A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF STRATEGIC ALLIANCES BUILT FROM A STUDY OF MALAYSIAN ENTERPRISES.

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Abstract

Looking at the rate at which organizations/firms are entering into strategic alliances of late, one can understand and/or appreciate the increased research in the area of strategic alliances. All seek to increase our knowledge and/or understanding of the potentialities, as well as the adversities inherent in the formation of strategic alliances. For Malaysian firms, alliances can provide the means to extend business activity and compete against internationally based competitors. More recently, the Malaysian press has been inundated with news about the emergence of many more such alliances. What is the nature of alliances formed by businesses in Malaysia and how do those alliances contribute to business development? This research first examines theory supporting the classification of alliances in the literature, and then explores managers' perceptions on motivation driving the formation of alliances and the role of alliances in a business's strategic direction. When data identifying the purpose for entering the alliance and benefits received from the alliance were linked to data measuring alliance performance, three major dimensions emerged, which together describe strategic motivation or intent for the range of alliances observed in the data. The framework developed through this research provides a management perspective of building alliances, which supports Sheth and Pravatiyar's(1992) prior classification of strategic (exclusive arrangements that create new opportunities), and operational (enhancing current business capabilities) alliances, with the addition of alliances created to defend past strategic activities against competitive and/or environmental threats.

Introduction

Interorganizational cooperation is spurred by the increased recognition of the fact that no firm or organization has all the 'capacities', e.g., resources and activities, needed for it to achieve its goals or objectives in the marketplace (Cunningham and Varadarajan, 1995). For Hakansson et al., (cited in Aaker, 1995) the total capacities of an actor include its own internal capacity (i.e., own control of resources and/or activities) and external capacity (i.e., indirect control of the resources and/or activities of other relevant actors in a network). A firm's need of links with resourceful actors (business organizations or non-business organizations) in today's dynamic and heterogeneous global market has to do with the fact that the internal capacity needs to be complemented by those of some significant actors. Gaining access to complementary resources and/or activities externally can be expressed in many different ways. For example, firm A may have different cooperative arrangements such as 'joint development agreement', 'alternative sourcing agreement', and 'joint product development' with various actors (Davies and Brush, 1997). Consequently, the definition of strategic alliances is not coherent in the existing literature. A few examples are worth giving. Strategic alliance is defined as an informal or formal arrangement between two or more companies with a common business objective (Czinkota and Ronlainen, 1998). Strategic alliances are seen as a manifestation of interorganizational cooperative strategies that entail the pooling of skills and resources by the alliance partners in order to achieve one or more goals linked to the strategic objectives of the cooperating firms (Ohmae, 1991). According to Dess et al., (1994), the term strategic alliances refers to less than arm's length agreements including: equity agreements (joint venture, minority equity positions, and equity swaps; and no equity agreements (for joint R&D, joint product development, long term sourcing agreements, joint manufacturing, joint marketing, reciprocal distribution, standards setting consortia, barter switching agreements, and the less than arm's length franchising and licensing agreements.

Apparently the various ways that strategic alliances have been defined may have the effect that each proponent of a particular definition may tend to concentrate on particular characteristics of the phenomenon that best suit his/her view of 'reality'. No intention is made to add any additional definition. Noticeably, there is some common denominator to which the above definition can be reduced. Thus, in all the definitions, one realizes that firms are pronged to develop some kind relationships with some significant others as a means to gain access to activities or resources that they lack. The exchange relationships with external actors are a necessity for most firms since they provide access to complementary resources and activities that may have an impact on their output and/or success in the marketplace. While these classifications provide managers with a broad range of detailed options in developing business partnerships, none other than the classification of 'strategic' or 'operational' propounded by Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) captures the essence of the intent of alliance formation, i.e. to achieve common and individual goals.

Although alliances have been extensively covered in the literature, few studies to date have examined alliances from a Malaysian businesses perspective. This research will develop a classification of alliances through examining their contribution towards a Malaysian business' strategic direction, and ways that those responsible for business performance measure the contribution of the alliance to their business strategy.

