embedded in stable and cohesive business networks could be vulnerable to frequent and radical changes in competitive environments, and face challenges from innovative products and services produced by more flexible firms.

On one hand, researchers insisting on the importance of tightly coupled relationships would emphasize the positive impact of institutionalization and adaptation in relationships on performance of firms. On the other hand, researchers focusing on flexibility and inertia would point that relationships could have a negative influence on performance of firms in changeable and competitive environments. Thus, the research about the effect of strength of relationships on firms' performance implies a paradoxical argument.

However, we can resolve the above paradox by assuming that performance of firms is a function of the interaction of two factors: adaptation and flexibility as Figure 1 and 2 show. Hence, we can suggest that in order to improve performance, a firm should enhance the level of adaptation by forming a network with tightly coupled relationships while holding flexibility in the business network in some ways, for example, by introducing "ambidexterity" into the network (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Duncan, 1976; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004, 2008; Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996).

Figure 1. The Relation between Network Characteristics, Adaptation, Flexibility, and Performance

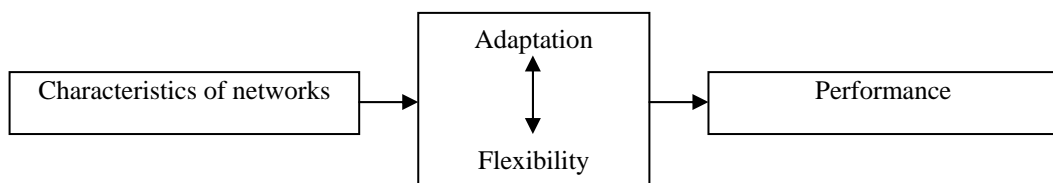
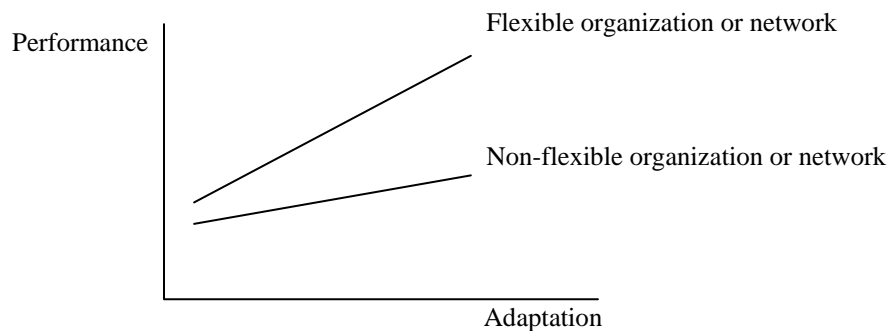


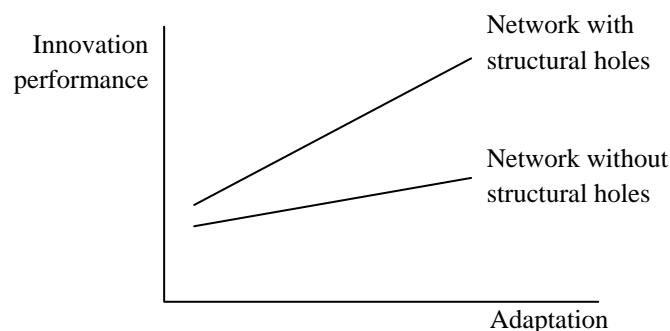
Figure 2. The Interaction of Adaptation and Flexibility



Furthermore, we can find a similar paradoxical argument in studies on the issue of how the properties of inter-organizational relationships or networks influence innovation. Many researchers have assumed that inter-firm network formation and management could influence firms' innovativeness (e.g., Afuah, 2000; Ahuja, 2000; Hagedoorn et al., 2006; Möller et al., 2005; Ruef, 2002). Most of them have applied social network theory. Often, researchers use the notion of “strong and weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973) and “structural holes” (Burt, 1992) to investigate how the properties of relationships between firms affect innovation performance of each firm. However, some findings have suggested that weak ties positively influence innovation; others have suggested strong ties positively influence innovation. Then, which is more beneficial for innovation and knowledge transfer—network cohesion (strong ties) or structural holes (weak ties)?

