Caroline Yeng-Ting Cheng

Relationship and Networking Strategy Tools:

What are they and
how do managers use them in
practice?

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Doctoral Thesis

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Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor

Trondheim, February 2018

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Summary

This dissertation examines the topic of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Previous studies in the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) approach to strategizing as well as selected strategy tool studies from Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) have provided valuable insights on this topic. The term 'strategy tools' covers a set of concepts, methods, models, techniques, frameworks and methodologies that structure or influence strategic activity. While IMP studies have started to embrace strategizing and SaP has made the position clear that tools are important practices that deserve empirical attention, the topic of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks remains underexplored in IMP in two respects. First, too little *conceptual* attention has been given to tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks, despite the recognition that tools are helpful to assist managers to move beyond cognitive boundaries. Second, too little *empirical* attention has been given to tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks, despite tools being a significant part of managerial life as an empirical phenomenon.

The purpose of this PhD thesis is to provide a starting point to address 'strategy tools', conceptually and empirically, within the IMP approach to strategizing focusing on two questions: *(1) Which types of tools for strategizing in business relationships have been conceptualized and discussed in the IMP literature, and (2) How do managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships?* To examine these questions, this dissertation employs a manual qualitative content analysis approach to systematically review literature and build a conceptual framework. Regarding practices as a set of tools in the IMP approach to strategizing, a multiple embedded case study design investigating tool uses in 16 buyer and seller relationships using the qualitative research interview method was employed to conduct the field research.

The thesis contributes to literature on the IMP approach to strategizing in five ways. First, the term '*relationship and networking strategy tools*' (RNSTs) has been put forth as a distinct concept to encompass tools relevant for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Second, a fine-tuned conceptual framework of RNSTs with four commonalities and six differing dimensions to structure and stimulate discussions concerning tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks has been developed. Third, an initial IMP strategy toolbox, which more clearly outlines the IMP approach to strategizing using tools, is presented. Fourth, this thesis also contributes by suggesting a six-part typology of interactive strategizing categories where two additional strategizing configurations to the literature are being discussed. Finally, taking a broader perspective, this thesis has also taken steps to broaden the interpretation of strategy tool uses by proposing a 'tools-in-interaction' matrix, which discusses an additional dimension further to the thinking of strategy tool uses in systematic and experimental ways - that of using tools proactively and reactively in interactive contexts.

Keywords: strategy tools, interaction, business relationships, strategizing, Strategy-as-Practice

Acknowledgements

A PhD thesis embodies the contributions of many people without whom it could not have been produced. First and foremost, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my advisor, Professor Elsebeth Holmen, for her guidance and discussions in strengthening my ideas and thinking for external exposure, for having motivated me towards new ways of thinking, and for allowing a unique and, to me, significant individual research project to materialize. I also want to express my sincere appreciation of my co-advisor, Professor Debbie Harrison, at BI Norwegian Business School, for her insightful feedback and valuable suggestions, and for ensuring that progress has been made.

Two other individuals deserve explicit acknowledgement. In particular, I want to thank Malena Ingemansson Havenvid, for being tremendously enthusiastic in exploring ideas together as a co-author and for being an exceptionally encouraging colleague and friend. I must also acknowledge Lise Aaboen, who made time to be my critical reader in the final stages of writing up the thesis, as well as for much needed 'fika', both of which I am very thankful for.

I have learnt a lot as a PhD student coming from managerial practice. During my time as a PhD student, I have been very fortunate to be able to present my work and discuss papers with senior researchers highly familiar with my field of interest at many conferences, workshops and seminars. I want to thank the IMP community which have provided sources of inspiration that have been instrumental in shaping my thinking, and in positioning my ideas theoretically. On the same note, I owe much gratitude to the reviewers who have painstakingly critiqued my papers. Although I am not able to thank them personally, I very much appreciate their efforts in helping me find a voice that is able to engage in an ongoing intellectual conversation with others. Getting papers published is hard (nothing like I ever imagined), but has also brought me much satisfaction and joy.

This thesis would not have come to fruition without the participation of my informants. The connection to the real world has been pivotal for my motivation and my creativity. Although I cannot thank you by name here, I would like to express my profound gratitude for allowing me access to your companies and materials, for your hospitality and open-mindedness, and for the valuable discussions I had with each and every one of you. Being out in the field was no doubt the most enjoyable phase of my research.

The people who have meant a lot to me in making my working days enjoyable have been the resident scientific staff at the department and fellow PhD students. I have benefitted tremendously from being involved in research projects that are related to my field of interest. I have also been privileged to carry out teaching tasks in my favourite courses at IØT. I have not told this to the students on my courses, but the fact is that they have also inspired me with their questions and comments. On a daily basis, I have enjoyed chatting and discussing ups and downs with fellow PhD students on my floor. I also owe many thanks to the administrative support staff, who have never hesitated to lend me a helping hand whenever I have had trouble with my computer or my desk or filling out forms.

Having my origins in Singapore has allowed me to tap into the unwavering support and encouragement of a handful of long-time ex-school mates and ex-colleagues. Lisa, your friendship all these years has been invaluable to me and your regular doses of care and support have meant a lot to me. Julie, thanks for being there despite being latitudes and time zones away. Pat, Andrew and Jennifer, you literally watched me grow as a manager and make the transition to a researcher, I can never thank you enough for always being exceedingly supportive.

Here at 63° N, I have gained so much living in Trondheim, where the world literally meets! I want to thank my community of moms and dads here for always being so ready to chip in with child-sitting offers and so kind and generous in sharing their talents (be it culinary, visual arts, musical or physical sports).

When the going gets tough, which is inevitable in a research project like this, I have been so blessed to be able to share the peaks and valleys of my PhD journey with my family, who have enthusiastically believed in and supported my endeavour from the moment they learned of it. Most of all, my parents have always been the greatest inspiration to me. This thesis has been completed in loving memory of my father, who departed in the initial months of my embarking on this PhD project. Ba Ba, your gentle, wise and witty words and ways will always stick with me. And Ma Ma, words just cannot convey how much I love, respect and appreciate you every single day! To my three lovely sisters, Celine, Magdalene and Veronica, thanks for always cheering me on and for all the constructive chats and getaways. My parents-in-law did everything they could to support and energize me. Mamma and Pappa, thanks for always feeling so proud of me and for all your parcels of love from the best grand-supplier in the European Continent!

To my better half, André, working on this thesis has demanded so many sacrifices from you and you never bear a grudge. Thanks for your deepest and most enduring support, and for being the most engaged and hands-on father and never neglecting little surprises to brighten up my every day. One of the definitions of happiness in life (at least mine) is that your spouse loves and respects you even more as the years go by. By that measure, I hope to be as successful as he is. Finally, it is with great delight that I dedicate this thesis to our two wonderful children, Emily Liv and Hans Ourson.

Caroline Y. Cheng
Trondheim, February 2018

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Part I

1. Introduction

"We spend a lot of time working with strategies, planning the future. We spend a lot of time working on day-to-day relations with the customers. If we could tie those two items better together, we would be much stronger…"

(Director, Business Development, LiftCo)

This citation from LiftCo's Director of Business Development accords prestige and limelight to the interactions in business relationships performed by business development personnel, purchasers and technical specialists representing middle management. LiftCo is a worldwide leader in the design, manufacture and sale of equipment and components used in oil and gas drilling and production. Accordingly, interactions in business relationships take a lot of time, and have a great deal of strategic significance and relevance for a firm's strength and performance. Yet, something seems to be missing to support this managerial activity, as LiftCo's Director of Business Development completes his thought:

"… and we don't really have good tools to tell us how the approaches that we do, how they match up with what is the actual day-to-day business."

(Director, Business Development, LiftCo)

Tools have been extending the human reach since the dawn of mankind. It is not uncommon to distinguish human beings from other creatures by their ability to use and fashion tools to achieve their purpose. Over the past decades, strategy tools have become a staple of management. The term 'strategy tools' generally covers the range of concepts, methods, models, techniques, frameworks and methodologies that structure or influence strategic activity (Knott, 2008). As a significant part of managerial life, a plethora of strategic management tools and techniques, from portfolio matrices to balanced scorecards, are at managers' disposal to support their work in strategy making (Ghemawat, 2002; Grant, 2010; De Wit and Meyer, 2010; Evans, 2013; McKinsey, 2000; Burtonshaw-Gunn, 2008; Rigby, 2011). Furthermore, the widespread use of strategic management tools and techniques has also been reported (Rigby 1993, 1994, 2001; Clark, 1997; Frost, 2003; Gunn and Williams, 2007; Rigby and Bilodeau, 2007; Aldehayyat and Anchor, 2008; Knott, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Kalkan and Bozhurt, 2013; Tassabehji and Isherwood, 2014; Qehaja et al., 2017). Despite tools being very much of the everyday lexicon of managerial life, managers are still

in need of tools to help them in business relationships, as pointed out by LiftCo's Director of Business Development.