Classification of Strategic Alliances

Resource dependency theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) positions most organizations as incapable of individually delivering the resources required to build competitive advantage. The varying ability of organizations to build business partnerships to access these resources, and the rapidly changing nature of the market within which organization operate, create an environment of risk associated with alliance formation and the delivery of competitive advantage. While resource dependency theory presents alliances as a means of supporting current business capability and defending against environmental forces, Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995, p.287) identify strategy as a mechanism of change, where firms "make a conscious attempt to influence their environment through their exchange and interfirm relationships". It is these dimensions that contribute to the range of classifications that have been proposed in the literature and the debate about whether an alliance is "strategic" or not (Sheth and Pravatiyar, 1992).

Categorisation of strategic alliances has been attempted from a range of perspectives. Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995, p. 292) provide a review of major contributions, describing broad categorizations (dividing alliances into those that access complementary and different resources to create advantage and those that access similar resources to lower costs), functional categorizations (linking functional aspects between organizations that build skills through joint manufacturing, marketing or product development agreements), intra and international categorizations (forming relationships among partners in the same country or developing links between organizations operating across nations), intra and inter industry categorizations (building relationship with rivals or pooling resources across industries to build new market opportunities) and a motivational categorization based on Ansoff's (1957) business growth matrix. This latter approach identifies motives underpinning strategic alliances as international market entry, defending market position, building product offerings or appeal, entering related markets, offsetting competitive actions, accelerating the pace of market entry, lowering manufacturing and/or marketing costs, reducing financial commitments and risks associated with large resource outlays and enhancing current and/or developing new skills.

Astley and Fombrun (1983) developed a classification for business relationships based on the type of contractual relationship between the businesses involved. They identified confederations (contractual agreements that synergize functional activities such as shared shipping costs), conjugate collectives (contractual agreements that satisfy non-economic mutual needs such as buyer-supplier relationships), agglomerative collectives (groups of competitors that have no contractual arrangements such as trade organizations) and organic collectives (traditional networking across industries). Golden and Dollinger (1993) explore the strategic nature of these types of business relationships and conclude that "differences in strategic postures are associated with differences in the quality and type of interorganizational relationships used by small firms". The authors examined the use of business relationships within the strategic adaptation classification of companies by Miles and Snow (1978) and found that companies demonstrating a specific strategic position were more likely to select a particular alliance form. Those demonstrating a defender strategic posture were more likely to select conjugate relationships, those adopting a prospector strategic posture were more likely to select confederate relationships, those adopting an analyzer strategic posture were more likely to select agglomerate and organic relationships, and those adopting a reactor strategic posture were not predictable in the types of business relationships selected. Miles and Snow indicate that few small firms can compete without some form of inter-organizational relationship and that companies will use these relationships strategically to enter new markets, reduce costs, and/or gain valuable information about their business environment.

Achieving operational efficiency and strategic effectiveness are important outcomes for strategic and operational alliances respectively (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Sheth and Parvatiyar classified alliances as either strategic or operational, based on the contribution of the alliance to the achievement of a future competitive position or enhanced operational efficiency. In practice, however, this delineation is not always clear-cut. For example, relationships formed by an organization to develop a skilled workforce contribute to both desired outcomes, i.e. building a future competitive position as a quality producer and enhancing operational efficiency (Jarrat et al., 1997). Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995) argue that operational alliances such as streamlining systems and cooperative arrangements are not "strategic" and their inclusion in a strategic alliance classification system is questionable. The critical issue here, as to whether an alliance is strategic or not, is not related to the nature of the alliance per se, but the "exclusivity" of the partnership and its ability to lead to a competitive advantage.

"Regardless of underlying motives a fundamental concern of each prospective strategic alliance parent is the question of how much of its resources to put into and retrieve from a strategic alliance" (Lorange and Roos, 1992, p. 10). Within this context Lorange and Roos created a framework of four archetypes of strategic alliances, with *ad hoc* pool types reflecting short term alliances where the resources are retrieved at the end of a strategic endeavour, consortia, depicting, for example long term R&D alliances where benefits generated are distributed back to the individual alliance partners, project based joint ventures where the investment of minimal resources by alliance partners jointly create value that is retained by the alliance, and full blown joint ventures where extensive resources create value which is retained by the joint venture. The authors identify that a company's strategic perspective of an alliance (i.e. developed to defend core business, build capability to improve market position, retain a business area that is peripheral to a company's core business, or to restructure a business) together with the input/output of resources dictate the nature of the alliance formed.

A broader definition of a strategic alliance or strategic business relationship, namely, "a coalition of two or more organizations intended to achieve mutually beneficial goals "formed the basis of a taxonomy of European retailing alliances, is proposed by Robinson and Clarke-Hill (1994). The authors described how alliances can vary in intensity, which they refer to as "tight" or "loose" relationships, and identified the specific arrangements evident in the market as in Figure 1.

