

Extended abstract of the competitive paper

Yesterday is gone, Tomorrow has not yet come: exploring power shifts in buyer-seller business relationships

INTRODUCTION

Although industrial marketing literature, and especially IMP school early recognized power as an important aspect of business relationship and networks (Wilkinson & Kipnis, 1978) and further works have emphasized the complexity of power use in B2B context (Blois & Lacoste, 2009), there is no consensus with regard to the effects of using power in buyer-seller business relationships and this topic remains undoubtedly controversial in B2B marketing and purchasing.

Early research on power in the context of industrial marketing was strongly influenced by the theory of interpersonal relationships (Hingley, Angell, & Lindgreen 2015a). Using such general theory, we may see power as a common feature of human relationships, where it is derived from the dependence of the parties on each other (Emerson, 1962). In this paper, we looked at the concept of multidimensional power asymmetry dynamics in buyer-seller business dyad at theoretical and empirical level with the special emphasis on complexity of such process. We explored different factors influencing on changes in power distribution and their consequences. We used the dyadic examples, where power was initially strongly asymmetrical and then it shifted towards a purposive to some extent (from managerial perspective) sets of some levels of asymmetry of different power sources within the relationships. Empirical research on dynamics of power asymmetry in buyer-supplier dyads is very limited. The studies by Lacoste & Johnsen (2015), Pérez & Cambra-Fierro (2015) and (*Authors name withheld to ensure anonymity during the review process*) applied case study research to identify process-related practices leveraging performance and improving suppliers power position. This study extends these previous works, because it uses dyadic perspective (i.e. buyers and sellers perspectives) on explaining how power shifts with regard to both type of power: mediated and non-mediated. We aim at identifying not only intentional actions in this area, i.e. tactics to mitigate power positions, but also situational (partners' independent) and relational factors that tend to impact on power asymmetry. Therefore, this research sheds multi-level light on the phenomena of intentional and non-intentional power shifts in deep buyer-seller relationships.

Our study utilizes a longitudinal case study approach with regard to relationships between medium-sized companies, both: buyers and sellers and their business partners, characterized initially by substantial power asymmetry with regard to all or majority of power sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Power is a key concept in business-to-business relationships. A different understanding of this notion by industrial marketing researchers resulted in inconsistent empirical findings (Hingley, 2005). As Cowan, Paswan, & Van Steenburg (2015, p. 142) concluded in their literature review, power within a social exchange can be understood as “*the potential to affect another's behaviour, manifests when a firm demands something incompatible with another firm's desire, and the firm receiving the demand shows resistance*”.

Power is frequently associated in the literature with power sources, the term proposed by French & Raven (1959) to describe different types of power, such as: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent and expert. Numerous studies using French & Raven (1959) categorized the power sources into two groups; coercive and other power sources, where expert, referent, legitimate and reward power were classified as non-coercive (e.g. Cowan, Paswan, & Van Steenburg, 2015; Wilkinson, 1996). In a similar spirit, the power sources were also divided

into mediated and non-mediated power (Nyaga, Lynch, Marshall, & Ambrose, 2013; Benton & Maloni, 2005). In this second typology the mediated power sources; legitimate, coercive and reward were introduced to “*represent the competitive and negative uses of power*” (Benton & Maloni, 2005, p.4). Generally, there is a consensus among researchers that exchange partners should avoid using power in coercive ways (Leonidou, Aykol, Spyropoulou & Christodoulides, 2017; Benton & Maloni, 2005). The mediated power sources are complemented by non-mediated power sources, specifically referent power, expert and informational power.

The asymmetry of power and its utilizing in buyer-supplier relationships has been discussed in various streams of literature, including marketing channels (e.g. Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1998), the industrial network approach (e.g. Fairhead & Griffin, 2000), supply chain management (e.g. Nyaga, Lynch, Marshall, & Ambrose, 2013) and IMP approach (e.g. Zolkiewski, 2001; Blois, 2008; Kähkönen & Lintukangas, 2011). Although these literature streams applied slightly different perspectives and nomenclature towards power asymmetry, they are not contradictory.