One theoretical approach that has consistently emphasized the importance of business relationships and interaction with important counterparts is the ***Industrial Marketing and Purchasing*** (IMP) approach (Håkansson, 1982). In this approach, business relationships are not something firms can choose when and if to adopt. Rather, business relationships are considered essential resources (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Dubois and Håkansson, 2002; Håkansson et al., 2009). In the IMP approach, interaction is conceptualised to reside within business relationships and the world is full of day-to-day interactions that are of significance for a firm's effectiveness and efficiency (Håkansson 1982; Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2013). IMP studies have been devoted to understanding the patterns and underlying structures which guide managers in their interaction with others, shedding light on the variation in interactions and their effects for the relationship (Cantillon and Håkansson, 2009; Håkansson and Ford, 2016). For four decades, the IMP approach has focused distinctively and consistently on relationships and interactions (Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Håkansson and Snehota, 2002; Harrison, 2004; Cova et al., 2009; Axelsson, 2010; Cantù et al., 2013; Ford and Håkansson, 2013; Håkansson and Gadde, 2018).

Studies subscribing to the IMP approach have shown that there are often strategic implications from interactions in business relationships. In line with such findings, strategizing has emerged as a theme within the IMP research tradition (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989; Gadde et al., 2003; Holmen and Pedersen, 2003; Ritter et al., 2004; Baraldi et al., 2007; Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Harrison et al., 2010; Ritter and Andersen, 2014; Aaboen et al., 2013; Öberg et al., 2016). At first glance, the IMP approach to strategizing might seem to have some aspects in common with several approaches within the so-called embedded view of network level strategy (De Wit & Meyer, 2010; Venkatraman and Subramanian, 2006) where business is about joint value creation and bringing together firms towards a common goal (Greve et al., 2014; Kanter and Eccles, 1992; Gulati et al., 2000; Dyer and Singh, 1998; Moore, 1996; Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996). However, with careful examination, the IMP approach stands out with its distinctive focus in digging deeper into the complexities of business relationships.

A fundamental tenet in the IMP approach to strategizing is that it is through the continuous combining and recombining of existing resources that new resource dimensions are identified and further developed within business relationships (Gadde et al., 2003). Put

another way, the strategy of a company is based on its interactive behaviour with major counterparts (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989). While an embedded view of network level strategy usually concerns efforts by one actor to influence relationships with an outer environment, the IMP approach to strategizing defines strategic action as efforts of a firm to influence its position in the network of which it is part (Johanson and Mattson, 1992).

However, based on empirical studies, the IMP is considered more descriptive and explanatory than normative in generating insights for understanding the significance of business relationships for a firm's effectiveness and performance and for tackling the problems encountered in interaction with significant others. Therefore, while the research tradition of IMP is concerned with helping practitioners (Easton, 2000, Brennan and Turnbull, 2002, Håkansson and Ford, 2002, Håkansson and Ford, 2016), the managerial side is considered weaker (Baraldi et al., 2007; Möller 2013). Although tools are a significant part of managerial life (Rigby 1993, 1994, 2001; Clark, 1997; Frost, 2003; Gunn and Williams, 2007; Rigby and Bilodeau, 2007; Knott, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009), researchers within the IMP tradition have only paid tangential attention to tools (Ford and Håkansson, 2006b; Möller and Halinen, 1999; Leek et al., 2002, 2004; Baraldi 2008).

1.1 Motivation for the study

Strategy research has been challenged to focus on the real "things" of strategy, that is, the practices, the practitioners and the praxis of strategy (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Seeing strategizing as a "chronic feature of organizational life" has been a preoccupation in one of the schools of thought in strategy known as ***Strategy-as-Practice*** (SaP) (Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al., 2003). The concern of SaP is the work of strategizing in the day-to-day actions of practitioners and the actual activities that form the practice of the strategizing processes (Whittington 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

Tying together relationships and strategizing implies a lot of time is spent on interacting with counterparts. Strategizing studies using the IMP approach are also starting to welcome ideas that can further the understanding of the activities and practices involved in individual managers actually doing the "process of relating" (Baraldi et al., 2007). Considering IMP's strong empirically based research tradition (Håkansson and Gadde, 2018), it is not surprising that IMP strategizing studies have been inspired to embrace strategizing

from a practical viewpoint (Harrison, 2007; Harrison et al., 2010; La Rocca and Perna, 2014; Nyström et al., 2017).

Furthermore, when approaching strategizing from a practical viewpoint, one possibility is to regard practices as a set of tools (Rouleau, 2013; Golsorkhi et al., 2010). The term 'tools' can mean many things. On the one hand, and familiar to most management researchers, tools tend to connote stylized 'strategic management tools and techniques' (Rigby 2001; Clark, 1997; Gunn and Williams, 2007; Knott, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009). On the other hand, tools can be approached practically to direct research attention to how they are used (Whittington, 2004). In SaP, tool usage has been extended to that of strategy workshops and strategy consulting interventions, as well as of material artefacts such as spreadsheets and even the Power Point (Whittington et al., 2006; Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Kaplan, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

1.2 Focus of the study

Although tools are omnipresent in a manager's life (Rigby, 2001; Knott 2008; Gunn and Williams, 2007) and a much discussed theme in strategizing research generally (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Whittington 2008a, 2008b; Wright et al., 2012), tools have only received limited attention in the IMP approach to strategizing (Ford and Håkansson, 2006b; Möller and Halinen, 1999; Leek et al., 2002, 2004; Baraldi 2008).

These existing studies suggest that there might be some association between relationship complexity and the use and non-use of managerial tools (Möller and Halinen, 1999) and that there might be some form of relationship management system but of varying degrees of formality (Leek et al., 2002, 2004). Routines and ad hoc projects are discussed as managerial tools in IKEA's network (Baraldi, 2008). There are also signs hinting at the inadequacy of tools in the IMP tradition when Ford and Håkansson (2006, p. 255) remarked that today's managerial tools have been developed to work in a world that does not pay attention to network and interaction. Therefore, more needs to be done regarding tools in the IMP approach to strategizing. This thesis seeks to address the tools gap, or more aptly "emptiness", within the IMP approach to strategizing. That tools have only received limited attention in the IMP approach to strategizing is both a challenge and an opportunity in three respects.

Too little conceptual attention has been given to tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Strategizing is an emerging theme in IMP (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989; Gadde et al., 2003; Holmen and Pedersen, 2003; Ford and Mouzas, 2008; Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Wilkinson and Young, 2002; Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Awaleh, 2008; Harrison et al., 2010; Ritter and Andersen, 2014; Aaboen et al., 2013; Öberg et al., 2016). However, so far, there is no common conceptualization or agreement about how to understand strategizing from an IMP perspective (Zolkiewski et al., 2007). Furthermore, IMP researchers do not clearly signal the strategic content of interactions in business relationships (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002). From this angle, tools (or rather lack of them) becomes a research opportunity in the IMP approach to strategizing. Tools are helpful because they assist managers to improve the frame and structure used to shape the influx of information they face and to move beyond cognitive boundaries (Grant, 2008). In this way, tools may inspire the typical manager, who may otherwise tend to resort to implicit or experience-based knowledge (Gunn and Williams, 2007). The usage of available tools may also enhance a manager's analytical and diagnostic skills (Webster et al., 1989, Wright et al., 2012). As the IMP is considered more descriptive and explanatory than normative where its managerial side is probably less developed (Baraldi et al., 2007; Möller, 2013), that tools have not been in the limelight further exacerbate its weaker managerial side in articulating managerial recommendations.

Too little empirical attention has been given to tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. IMP comes from a rich empirical tradition. Despite the pervasiveness of tools in managerial life (Knott, 2008; Gunn and Williams, 2007; Rigby, 2001), tools remain very marginal in IMP research as empirical phenomena, and few IMP empirical studies have devoted attention to how tools are used when strategizing in business relationships. IMP researchers have called for paying closer attention to the day-to-day activities of relating which have strategic implications (Easton, 2000).Yet there is still little research about how strategizing is actually practiced in business relationships (Baraldi et al., 2007).

Too little attention has been given to managerial implications in the form of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Managers are still in need of more tools that guide the strategic thinking process and generate more strategic options to tackle the challenge of strategizing in business relationships and networks. This resonates with IMP researchers who are concerned with helping practitioners. This is a research opportunity as

IMP researchers are particularly poised to address practitioners' call for the need for state-of-the-art strategy tools that concern business relationships and networks.

1.3 Purpose of the thesis

In response to the problems and opportunities outlined, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a starting point to address 'strategy tools' conceptually and empirically within the IMP approach to strategizing. I further formulate two research questions for this thesis.

1.31 Research question #1

The IMP has many facets and shows different ones depending on the angle from which it is approached (Håkansson and Snehota, 2002) and taking a tool focus is one possibility. There has been speculations that there are strategizing concepts and techniques to apply in the IMP approach (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002). It seems that some tools for strategizing in business relationships have been proposed in the literature. If that is the case, research can identify them and possibly classify them to arrive at some conceptual understanding of 'strategy tools' within the IMP approach to strategizing. However, there has been no studies attempting to make an overview of them.

The thesis research question #1 is therefore formulated as follows:

Which types of tools for strategizing in business relationships have been conceptualized and discussed in the IMP literature?

This first research question provides an overview of the discussion of tools in IMP. As it stands, tools have never been put centre stage in IMP. In addition, as the literature relevant for the IMP approach to strategizing seems very difficult to attend to (Brennan et al., 2008, 2009; Easton et al., 2003), this research question presents itself as one possible way to systematise the IMP literature where it concerns tools relevant for strategizing in business relationships.

1.32 Research question #2

IMP is an empirically driven research tradition. While conceptual development on the IMP approach to strategizing is emerging, it could be supplemented by taking an empirical route to

explore the tools used by managers when strategizing in business relationships. SaP has made the position clear that tools are important practices that deserve our attention at the empirical level (Whittington 2003; Stenfors, 2007; Kapan and Jarzabkowski, 2006). However, there has been no studies attempting to empirically investigate tools for strategizing in business relationships.