Robinson and Clarke-Hill (1994) identified the existence of national buying clubs and loose affiliations as having significant impact on the way companies can compete for market share. These looser types of alliances offer organizations an opportunity to develop competitive advantages otherwise unavailable to them with limited or no capital outlay. These relationships may exist in both lateral and vertical directions, each allowing an organization to access and configure capabilities or resources in a way not easily replicable by competitors, thus providing enhanced effectiveness in current markets or facilitating entry into new markets. Bucklin and Sengupta (1993, p.44) conclude that "co-marketing alliances prosper when projects have been well selected, partners chosen carefully, and relationships structured toward balance".

Objectives and research method

This qualitative research is exploratory in nature and examines the role of strategic alliances in Malaysian businesses with a view to establishing a classification of strategic alliances. Specifically, this research examines the structure and formation of alliances, the role these alliances play in a business's strategic direction and the ways that those responsible for business performance measure the contribution of the alliance to their business. A qualitative rather than quantitative research method was selected as there is a void in research on Malaysian business relationships and the research objective, to develop a classification of alliances, warranted a field based approach. A qualitative approach has been recognized to generate theory that are "grounded" and "holistic" in data in areas where little research has occurred (Drumwright, 1994). In the same vein, Steven White (2002) in his assessment of the state of management research in Asian contexts drawn from 840 articles, asserted that too much of the research effort has been limited to simplistic comparisons, correlational analyses providing no insight into underlying processes and skewed, idiosyncratic sampling, The result has been a lack of theory development and contribution to conceptual discourse beyond an audience specifically interested in Asia, with little relevance for management practice. Given the exploratory nature of this thesis, the methodological approach here follows that taken by Drumwright (1994) and Steven White (2002).

Businesses in two metropolitan cities were selected for inclusion in this study to provide broad representation of the business categories selected for investigation. Both cities have common dimensions, with food processing, retail trading, education, building and tourism all contributing substantially to their economic growth.

A total of 30 businesses across the two cities, reflecting four major categories of businesses specified in the Bursa Malaysia register (2005) were contacted to participate in this study. The four categories selected for study were the retail sector, financial/professional services, tourism and the building industry, all categories contributing substantially to employment and economic growth within two businesses communities. A convenience sampling technique was adopted to gather 20 respondents across the two cities within the retail sector and financial/professional services and 10 from each of the tourism and building industries. A broad representation within each business group was selected (for example the retail sector included businesses offering goods across a wide number of product categories, franchises and privately owned operations, those in monopoly situations and those in fiercely competitive markets), so that the classification that emerged captured their diverse nature, supporting the robustness of the classification.

Initially, three unstructured interviews were completed, using a "laddering" technique (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) asking the respondent to recall the formation process and management of strategic alliances, and probing for aspects of importance. Each of these interviews lasted approximately two hours and explored several alliances. From these interviews a structured interview protocol was prepared, addressing the key issues raised through the unstructured approach. Each interview with the senior manager or owner of each of the 30 businesses in the study using the structured interview protocol lasted approximately three quarters of an hour. Data in the interviews were gathered through note taking or tape recording and then transcribed after the interview, categorizing data on each transcription. Strauss (1987) recommends that coding of data should be done early and frequently within the research time frame. Information from 30 companies was gathered, addressing issues relating to alliance type, formation and impact on business direction and strategy. Companies ranged in size from having 200 to 10000 employees.

Research Questions

Essentially, the author argues that strategic alliance management requires skilful management that can be best derived from a systems perspective of management. A glance at the literature invariably reveals that a major cause of strategic alliance management is related to management particularly where partners are involved (Niederkofler 1991). A number of research questions have been derived from the literature review the answers to which leads directly to solving the research problem:

1. What economic/technological, political/legal and cultural/social factors impact on strategic alliance in terms of organization context, management culture and management process?
2. What is the state of alliance management skills in these companies?
3. What are the major organizational component dysfunctions that the alliance manager in these companies has had to contend with?
4. How did the alliance manager in these companies manage the alliance in the context of these major shortfalls?
5. How important were cultural elements in the management of strategic alliances?
6. How did alliance managers/liaison managers strategically manage the process issues of relationship bonding, trust, communication, boundary spanning, problem solving, learning, and cultural orientations in their respective companies?