The previous studies have argued that network cohesion and structural holes play different roles in promoting innovation, and both of them are useful for innovation (Gilsing and Nooteboom, 2005; Hansen, 1999; Rowley et al., 2000, Uzzi, 1997). Hansen's (1999) and Uzzi's (1997) findings show that weak ties or structural holes promote a search for knowledge and simple knowledge transfer, while strong ties or cohesive networks promote complex knowledge transfer. Gilsing and Nooteboom (2005) assume that the influence a network has on innovation depends on whether the network focuses on exploration or exploitation.

Figure 3. The Interaction between Adaptation and Openness



To summarize the previous studies, we can consider that strong ties and weak ties play different roles for innovation. We can also interpret strong ties' role as facilitating adaptation and weak ties' role as bridging structural holes. Hence, it is important for business networks to have both kinds of ties in order to achieve successful innovation. As a result, innovation performance is also assumed to be a function of the interaction of two factors: adaptation and openness (structural holes) as illustrated in Figure 3.

An inter-organizational network, as a form of social networks, can be viewed as a nexus of a number of relationships including both strong and weak ties, and it has a unique configuration. Burt (2001) classifies social networks according to two dimensions. One dimension captures the number of non-redundant contacts people have beyond their group. The other dimension captures network closure within the group. Burt (2001) also refers to a network with fewer non-redundant contacts beyond the group and highly cohesive relationships within the group as a cohesive group (network). He refers to a network with more non-redundant contacts beyond the group and discrete relationships within the group as a disintegrated group (network). There is another type of network that has not only more non-redundant contacts beyond the group but also highly cohesive relationships. Burt (2001) refers to such a network as the network that achieves maximum performance. Because Burt (2001) doesn't give such a network a specific name, we call it an ambidextrous business network. We consider that forming ambidextrous networks is vital to firms' innovativeness.

Through our longitudinal observation of the roles of account executives in the Japanese advertising industry, we examine how cohesive business networks influence firms' creativity, and how building tightly coupled relationships by using account executives influence the heterogeneity of partners' experience and knowledge necessary for creativity. Indeed, AE systems play an important role in promoting adaptation between partners. Our case study, however, revealed that the AE system could be an impediment to introducing radical innovation and changes. Our case implies the importance for firms to keep their business open to new business partners in order to maintain flexibility and to access new and diverse information and knowledge.