The thesis research question #2 is therefore formulated as follows:

How do managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships?

The second research question allows empirical investigation that explicitly addresses how tools might play a role when strategizing in business relationships is considered as a day-to-day managerial activity. If we aim to expand our understanding of interaction by focusing the research effort on the day-to-day activities which have strategic implications, questioning if and how managers use tools in business relationships when they consider or interact with important customers and suppliers is a very relevant matter. If managers are found to use tools in business relationships, we can analyse the tool uses and complement existing theory with theory that distinguishes how tools play a role in strategizing in business relationships.

The answers to these two research questions in combination will not completely fill out the tools' gap in the IMP approach to strategizing but will at least start giving higher priority to tools in the research agenda. Addressing the two research questions in combination may lead to important theoretical implications for the IMP approach to strategizing as well as managerial implications that specify which tools can be used, and how they can be used to support strategizing in business relationships and networks.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of this cover paper and three independent papers and is structured as follows:

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical frames of reference for the study, which comprise the IMP approach to strategizing in business relationships and relevant literature from SaP tool studies for conceptualizing tools in IMP.

Chapter 3 of this thesis clarifies the research process of the study and the methodological choices I have made in conducting it. Although each independent paper contains its own brief methodological section, a more thorough discussion of the overall research process is found in this chapter.

Chapter 4 presents a summary of the three independent papers supporting this thesis, to point out what is in the papers that contribute to the discussion of the combined findings.

In Chapter 5, the combined findings of the three independent papers are discussed in order to let the insights come together into a coherent contribution.

Finally, based on the findings and discussion of the thesis, Chapter 6 outlines the overall contribution of the thesis, as well as the implications for researchers and practitioners. As a result of this thesis, I also suggest several avenues for further research in the topic of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

2. Theoretical frames of reference

As presented in Chapter 1, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a starting point to address 'strategy tools' conceptually and empirically within the IMP approach to strategizing. This chapter presents the theoretical frames of reference that have guided and inspired the study. By reviewing relevant literature, I explore the under-researched area of tools within the IMP approach to strategizing.

In section 2.1, I outline in brief the concepts of business relationships and interaction, on which studies subscribing to the IMP approach have shown that there are often strategic implications from interactions in business relationships. In section 2.2, I review relevant studies subscribing to the IMP approach that supports the conceptualization of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. In section 2.3, building on recent IMP strategizing studies that have been inspired to embrace strategizing from a practical viewpoint, I draw concepts and ideas from strategy tool studies within the Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) literature in order to open the research agenda for investigating how managers use tools for strategizing in business relationships. Although tools are omnipresent in a manager's life, tools have only received limited attention in the IMP approach to strategizing. In section 2.4, I justify the two thesis research questions and further outline the supporting papers' research questions, in line with how this thesis has been written as a compilation of articles and papers.

2.1 Business relationships and networks

The IMP is a broad and open research perspective which shares the understanding that interaction and business relationships constitute the basic phenomenon of the business landscape (Håkansson, 1982; Turnbull et al., 1996; Håkansson et al., 2009). The task on hand is not to provide a comprehensive presentation of interaction and business relationships, as it would be impossible given the scope of this thesis, but to introduce them and outline the most important aspects relevant for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

2.1.1 The meaning of relationship

The underlying assumption of the IMP approach is that firms often engage in close and long-term relationships with a set of important suppliers and customers (Håkansson, 1982; Ford et

al., 1998, 2003). Business relationships are not only resources in themselves, but are also channels to other resources (material and immaterial) that can be tied together across firm boundaries to create new resource combinations (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). IMP suggests that business relationships may be probed and analyzed deeply (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). In IMP, a business relationship is a multidimensional term incorporating economic, technical and social aspects and content (Dubois and Håkansson, 2002; Håkansson and Snehota, 2002).

At the most basic level, relationsips can be analyzed via their structural and process characteristics (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Structural characteristics comprise continuity, complexity, symmetry and informality (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Relationships are seen to be long term and stable. They are also complex due to the number, type and contact pattern of individuals involved in the relationships. The parties in a business relationship tend to have resources and capabilities that are relatively balanced, hence there is symmetry. Business relationships often show a low degree of formalization. In terms of structural characteristics, companies tend to be tied together by long-lasting, thick, relatively balanced and informal relationships.

Process characteristics encompass adaptation, cooperation and conflict, social exchange process and routinization (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Stemming from the need to coordinate activities, the adaptations on either side of the business relationship are often numerous and frequent. Both cooperation as well as conflict are inherent in business relationships. In fact, some amount of conflict might even be required to keep the relationship between two companies healthy, although a cooperative posture is necessary. Business relationships are based very much on social exchange processes, in which personal bonds, convictions and trust play an important role. Routines and rules of behaviour do emerge in the more important relationships that a company maintains with its customers and suppliers. In terms of process characteristics, companies tend to be characterized by continuous change as a consequence of interaction between the parties involved.

2.1.2 The meaning of interaction

In IMP, the relationship between buyer and seller is conceptualized not only as long term and close but also involving a complex pattern of interaction between and within each company (Håkansson, 1982). In other words, a relationship is often defined as a 'mutually oriented *interaction* between two reciprocally committed partners' (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, p.

25) and interaction is viewed as residing within business relationships (Håkansson, 1982). Building on this is that economic exchange in business markets is interactive, because exchanges occur in dyadic relationships between *active* actors. At the heart of IMP is the envisioning and conceptualization of this single but rather complex process that is ongoing all the time (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2013). The IMP takes the interactive features of business in practice as the norm and regards them as a complete phenomenon per se (Håkansson et al., 2009). Interaction has also been suggested to be perhaps the most important ingredient for industrial renewal, efficiency and innovation (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2013; Ford et al., 2010; Ford and Håkansson, 2006a).

The idea of interaction maintains that the process of business is one of interaction that takes place within business relationships between individually recognized (therefore full-faced instead of faceless) and interdependent actors. Interaction also infers that outcomes in business are the result of actions (or proposals) and reactions between counterparts. These actions and reactions occur in series and in parallel, and both are made in the light of each part's perceptions of the views and likely responses of the other, whether known or anticipated. Therefore, the idea of interaction implies that no action by an individual is either isolated or independent.

Furthermore, the boundary between the internal and the external environment of the firm is blurred. As posited by Araujo et al. (2003), IMP sees the boundaries of the firm by paying more attention to their bridging function and the interactive processes of relating to and negotiating with others. In other words, 'the drawing of boundaries is an interactive and negotiated process mediating a variety of internal and external relationships and involves more than establishing a difference between the inside and outside of the firm' (Araujo et al., 2003, p. 1257). Seen this way, the relationship and interaction play a very important role for positive economic outcomes and effects for not only the single firm, but even more in a collective way for network of companies.

2.1.3 Substance and function of the relationship

In the IMP approach, well-functioning and connected business relationships can further be analyzed via two additional dimensions, defined as the *substance* and *function* of the relationship (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). At the same time, the relationship and interaction cannot be understood in an isolated way without bringing in the interpretation of networks in the IMP.

The substance dimension regards what the relationship affects on the two sides of the dyad, where three different layers of substance can be identified (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). The three layers are also interconnected. First, there is an activity layer. A relationship is built up of activities that connect, more or less closely, various internal activities of the two parties. A relationship links activities. Second, there is a resource layer. As a relationship develops, it can connect various resource elements that are needed and controlled by the two companies. A relationship can tie resources together. Third, there is an actor layer. As a business relationship develops, actors become connected. Bonds between the actors are established which affect how the actors perceive, evaluate and treat each other. These three layers comprise the links connecting activities performed by two actors, the ties connecting various resource elements controlled by two actors, and the bonds connecting the perceptions and values of the two actors. Therefore, analysing business relationships (or the outcomes of an interaction process) can be described in terms of the three layers: actor bonds, activity links and resource ties (Ford et al., 2010). These three layers constitute the three central concepts in the broad analytical tripartite ARA (actor–resource–activity) framework (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

The function dimension regards the effects a relationship has for different actors or, put another way, how relationships can create benefits in terms of functions. Three different functions can also be distinguished when considering the effect a relationship has for different actors at three levels (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, p. 36). First, a relationship can provide positive effects for the dyad itself, seeing the two actors as a pair. Second, a relationship has a function for each of the two companies. In other words, it can provide positive effects individually for each of the two involved actors. Third, as relationships are connected, what is produced in a relationship can have effects on other relationships and thus on other companies than those directly involved. This brings the analysis into connections with third parties.

The interpretation of networks in IMP is based on the understanding that relationships play a central role in a collective way for networks of companies (Turnbull et al., 1996). Seen through the ARA framework, the three different functions of the relationship can be systematically accounted for when analysing a relationship between two companies. They can be termed first-, second- and third-order functions, referring to the dyad, company and the network levels respectively.

To present the full scheme of analysis concerning ARA framework is outside the scope of this thesis. It is important to reiterate what is outlined here are only aspects of it. As

this study started out being concerned with the relationship column (i.e. first order), I highlight this column in **Figure 1** for the sake of clarity.