Findings and Discussions

Malaysian businesses were observed to be actively engaging in alliances. Both verbal and written agreements supporting alliance activity existed equally within the data. Lateral and vertical alliances were also evident, with vertical examples of forward and backward alliances seeking access to supply and/or access to customers and lateral examples of buying groups and competitors sharing resources. These were examples of alliances established through industry networks, joining with similar business in other trading areas to develop access to cheaper products and gain knowledge and expertise that could be translated locally into a competitive advantage. There were examples of companies developing an alliance with another in an allied industry to provide their own customers with a broader range of services and gain access to a new market segment, and there was an example of a professional service provider developing an alliance with a large, similar company operating outside the region. This latter alliance provided access to expertise that could not be delivered through a small, regional organization.

In terms of the framework developed by Robinson and Clarke-Hill (1994), loose affiliations, buying groups, equity participating alliances and co-market agreements were observed in the data. Within the framework propounded by Astley and Fombrun (1983), the data provided examples of conjugate collectives (alliances within the value chain providing access to supply and financial support), confederations (competitors working together to share costs), agglomerate collectives (buying groups), and organic collectives (tourism industry within the regional centre). Companies appeared to fall into the strategic positioning suggested by Golden and Dollinger (1993), with defenders, analysers, reactors and propectors seeking to develop alliances that facilitated their business approach. Given the qualitative nature of the study, it was not possible to determine whether the strategic posture increased the likelihood of selecting a particular type of strategic alliance.

Motives to enter strategic alliances suggested by Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995) were supported in the data, with access to new markets (to develop market potential and enter new non price sensitive markets), access to new skills ("if customer is interested in energy efficient glass and double glazing can get their expertise, therefore we take on their designs"), access to new products ("to be more efficient and provide a broad range of products and services, reduce out of stock situations and improve stock turnaround") and modifying the market structure (alliance allows us to build market share against our two major competitors) nominated as reasons for entering alliances.

When data identifying the purpose for entering the alliance and benefits received from the alliance were linked to data measuring alliance performance, three major dimensions emerged, which together described strategic motivation or intent for the range of alliances observed in the data. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and alliances observed fell within or at a point on or within the frame linking these three dimensions (Figure 2). The three dimensions each encompassed a "time" component, with "enhancing current business performance" reflecting an alliance's impact on building current capabilities, "creating new value" indicating the contribution of an alliance towards future business potential and "defending market position" forging links to protect past business development against market or environmental forces. Here, the concept of "defending market position" is inconsistent with Lorange and Roos (1992) "defensive" strategic perspective previously identified. Lorange and Roos defensive alliance motivation describes market leaders forming alliances to secure technology, resources and/or market access for their core business. Some alliances studied were clearly tied to one point within the classification frame.

Benefits derived form one alliance (case 18 –an alliance between a building products distributor and a transportation company), of "low cost coverage of a wide range of retail outlets, we can employ less staff", "low cost per dollar sales for administration and distribution" while maintaining a quality, reliable service were closely aligned with performance measures of "costs per tonnage per destination", level of customer service and "delivery on time". These benefits were linked to building the businesses' distribution capability, improving its efficiency without reducing the level of service provided to the customer. The motivation to enhance current business performance was also clearly supported in case 23 (alliance between independent furniture manufacturers), where manufacturers developed an alliance to share manufacturing methods and decrease costs. This latter alliance, however, also formed a platform from which to negotiate large tenders, creating the opportunity to compete in a new market, and thus creating new value for the business. This alliance would be positioned within the frame close to the dimension "building current business performance", and along the vector linking this dimension to "creating new value". Other examples of building current business performance observed in the data were improving the knowledge, expertise and skills of staff (for example case 3 – a construction company and supplier of construction materials, case 11 – building company and plumbing services, case 30 – construction firm and electrical contractor, 26 – association of financial services, case 24 – retail store and textile supplier, case 22 – supermarket and a supplier), building purchasing capability to enhance profitability (as opposed to the intent of enhancing value for the customer) (for example case 5 – group of independent financial services), accessing finance (for example case 11, case 21 – building contractor and project home builder), and accessing other resources (for example case 20 – supermarket and retail outfitter, case 22 – financial planner and fund manager). These alliances enhance the capability of businesses to perform various activities along the value chain, and deliver superior customer value through developing and integrating business processes.