Power asymmetry is often based on structural resources (Cowan, Paswan, & Van Steenburg, 2015), and it is proposed that companies should first evaluate its power position and environmental conditions before deciding on the preferred type of relationship (Benton & Maloni, 2005). Power in every dyadic buyer-supplier relationship can be qualified as symmetrical or asymmetrical (Cox, Chicksand, & Palmer, 2007). The asymmetry generally shows the situation of inequality, instability or unbalance. However, the issue of power asymmetry and its consequences is much more complex, if we take into consideration that in business practice there are many asymmetrical inter-firm relations which are long-standing and beneficial for each relationship side (Hingley, Angell, & Lindgreen, 2015a; Hingley, Angell, & Campelo, 2015b). Blois (2008) used the term “legitimacy” with regard to power use in asymmetrical relationships in the context, when dominant party offers the subservient parties some benefits in exchange of being dominated. Generally, we can somehow imagine that fully symmetrical or balanced power in relationships between partners do exist, but they are rarely observed in real B2B relationships and rather tentative (Nyaga, Lynch, Marshall, & Ambrose, 2013; Cowan, Paswan, & Van Steenburg, 2015; Hingley, 2005).

The notion of symmetry in regard to power of buyer and supplier should not be understood straightforward as mathematically the same power on the both sides. The issue of symmetrical or asymmetrical power is neither precisely explained in the literature or used in such manner in business practice, because there is not a clear measure of power within the business relationship (Hingley, Angell, & Lindgreen, 2015a). All of this is because power in buyer-seller relationships is multi-dimensional, perspective-based and dynamic phenomenon. Therefore, we argue that the theoretical framework of power sources (French & Raven, 1959) and longitudinal research approach can be helpful in better understanding of how power asymmetry changes in business relationships. The power in buyer-supplier relationship may be perceived as asymmetrical at a given point of time and it does not mean that such asymmetry is the same in case of all power sources, but the combination of all power sources would make it subjectively asymmetrical state.

The literature is often ambivalent, while discussing power asymmetry consequences. For instance Buchanan (1992) argued that power-dependence imbalances in buyer-supplier relationships influence differently on value that buyers and sellers attach to the relationship. This work fully acknowledges this ambivalence of power asymmetry in buyer-supplier relationships and business networks, and it does not argue that power asymmetry is something wrong by definition. Power asymmetry is often treated as a natural aspect of business relationships, which can be utilized for achieving benefits, not only for more powerful but also for less powerful party of the buyer-supplier dyadic relationship (Cuevas,

Julkunen, & Gabrielsson, 2015; Blois, 2008). Both partners in asymmetrical relationship, especially the weaker one, may accept some level of power imbalances, as long as they also benefit (Hingley, 2005). However, substantial power asymmetry can be treated as risky from relationship development point of view, as “*the weaker partner could be coerced to perform tasks or incur costs on behalf of the stronger partner*” (Nyaga, Lynch, Marshall, & Ambrose, 2013, p.45).

There is growing interest in the idea that power structure dynamics in business dyads proceeds not only as a “natural cycle”, including situational factors independent from actors, but such dynamics can be intentionally leveraged vis-à-vis actors’ attempts to influence distribution of so-called relationship rent. In the context of supply chain Cox, Watson, Lonsdale, & Sanderson (2004) suggest that although “ideal” relationship outcomes are rarely achieved, some companies try to influence on relationship power structure to get closer to these outcomes. More recently,

The empirical works on power-related tactics emerges. In Lacoste & Johnsen (2015) research the shift of power between exchange partners is caused by increased level of services delivered by supplier leading to increased total value perceived by the customer. Pérez & Cambra-Fierro (2015) have conducted case studies related to power tactics and they identified following practices: learning to work together, informal communication and committed champions, specific investments / specialization on supplier side, taking a long-term perspective and focusing on a limited number of value-creating relationships. (*Authors name withheld to ensure anonymity during the review process*) continued this research direction and noticed 15 various power-related tactics in case of interfirm relations within manufacturing services and retail real estate development. These recent empirical works illustrated that practices oriented on power asymmetry are based rather on non-mediated power sources, e.g. expert power and referent power. In general, weaker business partner makes efforts to improve its competences and image within relation with dominating partner and at the same time revise its position within supply chain, e.g. by diversifying customer base.