	Company *(second order)*	Relationship *(first order)*	Network *(third order)*
Activities	Activity structure	Activity links	Activity pattern
Actors	Organizational structure	Actor bonds	Web of actors
Resources	Resource collection	Resource ties	Resource constellation
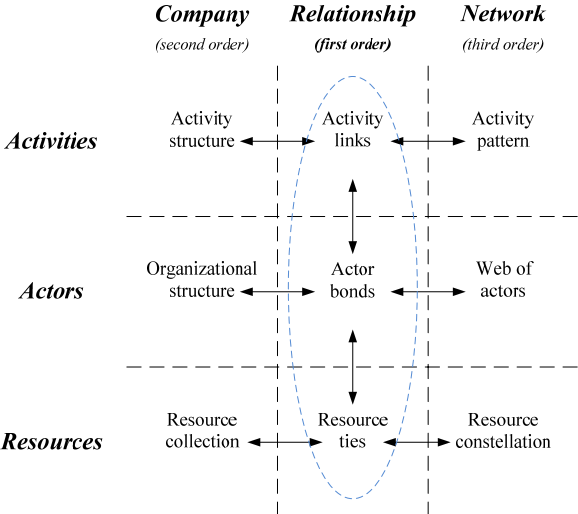
Figure 1 Scheme of analysis of development effects of business relationships
From Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, p. 45

The relationship column of the ARA framework is important in this study for two reasons. First, it foregrounds that important relationships are objects of interest. It draws attention to bonds, links and ties as empirical entities that can be analysed very systematically and rigorously (Axelsson, 2010; Cova et al., 2015). The concept of activity links, actor bonds and resource ties can be useful in the empirical analysis of tool uses. Second, the ARA framework shows the relationship level is intricately connected to company level and the network level systematically and succinctly.

For this study, although I started out mainly concerned with the relationship column (i.e. first order), as the reader shall find out more in the findings and discussion, the three layers of substance and the three functions direct research attention to recognize not only that every firm operates within a complex industrial network, but also that business relationships constitute a way to connect the external and internal networks (Ritter et al., 2004).

2.1.4 Summing up business relationships and networks for this study

With four decades of research, there has been many developments in IMP but it is fair to say that the definitions of interaction and the relationship, as well as the ARA framework have remained relatively stable and resilient, weathering the test of time and undaunted by managerial trends and fashion (Axelsson 2010; Zolkiewski and Turnbull, 2006; Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2013; Cova et al., 2015; Håkansson and Gadde, 2018).

Studies subscribing to the IMP approach have shown that there are often strategic implications from interactions in business relationships. A single firm's strategizing cannot be properly understood without considering its counterparts in the network of which it is part and how it interacts with these counterparts. In line with such findings, strategizing has emerged as a theme within the IMP research tradition (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989, 2006; Möller and Halinen, 1999; Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Tikkanen and Halinen, 2003; Gadde et al., 2003; Holmen and Pedersen, 2003; Ritter et al., 2004; Baraldi et al., 2007; Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Baraldi, 2008; Ford and Mouzas, 2008; Awaleh, 2008; Harrison et al., 2010, Ritter and Andersen, 2014; Aaboen et al., 2013; Öberg et al., 2016).

2.2 Strategizing in business relationships and networks

The focus of this section is to review relevant studies subscribing to the IMP approach that supports the conceptualization of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Strategizing in business relationships and networks has often been discussed in terms of three sets of paradoxes and their accompanying strategizing issues (Gadde et al., 2003; Håkansson et al., 2009), as well as the so-called 'scope of action' within the strategizing task. Furthermore, strategizing from the IMP approach is also being discussed in terms of strategizing activities involved in individual managers actually doing the "process of relating" (Baraldi et al., 2007, p. 888).

2.2.1 The three paradoxes

I shall briefly outline each of the three paradoxes and strategizing issues in pairs. The first paradox points out the interconnectedness of networks and distils the idea that companies within a network are not free to act according to their own aims or to circumstances as they arise. Close relationships are at the heart of a company's survival, but they in turn restrict its ability to change. Therefore, *the first strategizing issue for a company is to identify and*

establish appropriate levels of involvement in relationships with individual partners (Gadde et al., 2003, p. 358).

The second paradox tries to capture the notion of interdependence that a company's relationships are the outcomes of its strategy and its actions. No company is self-sufficient enough and is dependent on the skills, resources, actions and intentions of counterparts. As a consequence, *the second strategizing issue for a company is about balancing the interplay between influencing others and being influenced.* (Gadde et al., 2003, p. 358).

The third paradox centres on the idea that companies often do their best to control the network surrounding them and to manage relationships so that their own objectives are achieved. However, while the ambition to control is one of the key forces in developing networks, it is also detrimental to innovativeness. Accordingly, *the third strategizing issue for a company is to identify adequate ambitions regarding control* (Gadde et al., 2003, p. 358).

2.2.2 The scope of action within the strategizing task

Strategizing in business relationships and networks is sceptical about the degree of control over resources a firm can achieve, as many of the important resources available to the firm are under the direct control of other actors and can only be 'controlled' through the medium of interaction, relationships and networks (Ford and Håkansson, 2006b). When strategizing in business relationships and networks, a company's characteristics are the outcome of its interactions and relationships, while its future is dependent on what happens in those relationships. The strategizing task is about 'identifying the scope of action within *existing* and *potential* relationships and about operating effectively with others within the internal and external constraints that limit that scope' (Håkansson and Ford, 2002, p. 137). Therefore, an active debate within IMP has been over whether firms are able to 'manage networks' or rather can only 'manage in networks' (Ritter et al., 2004; Golfetto et al., 2007). It might seem that no company manages it (the relationship or the network) although all try to manage in it (Gadde et al., 2003; Håkansson and Ford, 2002).

When strategizing in business relationships and networks, the strategy process is 'interactive, evolutionary and responsive' (Håkansson and Ford, 2002, p. 137), rather than independently developed and implemented. Central to this is the notion that firms do not have complete independence of action, and that, instead of 'management of acting', it is more 'management of *reacting*' (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989, 2006). An integral part to strategizing is flexibility and responsiveness to other parties (Axelsson and Easton, 1992). In

other words, as interaction consists of a series of actions and counteractions, the 'problem' becomes how to activate and motivate important business counterparts on a continuous basis, how to take part in development processes without any final state, and how to become an intelligent interaction partner where experimentation is important in order to develop efficient ways to interact (Håkansson and Snehota, 2002). What is salient in this problem-driven articulation is that there is always a significant other or others to consider.

Strategizing in business relationships can therefore be conceptualised in a dualistic perspective, akin to two sides of the same coin and comprising proactive and reactive elements: initiating and responding, acting and reacting, leading and following, influencing and being influenced, planning and coping, strategizing and improvising, forcing and adapting (Möller and Halinen, 1999; Wilkinson and Young, 2002; Ritter et al., 2004; Ritter and Ford, 2004).

In IMP, a company's strategizing is interactive and contingent on the actions and reactions of others (Harrison et al., 2010). Nevertheless, a firm still needs to act, to try to control and influence, to suggest ideas and initiatives, to set limits and seek opportunities (Harrison et al., 2010), suggesting a certain degree of deliberateness. Strategizing in business relationships and networks can be interpreted as the conscious attempts of an actor to change or develop the process of interaction or the structure of relationships in which it is directly or indirectly involved. The idea of a strategist in business relationship and networks is a modest one (Ford and Mouzas, 2008, p. 76). The strategist is laboriously aware of the interconnectedness and the interdependence among relationships and the limited scope of action in relationships as well as the need to follow as well as lead, to work collectively as well as individually in the day-to-day activity of strategizing (Ford and Mouzas, 2008). As suggested by Baraldi et al., (2007), the IMP approach to strategizing creatively marries the rational planning approach with the emergence of strategy from interactions in each relationship and at network level.

The apparent degree of deliberateness or intent in strategizing in business relationships and networks is also suggesting that the existence of deliberate strategizing activities, such as creation of new relationships, or the creation of new network positions, to name a few (Baraldi et al., 2007). Given IMP's rich empirical roots and strong empirically based research tradition, strategizing from the IMP approach is also being discussed in terms of strategizing activities involved in individual managers actually doing the "process of relating" (Baraldi et al., 2007).

This is also in line with the view of strategizing seen as a "chronic feature of organizational life" (Johnson et al., 2003, p. 5), and in this regard, the IMP offers some clear suggestions to the various strategizing activities relevant for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

2.2.3 Strategizing activities

Several type of strategizing activities can be considered as central to strategizing in business relationships and networks. One typology differentiates among positioning, mobilizing and visioning approaches (Tikkanen and Halinen, 2003; Möller and Halinen, 1999). Adaptations within relationships has also been identified as one type of strategizing activity (Harrison and Prenkert, 2009; Harrison et al., 2010; Aaboen et al., 2013). Other studies have emphasized appropriate levels of involvement (Harrison et al., 2010; Holmen et al., 2003). For the purposes of this thesis, I will outline positioning, adaptations and involving as the most relevant activities when strategizing in business relationships and networks. While positioning, adaptations and involving are not an exhaustive list of possible activities for strategizing in business relationships and networks, they shed some light on the complexities and challenges encountered when strategizing in business relationships and how IMP tries to deal with them.

2.2.3.1 Network positioning

This category is about trying to manoeuvre for a favourable position for the company in the business network. In IMP, related to the concept of network positioning is the notion of strategic action (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). The notion of strategic action in IMP encompasses action and reaction in a general sense (Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Ford and Mouzas, 2013), and refers more specifically to efforts by actors to influence (change or preserve) their position(s) in networks (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992).