While several alliances in this study were created specifically to gain access to new client groups, thereby building current business potential through extending market coverage, other alliances reflected multiple strategic outcomes. In case 1 (alliance between a retail pharmacy and a wholesaler), for example, the alliance adds new value through providing access to a competitively priced, broader range of goods, builds current business capability through providing access to finance, information on industry trends and business management information and advice, and defends market position against competitors through communication of links with a recognized national chain. As the discourse of this respondent contained more components of a "competitive" nature, concentrating discussion on comparative market performance measures, this alliance would be positioned at a point distant from the central point of the frame (recognizing the multiple strategic intent) and the vector "defending market position" (supported by the concentration of the discourse). Another strategic alliance, between a business and a specific client group (case 8) was initially created to enhance customer relationships. Out of this "relationship marketing strategy", a strategic alliance has developed which facilitates new product development for the business. The client group has a high level of expertise, and not only readily contributes ideas for new product development but is also actively involved in testing new products for the business. Further, through the alliance, the business generated strategies to increase usage of products and develop market segments, building current business capability. This alliance would be positioned on the framework close to the vector point, creating new value.

To "defend market position", businesses formed alliances to undertake joint promotional activity (cases 2, 5, 8, 10, 15 including an alliance between independent travel agencies), build barriers against new entrants through building an alliance with a competitor (case 17), link with buying groups to compete against major chains (as opposed to the strategic intent of building purchasing capability)(case 25), offset the impact of product substitutes (case 27) and create a new force for survival during economic downturn (case 11).

"Creating new value" was a strategic intent of many alliances (supported in cases 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 21, 25 including alliances between a bank and an insurance company), with the nature of "value-adding" encompassing gaining access to a broader range of goods and services, creating better quality goods and services, providing access to innovation that can be incorporated within a design or service, and facilitating new product development to ensure premium quality. Comments such as "our clients want high level creativity and high level technical support", "improved customer service through gaining access to expertise" and "to gain access to supply of innovative products" support the value adding dimension of these alliances.

Under this classification, the position occupied by alliance types within the classification frame will reflect the contribution of the alliance to achieve a specific strategic intent. For example, building links within a buying group is classified for cases 26 and 30 as defending market position, since the discourse revealed the strategic intention as to compete against major chains and meet the competition, In case 5, the same alliance type is classified as building purchasing capability, with decrease in costs and improved profitability identified as the primary purposes for entering the alliance. Table 1 summarizes the specific nature of alliances that fall within each of the three major areas of strategic intent.

Conclusion

Alliance classifications to date have provided managers with a broad range of options in alliance formation, yet few have reflected a strategic vision of how an alliance will shape business development. The framework developed through this research provides a management perspective of building alliances, which supports Sheth and Parvatiyar's (1992) prior classification of strategic (exclusive arrangements, that create new opportunities), and operational (enhancing current business capabilities) alliances, however, creating an additional category of alliances to defend past strategic activities against competitive and/or environmental threats.

Theoretical support for the dimensions underpinning this new approach to alliance classification is evidenced through resource dependency theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), with small and medium sized enterprises unable to access resources internally to develop all the capabilities necessary to compete effectively in their regional market sectors. Kogut's (1988) theory on joint venture formation, basing motivation for alliance formation on transaction cost theory (to minimize bargaining of small transaction numbers), strategic behaviour (to enhance competitive position) and organization theory (creating new forms through which organizational knowledge can be transferred); Ansoff's (1957) classification of organizational growth opportunities; the link between competitive advantage and business partnerships (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1992), and the broad range of motivational drivers of alliance formation proposed by Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995), which includes motives of international market access, building product line, entering an evolving industry, offsetting threats of future competition, accelerating pace of market entry, lowering manufacturing costs, lowering resource access costs and building new skills. Not all these motives were evidenced in this data on Malaysian firms (Table 1), identifying the need for further clarification through quantitative analysis.