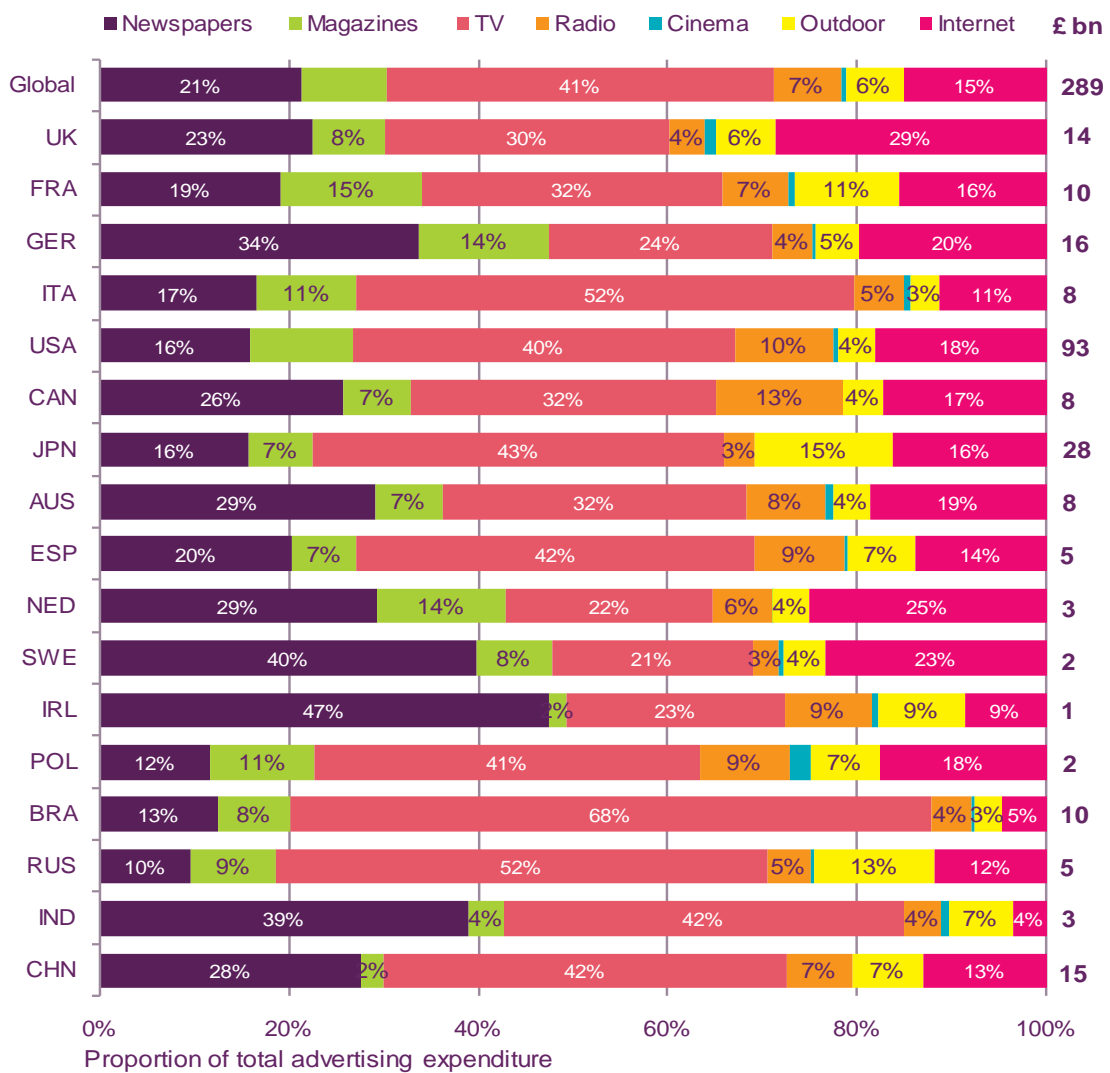
RESEARCH METHOD

We designed a longitudinal case study on a business relationship between a major advertising agency and its two clients: a major toiletry company and a major food company in Japan. We follow Yin's (1984; 2003) case study method of research design development, data collection, and data analysis. Our data sources consist of longitudinal interviews with both sides of the advertising agency and its clients in the relationships, and archival data including industrial reports and the companies' internal documents.

Why do we focus on the advertising industry in Japan? We can observe interesting phenomena in the industry for several reasons. Firstly, the advertising industry in Japan is one of the typical industries where cohesive networks between advertising agencies, their business partners, and their clients can be observed. Secondly, powerful and independent advertising agencies have grown in Japan, unlike other countries whose advertising industries have been dominated by American agencies. Thirdly, interestingly, there are significant differences among countries in the advertising mix as illustrated in Figure 3. The technological environment surrounding the industry has changed rapidly, and new

combinations of media are occurring recently. Through the development of information and communication technology, the Internet is growing as an advertising medium so rapidly that it is about to become the number one advertising medium in several countries. The composition ratio of the Internet in the advertising mix might partly influence the diffusion rate of innovation in the advertising industry in each country. In Japan, the composition rate of television in advertising expenditure is still more than twice as much as the one of the Internet in spite of the high diffusion rate of the Internet (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Advertising Medium Mixes in Countries



Source: Warc data (www.warc.com)

Note: Excludes expenditure on cinema advertising in CAN, JPN and CHN

Source: Ofcom, *International Communications Market Research*, 2011, p.22.

Table 1. Overview of the Case Firms

Firms	Year founded	Annual revenues (million JPY)	Capital (million JPY)	Number of employees
Dentsu	1901	1,833,449	58,967	19,535
Lion	1891	327,500	34,433	5,973
Meiji	1917	9,863,400	33,640	15,338

Fiscal year: 2011

Advertising expenditures in Japan amount to 5,709.6 billion JPY (Data from *Advertising Expenditures in Japan*, 2011, Dentsu Inc.). Major advertising agencies earn most of their profits from advertising in the four traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio, and television) in Japan. Media organizations and advertising agencies in Japan have invested in each other, whereby they created and have maintained a set of interlocking shareholdings over time. Furthermore, advertising agencies build tightly coupled relationships with their clients by using account executives (AEs). AE systems play an important role in promoting adaptation between partners. In AE systems, AEs are dispatched from advertising agencies to their clients in order to work for the clients' advertising department. AEs are deeply involved in even the product development processes as well as the whole promotion processes of their clients.