Network position refers to the role that the actors have in the network (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). A distinction can also be made between an extended or a limited definition of positions (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). Whereas the extended definition refers to the role the actors have in the production system, the limited definition refers to the position of an actor as a matter of the exchange relationships of the actor and the identities of the counterparts in those relationships (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992, 1985; Håkansson and Johanson, 1988). The former can be understood as a 'macroposition' which reflects the role of

the organization in its own network, while the latter can be understood as a 'microposition' which is the bargaining position of the organization vis-à-vis one specific counterpart (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989). In this sense, positioning can be further sub-divided into macro-positioning and micro-positioning.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that network position is a relative concept in IMP. Because no two parties' positions are alike, network position is subjective, and it exists only if perceived and recognized by the parties in the context. While subtle, it is important to recognize that the potential to influence others is a function of a company's network position (Gadde et al., 2003).

2.2.3.2 Adaptations

This adaptations as strategizing category emphasizes how "…ongoing adaptations to a specific customer or supplier may have significant consequences for strategy" (Brennan and Canning, 2002; Harrison and Prenkert, 2009). Adaptation activities, which are specific responses of one form for another and entail processes of making changes based on interaction, have also been specified as comprising both inter-firm processes and intra-firm processes (Canning and Hanmer-Lloyd 2002; Brennan and Canning, 2002; Brennan and Turnbull, 1999).

This aspect also points out that when strategizing in business relationships, the internal network is not to be relegated to lesser importance than the external network (Zolkiewski et al., 2007). The firm is embedded in a network of ongoing relationships, comprising internal and external, among people, departments, functional units that form the basis of its ability to develop and implement its strategies (Ritter et al., 2004). Strategizing in business relationships also entail that the firm must learn to manage the interactions that take place within their relationships both internally and externally (Batt and Purchase, 2004). Supporting this is also the recent IMP studies which emphasize that business actors often have to seek internal routines and processes to handle the variety and scale of external variation (Öberg, 2010; Andersen et al., 2013; Håkansson and Ford, 2016).

2.2.3.3 Involving

Stemming from the first paradox and strategizing issue outlined earlier, this strategizing activity concerns involving relevant counterparts and involving them to a relevant extent. Several studies in IMP have shed light on handling this strategizing issue. Holmen et al.,

(2003) tries to emphasize whether or not the counterpart(s) were actively involved in framing efforts. In doing so, the study suggests varying degrees of 'interactive-ness' or interactive modes, which might be appropriate at different times, befitting the firm's context. Harrison et al. (2010) distinguish at least four forms with different types of external counterparts from fully detached modes to various degrees of "interactive-ness". While both strategizing based on network pictures and strategizing in the presence of a network audience can be attributed to more detached modes, strategizing among deliberate equals and imaginative equals refer to more interactive modes. To elaborate, strategizing based on network pictures denotes an absence of direct interaction, while strategizing in the presence of a network audience denotes little room for counterpart(s) to bring up visions and plans *despite counterpart(s) being present*. In contrast, strategizing among deliberate equals and imaginative equals denotes being open to counterparts' visions and plans, viewing them as valuable contributors and even relying on their imaginative, "out-of-the-box" thinking capabilities as drivers for strategizing initiatives (Harrison et al., 2010). Involving as a strategizing activity can be considered one of the most concrete way of shifting the scope of strategy from that of pursing victory over others to somehow 'making it together' with customers and suppliers, distributors and development partners.

2.2.4 Embracing strategizing in business relationships and networks from a practical viewpoint

Strategizing in business relationships and networks is a cumbersome task due to the parallel activities of other actors and because a network looks very different from the perspective of the different companies involved. At the same time, the existence of strategizing activities also buttresses the idea that strategizing in business relationships and networks entail a certain degree of deliberateness, because each company must seek to strategize *in* a network, within a complex pattern of action and reaction to events and to the actions and reactions of others, each with their own motivations, resources and understandings. Positioning, adaptations and involving are some possible deliberate activities for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

Seeing strategizing as an activity or more aptly a "chronic feature of organizational life" has been a preoccupation in one of the schools of thought in strategy known as Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) (Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). The basic assumption of the SaP perspective is to regard strategy as something firms do

instead of something that firms have (Johnson et al., 2003). Strategizing research has been challenged to focus on the real "things" of strategy, that is, the practices including tools, the practitioners and the praxis of strategy (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). The concern of SaP is the work of strategizing in the day-to-day actions of practitioners and the actual activities that form the practice of the strategizing processes (Whittington 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

In line with the recent research interest on strategy which has taken a practical stance (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007) focusing on who to involve in strategy, what to do in strategizing activity, and which strategizing methodologies to use in order to guide this activity, IMP strategizing studies have also started to draw ideas from SaP (Harrison, 2007; Harrison and Prenkert, 2009; Harrison et al., 2010; La Rocca and Perna, 2014; Nyström et al., 2017). However, as explained in Chapter 1, tools have only received limited attention in the IMP approach to strategizing (Ford and Håkansson, 2006b; Möller and Halinen, 1999; Leek et al., 2002, 2004; Baraldi, 2008).

Strategy tools have not received much attention in the IMP approach to strategizing for at least two reasons. Firstly, IMP has probably shied away from the concept of strategy tools, with its deep-seated overtones of prescription and certainty. By the nature of how the literature has developed, the concept of strategy tools (in the form of strategic management tools and techniques) has been closely associated with mainstream strategic management (Bowman et al., 2002; Ghemawat, 2002; Grant, 2010). Tools are abound stemming from the rational planning and positioning schools (Ansoff, 1965; Porter, 1980; Chandler, 1962) which emphasize the external market or product position and a unidirectional view of planning and value creation, from which the IMP approach is distanced. Secondly, IMP has likely been unenthusiastic about the concept of strategy tools because the word 'strategy' has strong connotations of free will and self-control. Strategy tools seems incompatible with strategizing in business relationships which is emergent and contingent on others. Strategy tools and tool uses seem contrary to the underlying logic of the IMP approach to strategizing, and therefore little attention has been paid to conceive the usefulness of the strategy tool concept, neither theoretically nor empirically.

Because IMP strategizing studies have started to embrace strategizing from a practical viewpoint, drawing ideas from SaP is not new in IMP. Drawing ideas from outside is encouraged in the IMP research tradition (Golfetto et al., 2007; Baraldi et al., 2007; Håkansson and Gadde, 2018; De Boer & Andersen, 2016; Öberg 2016) to avoid proceeding in

parallel with other developments within the fields of strategic management with little cross-fertilisation (Bizzi and Langley, 2012; Johnsen et al., 2016). What is novel in this study is to draw ideas and concepts from strategy tool studies more deeply to address the tools gap in the IMP approach to strategizing. The term 'strategy tools' generally covers the range of concepts, methods, models, techniques, frameworks and methodologies that structure or influence strategic activity (Knott, 2008).

"Going outside" is further justified in this study on two counts. First, tools have received limited conceptual attention in the IMP approach to strategizing. Until this study, there has been no research to conceptualize tools in a systematic way in the IMP approach to strategizing. There are no definitions or vocabulary concerning 'strategy tools' in IMP. Second, tools have received limited empirical attention in the IMP approach to strategizing. Together with strategy praxis and strategy practitioners, strategy practices constitute one of the three central concepts within SaP (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). To embrace strategizing from a practical viewpoint, one must be concerned about the real "things" of strategy, that is, the practices including tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. While tools have become a staple of management over the past decades, there are no empirical handles to approach investigation of tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks in IMP. Therefore, this study draws ideas and concepts from a stream of strategy tool studies in SaP (Kaplan, 2011; Stenfors, 2007; Whittington et al., 2006; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014; Knott, 2008; Kapan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008a, 2008b; Wright et al., 2012).

2.3 Conceptualizing strategy tools and investigating tool uses

The emergence of SaP perspective highlighted the need to focus on the practical things of strategy, that is, the practitioners, the practices and the praxis (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006). SaP has made the position clear that tools are important practices that deserve our attention at the empirical level (Whittington, 2006; Whittington, 2003).

In this section, I start by explaining my choice in regarding practices as a set of tools and in focusing on the concept of strategy tools rather than strategy practices. In SaP studies, tools can be distinguished as being researcher-derived or empirically observed (Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008b; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). From a practice viewpoint,

strategy tool uses have also been characterized by a rich vocabulary (Stenfors, 2007; Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009; Wright et al., 2012; Knott, 2006; Kaplan, 2011).

2.3.1 Regarding practices as a set of tools

There are at least five views of practice that exists within SaP to uncover the practices or micro-activities involved in strategizing (Rouleau, 2013). These five views do overlap and while all represent possible ways to study the "doing" of strategy, they lead to different distinct focus.

In approaching my topic, I have chosen to stay away from three of them: practice as knowledge (Mantere, 2005), practices as organizational resources (Regnér, 2008), as well as practice as global discourse (Whittington, 2011; Whittington et al., 2003). Practice as knowledge emphasizes the social and tacit knowledge that managers or others use when they are making strategy and typically involves ethnographic research methods (Huff et al., 2010). This is not really in line with the emphasis in my topic. Practices as organizational resources involves a micro perspective of organizational processes, routines and capabilities and is consider quite marginal in SaP research. I therefore did not see it as a tower of strength to draw ideas from. Practice as global discourse can be very interesting for orienting research towards professionalization of strategic management and the industry it has become. With signs of more open forms of strategy-making in practice today, compared to the 1950s-1970s, this can be of relevance from an IMP perspective given the notion of inclusion increasingly extends to more variety of actors, internally and externally (Whittington, 2011; Whittington, 2006; Whittington et al., 2003). However, I considered it an area to work on after tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks have been addressed. Distancing from these three, the two remaining views of practice are practices as a set of tools, and practice as managerial action.