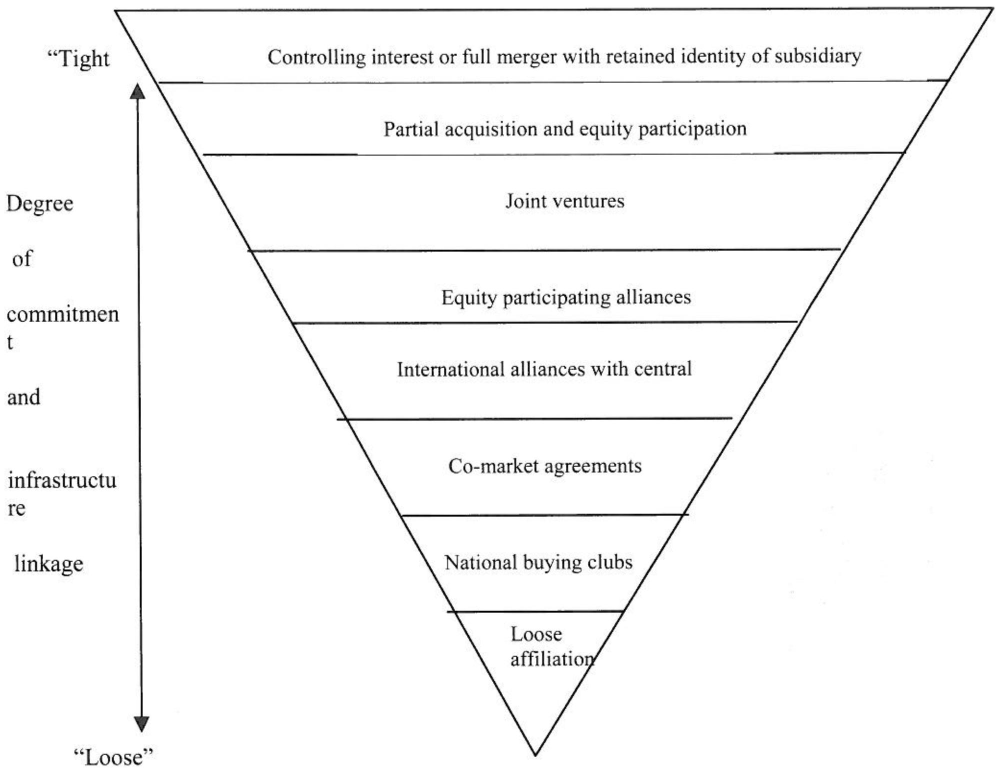
Alliances built to offset the impact of the environment were evident in this study, as Malaysian firms struggled to defend against the impact of economic downturn within Malaysia. This motive driving alliance formation is not apparent in the framework discussed in Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995).

General support for classification of strategic alliances on strategic intent is provided by Lorange and Roos (1992), although the classification propounded by the authors was not supported in this study. This variation in classification by strategic intent is partially explained by the nature of the businesses being investigated in this study. Lorange and Roos created a framework of strategic positioning of alliances based on the importance of the area of business to an alliance instigator and the company's relative market position, using examples of companies such as IBM and SKF. However, the Malaysian firms examined in this study had predominantly only a core business, with few identifying peripheral business areas, and the majority of markets in which they compete are fragmented, containing multiple business operators.

The framework generated through this research on Malaysian firms demonstrates partial support of prior theories (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1992; Varadarjan and Cunningham, 1995) and reflects the perceptions of managers as they consider the value for their business created through an alliance. When asked to describe motivation for alliance formation, value created through the alliance and the dimensions through which they evaluate the contribution of the alliance to their business, Malaysian directors' discourse revealed a unified strategic intent. The strategic intent in some cases is a combination of the three key dimensions (building business capability, defending market position, and creating new value), and in others is specifically built around a single strategic dimension.

Relationship theory, strategic alliance theory and theories of corporate competition (for example Hamel and Prahalad, 1993; Stalk et al., 1992) support the notion that the strategic dimensions described in this research are consistent with dimensions considered by managers when examining the broader context of where and how their business should compete. The potential of the two market-directed dimension (adding value and defending market position) supported by the "delivery" dimension of enhancing business capability, is currently being investigated by the authors as a generic alliance strategy framework. The framework generated through this research will assist managers in understanding the strategic paths through which alliances can assist a business achieve a future desired position. However, further research is required to establish its relevance within a large business context and in other industries.