RESEARCH METHOD

We used the qualitative approach towards asymmetrical dyadic buyer-supplier relationships. Specifically, we applied a longitudinal multi-case approach to explore and understand specific interrelations between buyers’ and suppliers’ power positions, partners actions, relationship and situational factors as well. The case study method was often used in prior studies of power asymmetry in B2B relationships (e.g. Cox, Watson, Lonsdale, & Sanderson, 2004; Pérez & Cambra-Fierro, 2015; *authors name withheld to ensure anonymity during the review process*). Our study focuses on the evolution of a dyadic buyer-supplier relationship, and involves 4 longitudinal relationship cases, specifically 4 dyads between buying company and selling company, observed over a different time frames (from 2 years in the shortest case to 10 years in the longest one). Among these 4 business dyads, three were initiated before we started our study and one started exactly at the beginning of our research (case 4). This implied both the retrospective and the real time research approach in connection to the history and current development of analysed relationships. The retrospective interviewing about the starting period of analysed relationships were done essentially on the beginning of the case studies research. Thus, in each dyad being analysed, we treated the beginning of the relationship as a somehow natural reference point for our interviewing.

The case study research allowed us to analyse factors of power asymmetry shifts over a period of time with regard to various power sources. We have based our reasoning mainly on the managers’ perception of the phenomena under research. When investigating the power

asymmetry changes we aimed at exploration of all types of factors influencing this processes, which were finally contained in two general groups: buyer’s and supplier’s intentional actions to mitigate power asymmetry, non-intentional actions mitigating power asymmetry and situation/relational factors as well. The selection of concrete business relationships to be analysed was primarily based on corporate data accessibility, the observable existence of substantial power asymmetry in business relationships. In all of these dyads, the more powerful partner was historically also a strategic partner, e.g. key customer, relatively while comparing sales volume with this partner and other exchange partners.

Our main data gathering technique was a personal interview conducted with individuals who performed various roles within supplying and buying companies and such technique is perceived as a best practice in case research (Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2010).

RESEARCH RESULTS

The analysis of four case studies allowed to explore different factors influencing power shifts in buyer-seller relationships with regards to mediated and non-mediated power sources and that is way we named it as multidimensional power shifts. Identified drivers might be grouped in three main categories: partner’s intentional actions, partner’s non-intentional actions and processes and environmental and network factors (table 3). The first category which is intentional factors means undertaking the actions by weaker (actions: I.1-5) or stronger (actions: II.1-5) party in the relationship directly influencing on the shift of particular sources of power position. These actions are quite similar for researched buyers and suppliers and what makes difference in intentional actions approach is being a substantial weaker or stronger party. That is why we proposed grouping in table 3 these actions according to power position criterion. In four case studies the weaker parties are two buyers (Buyer 1 and 2) and two suppliers (Supplier 2 and 3), and the stronger parties are two buyers (Buyer 3 and 4) and one supplier (Supplier 1).

Table 3. Drivers for power shifts in asymmetrical buyer-seller relationship

I. Intentional actions by the weaker party	II. Intentional actions by the stronger party
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Investing in competences required by powerful partner (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1, 2) 2. Implementing product specialization strategy (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 3) 3. Making pressure on stronger partner in the next contract negotiations (<u>mediated power</u>) (Case 1, 2) 4. Achieving a position of a sole OEM supplier of concrete product (<u>mediated and non-mediated</u>) (Case 3) 5. Diversifying customer portfolio (<u>mediated power</u>) (Case 3) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Diversifying supplier base to shift advantage of coercive power position again on buyer side “all eggs in one basket” (<u>mediated power</u>) (Case 3) 2. Using discrete orders instead of uncomfortable contract (<u>mediated power</u>) (Case 4) 3. Implementing strategy of “sole distributor in the one territory” (<u>mediated and non-mediated power</u>), (Case 1, 2) 4. Acknowledging supplier with reward at “Suppliers’ Days” (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 3) 5. Adjustment to the weaker buyer’s market development of new products increased significance of expert power on the supplier side (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 2)
III. Non-intentional actions and processes of the weaker partners	IV. Non-intentional actions and processes of the stronger partners
The change of relationships key features:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased of trust level between of partners (e.g. on the stronger party side specifically the trust component as believe in competences of a weaker party (<u>mediated and non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1-4) 2. Achieving the higher level of goal congruence between parties as an adjustment process of a weaker party to the stronger one (<u>mediated and non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1-4) 3. Achievement of satisfaction of both parties within so far relationship and high probability of continuity (<u>mediated and non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1-4) 	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rapid increase of a volume of purchasing level from more powerful supplier (<u>mediated and non-</u> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Investing in weaker partner’s competencies (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1, 2, 3, 4)