Regarding the fourth, practice as managerial action (Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2007) is concerned with the action through which managers recurrently accomplish their strategy work. For example, Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) identified seven strategizing activities (spanning executing, initiating, coordinating, supporting, collaborating and shaping context) carried out at different organizational levels. This view emphasizes the role of the individual and its conscious and purposeful action related to strategy-making. Studying managerial

practices is argued to lead to a better view of the skills and abilities that managers at different levels draw upon when doing strategy, and the recommended research methods involve interviews and shadowing diaries.

As strategizing in business relationships can be conceptualised in a dualistic perspective, comprising proactive and reactive elements that creatively marries the rational planning approach with the emergence of strategy from interactions in each relationship and at network level **(**Baraldi et al., 2007; Harrison et al., 2010; Ritter et al., 2004), regarding practice as managerial action is potentially possible to approach strategizing in business relationships. However, there might be significant challenges regarding research methods as activities for strategizing in business relationships and networks is difficult to get close to in a direct way empirically.

Although practice as managerial action can also be relevant to investigating tools in strategizing in business relationships and networks, I have primarily chosen to regard practices as a set of tools considering the purpose of this thesis - to provide a starting point to address 'strategy tools' conceptually and empirically within the IMP approach to strategizing**.**

Regarding practices as a set of tools is therefore the viewpoint taken to enrich the understanding of strategic activities concerning the day-to-day actions of practitioners, where tools can be viewed as assisting with part of the activity. Seen this way, the properties of a tool are open to interpretation according to the uses to which they are put (Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Kaplan, 2011; Whittington et al., 2006; Stenfors, 2007). These studies view strategy tools as assisting with part of the activity of strategizing. Regarding practices as a set of tools therefore suggests that practitioners might simply adopt existing tools and artfefacts, adapting them to situational demands, with little concern for their theoretical origins or tool blueprint, a process known as bricolage (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014). Put differently, managers seldom use tools in the ways intended by the tool developers because they have the need to adapt and use the parts of the tools that best serve the requirements of the situation they face (Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Stenfors, 2007). Through such bricolage, tools may also be significantly altered, generating hybrid forms. Bricolage does not constitute deviance or ignorance about using a tool 'properly', as it may involve high levels of practitioner skills and experience to deploy tools in practically situated ways. Bricolage is not rare or unusual behaviour but part of everyday creativity and reflexivity of practice (Schön, 1983).

2.3.2 Strategy tools vs. strategy practices

Regarding practices as a set of tools, it might have been possible to pursue the study focusing on the concept of 'strategy practices' instead of 'strategy tools'. But I chose a 'strategy tools' for several reasons.

First, tools are important because they can assist managers to improve the frame and structure used to shape the influx of information they face and to move beyond cognitive boundaries (Grant, 2008). Strategy tools can act as a guide to thinking and a starting point for structuring activity (Whittington, 2006; Whittington et al., 2006). In this way, tools may inspire the typical manager, who may otherwise tend to resort to implicit or experience-based knowledge (Gunn and Williams, 2007). The usage of available tools may also enhance a manager's analytical and diagnostic skills (Webster et al., 1989, Wright et al., 2012).

Second, SaP has made the position clear that tools are important practices that deserve our attention at the empirical level since they have a relevant role in companies' strategy work (Whittington, 2003; Whittington, 2006). Strategy tools are visible, explicit and observable and therefore becomes a feasible research endeavour (Whittington, 2003). Researchers can attempt to investigate how tools are used, with the aim of uncovering the micro activities involved in strategizing (Whittington, 2006). Tools indicate the motivation of managers when using them (Gunns and Williams, 2007).

Third, tools is a narrower concept than practices. Whereas strategy tools typically refer to concepts, models, techniques, frameworks and methodologies that structure or influence strategic activity (Rigby, 2001; Knott, 2008), strategy practices mean shared understandings, cultural rules, languages and procedures, and can refer to shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using 'things' in the work of strategy (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). In SaP, tools of strategy, as they are being called, are regarded as a subset of strategy practices.

Fourth, emphasizing strategy tools under the broader terminology of strategy practices unavoidably foregrounds an important and often forgotten audience, practitioners themselves. The imagery of "use" stands out better in tools than practices. Tools have been extending our reach since the dawn of mankind (McCarty and McQuaid, 2014). They exist so that we may make things work, see better, gather information, investigate new frontiers, and interact more fluidly, to name a few. Tools are intended to bring about change. The inclination is to think of tools being helpful.

Lastly, explaining and describing uses of tools by practitioners may lead to a more open and neutral way of discussing strategizing issues and hence may open a path to better understanding strategizing in interactive contexts. Explaining and describing the use of a tool or a combination of tools can lead to some degree of examining the shared experience of using a tool from both sides of the relationship without necessarily having access to informants at the other end of the dyad. Given that accessing both sides of the relationship remains a constant challenge in IMP research, the choice of focusing on the concept of 'strategy tools' over 'strategy practices' seems sensible for this study.

The choice to focus on the concept of 'strategy tools' over 'strategy practices' was also made with the awareness of the increasing breakdown of barriers between strategy tools and strategy practices. In SaP, the interpretation of strategy tools becomes progressively augmented from classic apparatus or formal tools of strategy such as the Five Forces or the Balanced Scorecard into daily 'stuff' used in the work of strategizing (Whittington, 2004, 2006; Whittington et al., 2006). Strategy tools can extend to strategy seminars, away-days or strategy workshops to deliberate on the longer-term direction of the firm (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2010). The broadening of the interpretation of strategy tools is also evident in one definition of strategy tools. Strategy tools refer a large, heterogeneous group of products that structure or influence strategic activity that can be helpful in some situations (Stenfors, 2007). They include the formal and informal. In Stenfors' (2007) definition, strategy tools can be conceptual, process related or physical. Conceptual tools are those employed in strategy tool design, such as portfolio analysis or procedures of Porterian analysis. Process-related tools can, for instance, be more event-like initiatives such as strategy workshops or seminars. Physical tools can encompass management information systems, checklists, documents and anything tangible, such as PowerPoint (Kaplan, 2011) or even pictures, maps, data packs, spreadsheets and graphs (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

In approaching my study, I take into account the SaP interpretation of what strategy tools can be, being conceptual, process related or physical, as in the Stenfors (2007)'s definition, including workshops (Hodgkinson et al., 2006) and physical tools such as databases (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). I also take into account not just their formal aspects (for example, not directing, but coordinating), but also their potential to incorporate a broad constituency in the strategy development process.

The choice of 'strategy tools' over 'strategy practices' offers a very useful point of departure to open the research agenda due to the possibility to distinguish between empirically observed and researcher-derived strategy tools (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006).

2.3.3 Discerning researcher-derived and empirically observed strategy tools

In SaP, a distinction can be made between researcher-derived and empirically observed strategy tools (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008a, 2008b).

Researcher-derived strategy tools are important due to the cognitive boundaries of the typical strategy practitioner, who tend to resort to implicit and experience-based knowledge (Grant, 2008). Researcher-derived strategy tools can challenge the dubious "common sense" with which managers approach strategic problems. Tools that are firmly based on theory are likely to be more selective and effective in allowing managers to identify the most critical elements in a situation and to recognise how these elements relate to one another. Therefore the availability of researcher-derived tools are important to allow managers to come to terms with reality more "insightfully, incisively and economically" (Grant, 2008, p. 277). From the theory end, strategy tools can be conceptualized to arise from bodies of theory as knowledge artefacts, with their own architecture and blueprint design (Worren et al., 2002). Some find their way to managers in practice (Whittington et al., 2003). These artefacts can be considered actionable forms of knowledge that strategy research provides to practice (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006).

Empirically observed strategy tools are important because strategy tools are often used in ways for which they were not designed (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). Empirically observed strategy tools provide a means of uncovering the micro activities involved in strategizing through tool uses in practice (Whittington, 2006). From the empirical end, strategy tools can be conceptualized as strategy tools-in-use (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014). SaP offers a strategy tools-in-use framework for examining the ways that the affordances of strategy tools and the agency of the strategy makers interact to shape how and when tools are selected and applied (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014, p. 539).

Another insight from tool studies in SaP brings us up to date on addressing tools in strategizing in business relationships. Researcher-derived and empirically observed strategy

tools exist over a spectrum, in that one cannot always clearly distinguish between these two ends (Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008b). Furthermore, in the spectrum spanning researcher-derived and empirically observed strategy tools, theoretical strategy knowledge goes through a process of dissociation comprising two phases (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006, p. 362). In such a process, strategy tools typically go through the first phase of dissociation, which involves simplifying theoretical knowledge into knowledge artefacts that may be used in practice, a phase with which many researchers are familiar. Researcher-derived tools tend to be parsimonious with theoretical rigour because there is a preference for narrative and visual knowledge among practitioners (Worren et al., 2002). This is followed by the second phase of dissociation, which occurs when these knowledge artefacts meet the bricolage inherent in the situated practice of strategy, in the day-to-day uses and actions of practitioners. Practitioners use knowledge artefacts which may not be directly associated with their theoretical provenance (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006).

Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2006) point out that many researchers seem wedded to seeing the two dissociation phases proceeding linearly in a forward manner. They further point out that the under-researched area is to see these two dissociation phases in the reverse direction. Recognizing these two phases of dissociation inherent in strategy tools can be very useful to understand what can be considered the 'feedback loop' of strategy tools (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). In the language of strategy tools, getting into this feedback loop has been specified to be very useful for informing strategy tool design, dissemination and critique (Johnson et al., 2007). Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2006) therefore suggests that strategy tools can be viewed on the one hand, in light of how they evolve in their concepts and frameworks linked to the desire to answer certain specific strategy questions (i.e. researcher-derived), and on the other hand, how they evolve from practice (i.e. empirically observed).

That the concept of strategy tools can be differentiated as being researcher-derived or empirically observed provides one way to open up the research agenda for tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Researcher-derived strategy tools are those that have been suggested for use for strategizing in business relationships and networks; they may be inspired by empirical inquiries but have not yet been applied in practice, nor have they been found or observed in practice. In contrast, empirically observed strategy tools are those that managers actually use to facilitate their work for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

Because strategy tools have received little empirical attention in IMP, this study also needs some vocabulary concerning strategy tool uses empirically. This is also where a stream of SaP strategy tool studies (Stenfors, 2007; Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009; Wright et al., 2012) can provide some ideas and concepts.

2.3.4 Strategy tool uses in empirical studies

Unlike the traditional approach of questioning the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of strategy tools, which rests narrowly on the assumption that strategy tools ought to be used in systematic and instrumental ways, SaP strategy tool studies have been focused on the way strategy tools are being used in explorative and experimental ways (Kaplan, 2011; Stenfors, 2007; Whittington et al., 2006; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009; Knott, 2006; Kapan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Wright et al., 2012).

First, strategy tool uses have been linked to serious play with 'strategy toys' that help to maintain steadiness in exploration in strategy work (Stenfors, 2007). In a slight twist of definition, 'strategy toys' are strategy tools which facilitate explorative strategy work, where 'serious play' facilitates discovery, innovation, flexibility, experimentation, risk taking, variety and search (Stenfors, 2007). It is worth pointing out that strategy tools developed specifically to enhance creativity may not necessarily be used as strategy toys. In other words, it is the exploratory manner in which strategy toys are used that differentiates them from other strategy tools, not their prescribed use.

Second is that strategy tools can be conceptualized as symbolic resources that create spaces for debate and dialogue and as starting points and facilitators of a process, rather than being the 'answer', in a complex system of social interactions (Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006). The emphasis becomes how strategy tools are engaged by different actors to communicate meaning, to delineate interests and viewpoints, and to enhance the position of the actor, given their symbolic role. In another study attempting to address tool application systematically, at least five generic modes of tool application can be conceptualized, from analytical, dynamic, metaphorical, facilitative and interventionist (Knott 2006). Analysis and forecasting is increasingly displaced by coordination and communication, for example in the prevalence of strategy workshopping as a dynamic and creative process (Whittington et al., 2006).

Third, strategy tools can also assume the status of a 'boundary object', structuring information and providing grounds for interaction around a common tool that is easily recognizable by participants in a strategy task (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009). The idea of 'boundary objects' is applied to strategy tools as they can be attributed with meanings and actions which enable and constrain knowledge sharing across boundaries (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009). In the study to take a deeper look into how PowerPoint is mobilized in strategy making, Kaplan (2011) puts forth the idea that PowerPoint enabled the difficult task of collaborating as well as drawing boundaries around the scope of strategy, where collaborating and drawing boundaries are two sides of the same coin.

The vocabulary of strategy tool uses does not mean that strategy tools are not used systematically, but that strategy tool uses can be seen in a cumulative way, including experimentally. In fact, whether as toys, symbolic resources or boundary objects, strategy tools are being used in *combination*, as suggested by Wright et al. (2012). This is because practitioners tend to have a need for a variety of tools to provide different perspectives, peripheral vision and connected thinking, and simultaneously to help to differentiate and integrate complex issues and guide the thinking process (Wright et al., 2012).

Analyzing strategy tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks can draw on these insights, in particular how strategy tools can be used not only in systematic ways, but also experimentally, and build on these distinctions further.

2.3.5 Summing up the conceptualization of strategy tools in this thesis

In this section, I have explained approaching strategizing in business relationships and networks from a practical viewpoint with a focus on tools. In such an effort, I have given reasons for the choice of regarding practice as a set of tools, as well as the choice of the concept of 'strategy tools' over 'strategy practices'. I have also reviewed relevant SaP tool studies to differentiate between researcher-derived and empirically observed strategy tools and captured some vocabulary that can be helpful to analyse tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

2.4 Opening the research agenda: Tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks

Although tools have been accorded the centre stage in SaP tool studies (Whittington, 2006; Whittington et al., 2006; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006; Stenfors, 2007; Wright et al., 2012; Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009; Kaplan, 2011; Knott, 2006; Wright et al., 2012), tools have only received limited attention in the IMP approach to strategizing (Ford and Håkansson, 2006b; Möller and Halinen, 1999; Leek et al., 2002, 2004; Baraldi, 2008).

There has been too little conceptual and empirical attention given to tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. This is both a problem and an opportunity from a practical and theoretical point of view for tools in strategizing in business relationships and networks (see **Figure 2**). In this section, I justify the two thesis research questions and further outline the supporting papers' research questions, in line with how this thesis has been written as a compilation of articles and papers.
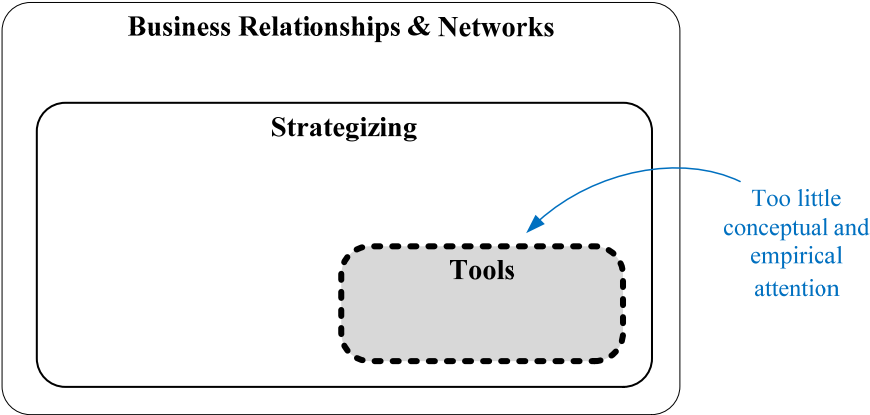
Figure 2 Research agenda: Tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks

In IMP, the most important strategic resource of the firm is its business relationships, and therefore its strategy will largely be formed in relation to and in interaction with relevant others. One of the overarching goals of IMP research is to help managers recognize the paradoxes in strategizing in business relationships and networks and to advocate flexibility

while not undermining the use of management analysis and planning techniques (Möller and Halinen, 1999; Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Wilkinson and Young, 2002; Ritter et al., 2004). Despite the desire of many IMP researchers wanting to help practitioners (Brennan and Turnbull, 2000), IMP research have generated low managerial impact (Baraldi et al., 2007; Möller, 2013). Strategy is implicit in IMP (Baraldi et al., 2007). With the exception of a few focused early IMP studies (Cunningham, 1982; Cunningham and Homse, 1982a, 1982b), many do not clearly signal the 'strategic content' of their work explicitly, steering clear of being normative (Easton, 2000). We may have been so preoccupied with other research priorities given the enormity of the research agenda and neglected the importance of making our research output more practitioner-friendly (Easton, 2000).

There have been conjectures that some tools for strategizing in business relationships exist in the literature (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002). If that is the case, research can identify them and possibly classify them to arrive at some conceptual understanding of 'strategy tools' in the IMP approach to strategizing. However, there has been no studies attempting to make an overview of them. To open up the research agenda, thesis research question #1 has been formulated as follows:

> Thesis research question #1:
> *Which types of tools for strategizing in business relationships have been conceptualized and discussed in the IMP literature?*

Under this thesis research question, the study can be further specified focusing on researcher-derived tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. The research angle would be to try and discern the plurality of concepts, methods and frameworks relevant for strategizing in business relationships and networks, which have been discussed in the literature. It is also an effort to re-examine the dispersed and difficult-to-attend-to literature systematically, with a focus on strategy tools. The outcome of such a research effort might be to capture the plurality of tools in IMP, so that there is a possibility to group them along particular dimensions, to find some ways of characterizing them, to arrive at some sort of conceptualization of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Paper 1 explores this further with the following research sub-questions:

Paper 1 research sub-questions:

- *What can be possible dimensions for characterizing relationship and networking strategy tools?*
- *Which relationship and networking strategy tools have been suggested for use for strategizing in business relationships and networks?*
- *How are relationship and networking strategy tools positioned along the possible dimensions?*

Concomitantly, in the footsteps of the empirical tradition of IMP, the study can take an empirical route to explore the tools used by managers when strategizing in business relationships. Although tools are omnipresent in a manager's life (Ghemawat, 2002; Grant, 2010; De Wit and Meyer, 2010; Evans, 2013; McKinsey, 2000) and tool usage is very much discussed in research generally (Rigby 1993, 1994, 2001; Clark, 1997; Frost, 2003; Gunn and Williams, 2007; Rigby and Bilodeau, 2007; Knott, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Qehaja et al., 2017), there has been no studies attempting to empirically investigate tools for strategizing in business relationships. Complementary to the first thesis research question, thesis research question #2 has been formulated as follows:

Thesis research question #2:

How do managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships?