Figure 1 A hierarchy of alliance types



Source: Robinson and Clarke-Hill (1994, p.5)

Figure 2 Strategic intent of alliances

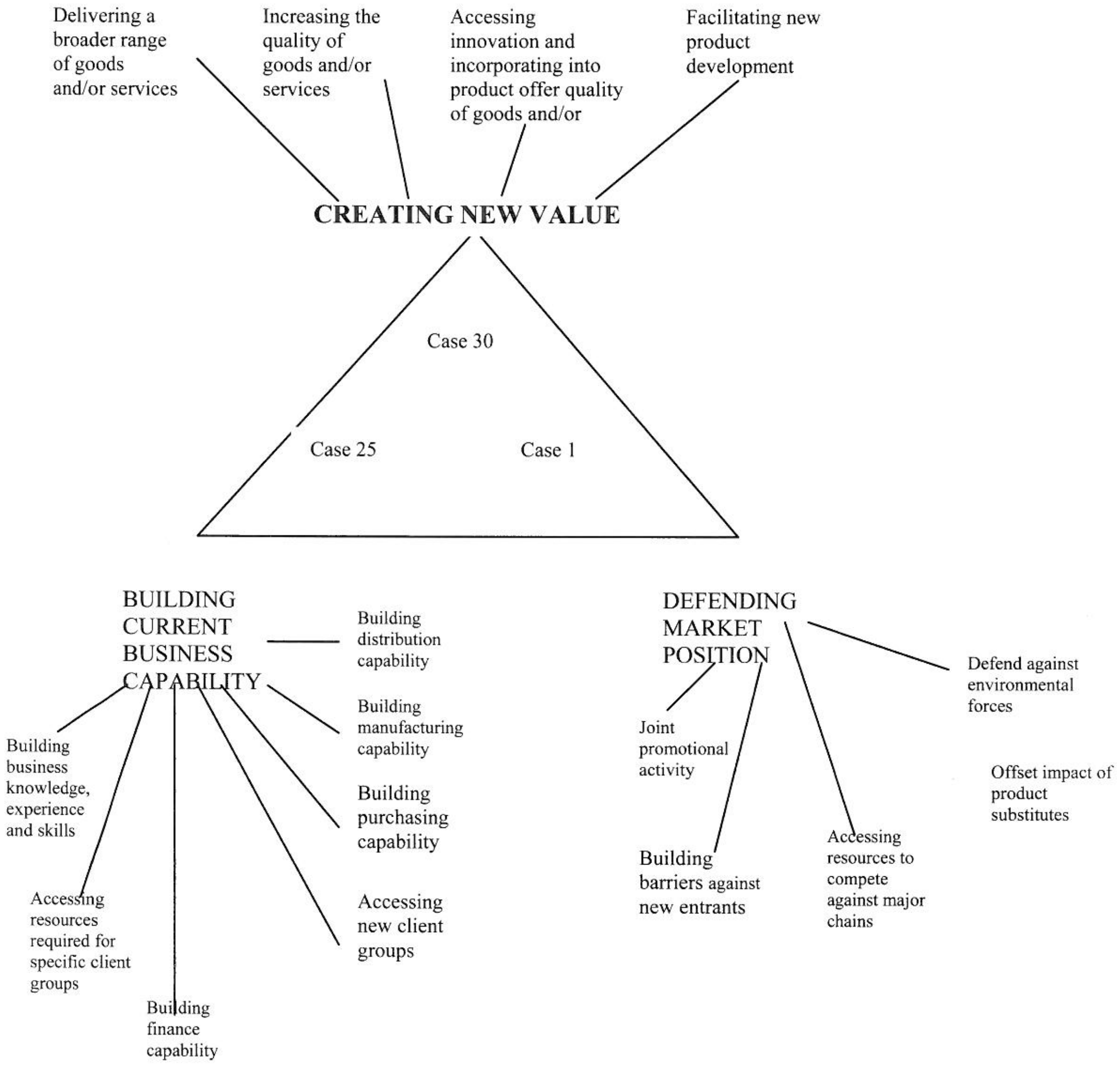


Table 1 Specific alliance outcomes

Strategic intent	Specific alliance outcomes
Adding new value services	Delivering broader range of goods and/or
services	Increasing the quality of goods and/or
	Accessing innovation and incorporating into product offer
	Facilitating new product development
Building current business capability	Building distribution capability
	Building manufacturing capability
	Building purchasing capability
	Building finance capability
	Building business knowledge, expertise and
skills	
	Accessing new client groups
	Accessing resources required for specific client groups
Defending market position	Joint promotional activity
	Building barriers against new entrants
	Accessing resources to compete against major claims
	Offset impact of product substitutes
	Defend against environmental forces

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