<p><u>mediated power</u>) (Case 2, 3)</p> <p>2. Improving market position and company image (<u>mediated and non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1, 2)</p> <p>3. Learning from the stronger party (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1, 2, 3, 4)</p> <p>4. Extending core capabilities beyond initial position within value chain (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1,2, 3, 4)</p> <p>5. Improvement in transparency of processes to align with stronger partner and improve image in general (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 4)</p>	<p>2. Sharing product-related knowledge with weaker partner (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1, 2)</p> <p>3. Pursuing strategy of limited number of OEM suppliers of concrete product (<u>mediated power</u>) (Case 3)</p> <p>4. Pursuing value co-creation initiatives (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case1, 2, 3, 4)</p> <p>5. Increased occupancy of supplier's manufacturing capacity influenced on decrease of his <u>mediated power</u> (Case 2)</p> <p>6. Developing weaker partner's image/position among final users (within distribution channel) (<u>non-mediated power</u>) (Case 1, 2)</p>
V. Environmental and network factors	
<p>1. Change of the situation in macroenvironment (<u>mediated and non-mediate power</u>) (Case 2)</p> <p>2. Change of the situation on the labour market (<u>mediated and non-mediate power</u>) (Case 1, 2)</p> <p>3. Change of the conditions of making orders from sub-suppliers (<u>mediated power</u>) (Case 3)</p> <p>4. Uncertainty of exchange rates move (<u>mediated power</u>) (Case 3)</p> <p>5. The situation change within the network (e.g. value chain) allowed to the weaker party to got less dependent on the powerful partner (<u>mediated power</u>) (Case 2, 3, 4)</p> <p>6. Intensifying competitive tensions <u>mediated power sources</u> (Case 1, 2)</p>	

As the analysis of multidimensional power shifts in four cases showed, from the one hand the level of power asymmetry decreased when compare the beginning of these relationships with substantial power asymmetry and the period in which the case studies were finished. This explains why all intentional actions of less powerful parties were directed on improving their multidimensional power positions, as well as why some intentional actions of stronger parties (actions: II.2-4) were oriented on helping the weaker ones on making them more powerful with regards to mediated and non-mediated power. These delivers evidences that substantial power asymmetry is a detrimental phenomenon with regards to researched business relationships.

From the other hand the parties of analysed dyads, especially those more powerful ones were interested in keeping some levels of power asymmetry with regard to different power sources. So these companies conducted the intentional actions related to countervailing power, being interested in achieving again more powerful position, which increased power asymmetry (actions: II.1,5). These results support the Hingley, Angell, & Lindgreen, (2015a) positive perception of the position of power asymmetry in business relationships, meaning that the power asymmetry in itself is not negative within the relationship, but it is rather more positive than clearly power symmetrical situation for achieving relationship benefits.

When exploring non-intentional actions and processes of weaker and stronger partners of the relationship, still impacting on power position shifts, we identified and named the actions and processes in which such an influence was clearly visible in interviewee words. First of all non-intentional processes, with regard to power, of changes within relationships key features such us: trust, goal congruency and satisfaction (III/IV.1-3) were the same for weaker and stronger partners. The low trust characteristic in the beginning of the relationship with substantial power asymmetry is defined through low level of competency of weaker partners. It is also connected with inconsistency in goal congruency. Further development of researched dyads was conditioned by improvement of competency at weaker party side. When it happened, influenced also on decrease of non-mediated power asymmetry, especially through improving weaker partner's expert power. The satisfaction of both partners from so far relationship was perceived as an condition for efficient cooperation in situation of power asymmetry.

We identified non-intentional actions specifically of weaker partners (actions: III.1-5) and stronger partners (actions: IV.1-6), which impacted on power position shifts (table 3). All

of that non-intentional actions effect was improving power position of weaker partners. Such an actions of more powerful parties led indirectly to improvement in the first place non-mediated power of the weaker sides (actions: IV.1-4,6). For instance in Case 2 and Case 3 it happened that less powerful parties when increased substantially non-mediated power (through multifaceted factors), they undertook some actions against the interest of powerful partners (it was not a goal congruency than), which motivated the stronger partners to undertake the actions related to countervailing power. Further in table 3 there are distinguished non-intentional actions of weaker sides impacted indirectly both, on improvement mediated power position (actions: III.1,2,4,5,7) and on improvement non-mediated power position (actions: III.1,2,3-6) of this weaker party.