The overview of the case firms is shown in Table 2. Dentsu is the largest advertising agency in Japan. The Japanese advertising industry is oligopolistic. The top three advertising agencies occupy a market share of about 80%. Furthermore Dentsu's sales volume is about twice as much as the second largest advertising agency's. Lion and Meiji are some of Dentsu's accounts. Lion is one of the biggest manufacturers of healthcare and beauty care products in Japan. Meiji is a major food and pharmaceutical company manufacturing confections, dairy products, health food, and medicine.

THE CASE AND FINDINGS

Through our case study on the roles of AEs in the Japanese advertising industry, we found that although building a tightly coupled relationship by using AEs promoted adaptation between partners; it could have a negative effect on innovation in the relationships.

It is commonly found that advertising agencies have AE contracts with their clients in the Japanese advertising industry. In our case AEs dispatched from Dentsu to its clients work for the clients' advertising department. AEs are deeply involved in not only the whole promotion processes but also the product development processes of their clients. In the AE system, clients tend to be inactive in creating the idea of promotion and rely on AE teams of advertising agencies. In addition, AEs tend to identify themselves with organizational

members of their customers. They gradually come to lose the heterogeneity of the experience and critical view as an unanticipated consequence. Therefore, cohesive business networks and tightly coupled relationships could have a negative influence on firms' creating innovative ideas.

In our case, an AE team of Dentsu always works for the clients' advertising departments. They work there as if they were the clients' employees. The AE team consists of AEs, creators, and marketing planning personnel. They are involved in all the marketing process, including marketing research, product concept making, promotion planning, and advertising.

Homogeneity and conservativeness in the stable relationships

Under the AE system, both Lion and Dentsu are getting homogenized. At first, one aim of AE systems is introducing heterogeneity, especially introducing new knowledge from Dentsu. Over time, however, the thinking pattern of the AE team is gradually getting similar to the one of people in Lion.

The interviewees in Lion pointed out some problems of the AE system as follows. Under the AE team, the AE team from the advertising agency tends to be conservative in planning medium mix and creating advertisements. Routinization also fosters conservativeness and spoils innovation in the relationship.

Interestingly, this result does not seem bad for Lion as well. Lion doesn't want radical innovation in advertising. Lion's aim of advertising is just to improve cognition rate. 70% of healthcare goods consumer decide what to buy "in store". The aim of advertising is adding Lion's products into consumers' evoked sets. Therefore, they do not require eccentric and artistic advertisements that could win some awards. The interviewees explained it by using a metaphor that the AE team placed emphasis on increasing batting average rather than hitting a home run in a baseball game.

Improving familiarity with the brand and understandability of the messages is the aim of Lion's advertising. In order to achieve it effectively and efficiently, Lion believe that TV is the best medium. TV still occupies more than 70% of Lion's advertising expenditure while the Internet occupying 10% at most. They don't want big changes in their advertising medium mix. Today, does TV as an advertising medium remain as effective and efficient as they think? Such conservativeness causes a problem that advertising recognition does not increase, as an unanticipated consequence, even though advertising exposure increases.

The ordinary work of the advertising department at Meiji is almost the same as Lion. They have an AE contract with Dentsu. Dozens of Dentsu people are working in Meiji's advertising department as an AE team. The results are almost same as with Lion. That is, under the AE system, both Meiji and Dentsu are getting homogenized. Radical innovation seldom occur in Meiji's advertising. These results are not bad for Meiji as well. Meiji doesn't want big changes in their advertising.

In the two stable relationships of our cases, not only Dentsu but also the clients of it do not want radical changes in the medium mixes where the advertising expenditures are allocated

heavily into TV advertising. It is easy to understand that Dentsu is willing to induce its clients to emphasize TV advertising because of the profitability of TV advertising for Dentsu. Interestingly, the clients also believe in Dentsu and do not have any intention to change that.

Where does innovation come from in the cases?

The clients have had a few radical changes in their advertising. They had some changes and challenges in their medium mixes and advertisements. Importantly, those changes did not come from the stable relationships with Dentsu but from what is called weak ties with the other partners.

Google recently approached Lion about a new project regarding Internet advertising. Indeed, Lion do not think at all that the composition ratio of the Internet will exceed the ratio of TV in the advertising mix in the near future. In addition, it is not clear whether the projects will be a trigger for some medium mix changes of the company. In any case, the company recognized the importance and potential of Internet advertising and started the project with Google. Importantly, the new attempt was not brought from the stable relationship but from the outside of the relationship.

Meiji also had an innovative advertisement on the 14th May 2012. On this day, Meiji did full page multi advertising of its main brand “Bulgaria Yogurt” in the Asahi newspaper. Asahi is the second biggest newspaper in Japan. On this day’s evening newspaper, Meiji occupied all ad space in the paper. Even more amazingly is they displayed “yogurt news” just under the title of the paper. While the appearance of the paper that day was completely different from the ordinary Asahi, readers thought that they received the wrong paper.

It was the first time in the Japanese advertising and newspaper history that one advertiser occupied all advertising spaces. The “Yogurt News” was quite a radical change and surprising event. It could be a kind of radical innovation.

This radical innovation was introduced from the outside of the AE partnership. The Yomiuri advertising agency – one of the advertising agencies of the Hakuhodo DY Group, rival of Dentsu – introduced this radical innovation in order to break up the AE relationship of Meiji and Dentsu and to build a partnership with Meiji. Yomiuri studied about Meiji’s business. They found 14th May is yogurt day in Japan. So they proposed advertising focused on yogurt day 3 months before hand. Of course, this kind of multi advertising imposes relatively high cost. However Yomiuri proposed a big discount intended to secure a contract from Meiji. As a result, the radical innovation occurred.

Actually, this innovative project was not a trigger for Yomiuri to make an AE contract with Meiji. The AE system between Meiji and Dentsu remains unchallenged. As is the case with Lion, Meiji did not feel the need for such a kind of innovative advertising. Interestingly, the clients also do not have an incentive to introduce what might change stable AE systems.

In our cases, stable relationships under the AE systems tend to foster conservativeness in planning medium mix and creating advertisements. In addition, some innovative attempts came from the outside of the relationships. Our case study implies the importance of the

heterogeneity of collaborative partners' experience and backgrounds. It is important for firms to keep their business open to new business partners in order to access new and diverse information and knowledge. Of course, the implication does not deny the importance of stable relationships and cohesive networks.

CONCLUSION

The business networks in the Japanese advertising industry are typical of cohesive networks. Media organizations and advertising agencies have created and maintained a set of interlocking shareholdings over time because the business of mass media advertising, in particular TV advertising is a cash cow for advertising agencies. Furthermore, advertising agencies build tightly coupled relationships with their clients by using AEs. AEs are deeply involved in not only the whole promotion processes but also the product development processes of their clients. Through our case study, we recognized that it might be difficult for radically structural changes to occur in the cohesive networks in this industry due to a kind of structural inertia. In the relationships we observed, a few innovative challenges occurred, which were brought not within the existing relationships but from the outside of the relationships. As we mentioned above in the theoretical part of this paper, it is important for firms to keep their business open to new business partners in order to maintain flexibility and to access new and diverse information and knowledge.

We focus on how network formation influences service innovation, in particular innovation in the advertising industry. With regard to service innovation, we assume that a new combination of services and service elements, which means a kind of architectural innovation (Henderson and Clark, 1990), are observed more frequently than innovation of elements per se, which means a kind of modular innovation (Henderson and Clark, 1990). For creating a new combination, the heterogeneity of collaborative partners' resources could matter. Some researchers advocate the importance of the heterogeneity of collaborative partners' resources and experience. The heterogeneity of collaborative parties' backgrounds and experience in social networks enable the parties to access new and diverse information necessary for innovation (Burt, 1992). The heterogeneity of partners' knowledge fosters innovative ideas (Sammarrà and Biggiero, 2008). According to empirical research by Nieto and Santamaría (2007), the diversity of partners in collaborative networks influences innovation positively.

Finally, the two assumptions on which our argument is based in this paper: performance of firms is a function of the interaction of adaptation and flexibility; innovation performance is a function of the interaction of adaptation and openness (structural holes), must be tested empirically. Of course, further theoretical research as well as empirical test regarding the argument in this paper is required.

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