The last but not least type of factors influencing on power position shifts are the environmental and network factors, which are related to the changes in micro and macro environment of both partners. In our research we identified six such a factors: V.1-6. Changes of the particular country legal situation in the industry type under consideration in the Case 2 (which we classified to a factor V.1), allowed less powerful buyer for improvement of his market position within the end users customers and rapidly increase sales volume, which influenced on improvement power position with regard to mediated and non-mediated power sources. The example in relation to factor V.2 is also visible in Case 2. Appeared the accessibility of qualified employees allowed to Buyer 2 match with rapid increase in sales orders and this factor impacted on improvement Buyer 2's mediated and non-mediate power sources.

In our research we proved that in business dyads the power in terms of symmetry / asymmetry shifts into a multidimensional, purposeful to some extent, set of different levels of asymmetries of power sources, which is influenced by intentional actions, non-intentional actions and processes and by environmental and network factors as well.

RESEARCH DISCUSSION

We focused on multi-level, multi-source power asymmetries and their shifts and through that we believe we were able to explain better relationship power dynamics than it could be achieved by incorporating wider, but also more distant network approach. Specifically, our qualitative abductive (Dubois and Gadde 2002) research approach allowed us to explore, which kind of drivers (intentional actions, non-intentional actions and processes and environmental and network factors) influenced on power asymmetry shifts within the relationships and how it happened. Considering that these consequences were found clearly mutually positive, this study supports the idea that the substantial or total power asymmetry (Kähkönen & Lintukangas, 2011) is a burden for a business relationship (Dwyer & Walker, 1981).

Although Business to Business research early acknowledged shifts in power between business partners, (e.g. Håkansson & Gadde, 1992), a little has been done to explain how such shifts happen. Our research fills this gap to some extent by presenting longitudinal cases of multidimensional power shifts between partners, where achieving the set of different levels of asymmetries of power sources has the purposive character to some extent because of influence of intentional actions. Other two kinds of drivers are not purposive one with regard to power shift.

Our research calls for a more nuanced approach towards power in buyer-seller relationships. On the one hand, our study supports the idea that power and some "weaker-stronger actors" are unavoidable in business relationships, (Cuevas, Julkunen, & Gabrielsson, 2015; Blois, 2008), even if business actors make some conscious efforts to decrease substantial asymmetries. On the other hand, our study brings evidence that too much dominance is unhealthy for a business relationship (Blomqvist, Hurmelina, & Seppanen,

2005); it is potentially harmful from long-term perspective and with regard to relationship benefits.

In each business relationship that we studied multidimensional power asymmetry shifts resulted in somewhat unique and complex set of power sources asymmetries, e.g. advantage in some types of power combined with disadvantage in other aspects. Generally, these unique power-related combinations cannot be treated as final ends, but rather as important steps in further relationship evolution. Consequently, so-called power asymmetry shift should be treated as a long-lasting management process aimed at getting closer to a “relationship golden mean” within the constraints of wider relational structures that surrounds business dyad. In a similar spirit the study of Cox, Watson, Lonsdale, & Sanderson (2004), showed that in achieving “ideal” performance outcomes in business relationship attention should be paid to finding appropriate level of interdependence between buyer and seller. Our study extends this suggestion, because Cox, Watson, Lonsdale, & Sanderson (2004) didn’t focused explicitly on power asymmetry change processes with regard to various power sources. Importantly, our study also illustrates that power asymmetry change may be sometimes extremely lengthy process and power asymmetry rather does not change with the same pace with regard to its all micro-elements.

This research motivates business practitioners involved in long-term relationships, firstly to careful analysis and understanding their own and the partner power positions with regard to mediated and non-mediated power source, and, secondly, to facilitate power position change in direction of the set of multidimensional power asymmetry, which is purposive to some extent. Our results showed that such a set is individual for each of researched four case studies, suggesting that dealing with it is a managerial task in business relationship development. So the one is to decrease the substantial power asymmetries to make the partners of the relationship better adjusted each other and the second is to keep some levels of power asymmetry with regard to different power sources. Managers should analyse which levels of power sources asymmetries positions are the best for the relationship and how all kinds of factors influence the power position shifts. This is a complex task, because it means most often maneuvering between asymmetries within different power sources. Nevertheless, this process is practical in nature, because it helps in maximizing the relationship benefits and mitigating risks connected with deep cooperation.

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