Such a research angle takes inspiration from SaP regarding practices as a set of tools and also take into account a more open interpretation of what strategy tools can be, be it conceptual, process related or physical, as in the Stenfors (2007)'s definition. Therefore, such empirically observed tools might or might not be IMP-related. With the empirical study concerned with the day-to-day actions of practitioners in their interactions in business relationships (Easton, 2000; Baraldi et al., 2007), it was found to be possible to further embark on two trajectories when exploring this empirically.

In one trajectory, the study can be directed to take a more rigorous approach relying on the dimensions of the ARA framework to understand strategy tool uses in terms of relationship layers. In other words, the idea is to put identified strategy tools under scrutiny by pinpointing how they affect ties, links and bonds. Such studies have not been done before in IMP. Approaching the study in this way also opens up the possibility of interrogating the

empirical material to foreground the notion of strategic action which was prominent in earlier IMP studies (Johanson & Mattsson, 1992). Paper 2 explores this further with these research sub-questions:

> Paper 2 research sub-questions:
> - *How are strategy tools used to affect the layers of substance of business relationships?*
> - *What role do strategy tools have for the firm's strategic action?*

In the other trajectory, the study can be led to scrutinize strategy tool uses in terms of level of involvement. This is particularly interesting because a central but often neglected aspect of an interactive approach to strategizing is arguably the interplay between interorganizational relationships and intraorganizational, cross-departmental relationships (Ritter et al., 2004; Ritter and Gemunden, 2003). The emphasis on the importance of the internal network in an interactive approach to strategizing has received limited attention (Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Hillebrand and Biemans, 2003; Pardo et al., 2011). The speculation is that investigations in the direction of strategy tool uses in terms of level of involvement in business relationships may shed some light on the interplay between inter-organizational relationships and intra-organizational relationships. Paper 3 explores this further with these research sub-questions:

> Paper 3 research sub-questions:
> - *How are strategy tools used to organize and influence interactions in business relationships?*
> - *How can strategy tool uses in interactions in business relationships be categorised?*

Tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks is a research area that deserves higher priority. The answers to the paper research questions specified on two fronts provide a starting point to attend to 'strategy tools' conceptually and empirically within the IMP approach to strategizing and can lead to some theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

So far, in how the two main thesis research questions and the paper research sub-questions have been presented (for the sake of clarity and readability), it seems as if the study has been designed this way right from the start. As any researcher will know, this is not true. Informed by the IMP approach to strategizing and supported by selected strategy tool concepts, several important choices have had to be made with regard to how the study has been planned and designed, including twists and turns along the way, the process of which I will detail in the next chapter.

3. Methodology

This chapter clarifies the research process of the study and the unique methodological choices that I have made. There are many possible ways to devise a master plan to design research and to collect and organize data. In this chapter, the reader will get a better picture of the iterations that happened in the study and the way in which the combination of concerns regarding method, theory and empirical phenomenon evolved in the process. As admonished by Dubois and Gibbert (2010), the three elements of and interplay between theory, empirical phenomenon and method are not always linear. However, the task at hand is to try to convey the research process as best as I can.

This chapter is organized as follows. Section 3.1 describes the choices made in the research design. While Section 3.2 provides an overview of the empirical material, Section 3.3 tries to convey how the study was 'cased', in accordance with the logic of abductive research. In Section 3.4, I describe some techniques I have incorporated to establish the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, in Section 3.5, I outline what I think have been the challenges, weaknesses and strengths of the study.

3.1 Research design: Motivating choices

A number of choices, influenced by the theoretical frames of reference and regarding practices as a set of tools (Golsorkhi et al., 2010; Rouleau, 2013; Whittington et al., 2006; Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006), were made as part of the research strategy from the literature review approach to the choice of case study with multiple cases and interviews as the primary method of data collection.

3.1.1 Why manual qualitative content analysis?

Researchers do not enter a field without some theory-driven specifications and expectations (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In management research, theory is important because it helps to guide the research questions we ask and to give sense to our findings (Van de Ven, 1989). My interest in strategy tools and more generally in the field of strategic management led me to follow interesting debates in the shift in the nature of strategy work such as deliberate emergence (Grant, 2003) and the relational view of strategy (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Kanter and Eccles, 1992; Gulati et al., 2000; Foss, 1999; Løwendahl and Revang, 1998;

Venkatraman and Subramanian, 2006), with growing attentiveness to the relationship and network perspectives (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989; Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Gadde et al., 2003).

For the literature review, I began with a few orienting concepts from theory. Blumer (1954) suggests that concepts should be used in a sensible way to create a reference and to function as a guideline when entering the empirical world. In contrast with definitive concepts, which provide prescriptions of what to see, orienting concepts are more aptly 'sensitizing concepts', which merely suggest a direction in which to look (Blumer, 1954). An indispensable link to sensitizing concepts is literature review, which has been defined as 'the use of ideas in the literature to justify the particular approach to the topic, the selection of methods, and demonstration that this research contributes something new' (Hart, 1998).

For this study, ideas from strategizing in business relationships and networks were used as 'sensitizing concepts'. To approach the thesis research question #1, I embarked on manual qualitative content analysis of relevant strategizing studies in IMP with an eye to identifying, extracting and coding possible 'strategy tools' inductively. This is also in line with previous studies attempting to map the knowledge created by the IMP group (Brennan et al., 2009; Easton et al., 2003). More details on the manual qualitative content analysis can be found in the methodology section of Paper 1.

3.1.2 Why case study?

The method chosen for the empirical work is case study. Case study is generally used for investigating a contemporary social phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2009). According to von Krogh et al. (2012), a phenomenon is something (such as an interesting fact or event) that can be observed and studied and that typically is unusual or difficult to understand or explain fully.

This choice was not trivial from a methodological point of view when trying to stay open-minded about the research process. Within the Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) research perspective, strategy tool usage studies have spanned quantitative approaches such as surveys (Wright et al., 2012) to ethnographic observations (Kaplan, 2011), and the broadening of research methods has been encouraged, such as practitioners' self-investigation including diaries and logs, and incorporating strategists and other organizational insiders as collaborators (Huff et al., 2010; Balogun et al., 2003). At the same time, while case research is common in IMP studies, there have also been calls to use action research to increase the

applicability of IMP research (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002; Abrahamsen et al., 2012, 2016; Lenney et al., 2004).

I have several rationales for considering the case study method. First, case research in IMP is unique because of the nature of the phenomenon under study. The main objects of interest are business relationships, which are difficult to access and complex in nature. It would not be appropriate to draw out tool use insights from practitioners via surveys or questionnaires that offer little depth on the business relationships in focus. Second, considering that this research topic is relatively exploratory, it is not sensible to jump straight into methods such as action research, as action research is a methodology in itself (Lenney et al., 2004) and time is required to acquire the necessary skills to execute the methodology properly.

Several further justifications hold for using a case study research design in this study. Case studies are useful for research where further understanding is needed about a phenomenon and where existing theory seems to be inadequate (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies are suited for *how and why* questions in unexplored research areas for theory development (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Case studies provide a stronger base for theory development, as they can accommodate a rich variety of data sources, including interviews, archival data, survey data, ethnographies and observations (Yin, 2009). Case studies allow the researcher the opportunity to tease out and disentangle a complex set of factors and relationships, albeit in one or a small number of instances (Easton, 2010). Finally, case studies, while remaining well under a minority percentage in the scientific field of management and business studies, can be viewed as a tool to make discoveries, at the top of the pyramid, leaving quantitative studies to conduct the more mundane job of verifying theories (Runfola et al., 2017).

To approach the thesis research question #2, I considered it best to approach the study using case study methods, in accordance with how case research has been defined in the research tradition as '*a research method that involves investigating one or a small number of social entities or situations about which empirical material is collected using multiple sources of data ... through an iterative research process*' (Easton, 2010).

The suitability of applying case study research is therefore strongly supported by the theoretical perspective of this thesis. Case research has played an important role in the development of theory on inter-organizational relationships, interaction and industrial

networks, and it has been the research method preferred by many researchers in this area
(Aune, 2013; Holmen, 2002; Baraldi, 2003; Ingemansson, 2010; Forsström, 2005).

Even though case studies may be suitable for the present study, there remains a gamut
of approaches possible for case research in IMP, each with its specific links to theory and
empirical phenomena (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010). The next sub-section explains why I have
chosen multiple cases as the best approach for my study.

3.1.3 Why multiple cases?

The choice of multiple cases was not to be taken lightly. Given the complexity of business
relationships, the natural choice would be to go deeper into one case instead of multiple cases.
This is also evident in many IMP studies focused on single case studies (Dubois and Araujo,
2004; Holmen, 2002; Baraldi, 2003). Furthermore, IMP researchers have admonished that
multiple cases may not be better than a single case (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

However, given that thesis research question #2 is exploratory, and that practitioners
are expected to use a combination of tools (Wright et al., 2012; Rigby and Bilodeau, 2007;
Rigby, 1993), the empirical interest in investigating how practitioners use tools for
strategizing in business relationships must be coupled with some variation in tool uses. Given
the time limitation of this work as a PhD study, it was not practical to consider capturing long
periods constituting longitudinal studies. The priority would be to go for some sort of
variation for subsequent analysis. Multiple cases are well suited to generating the variation
needed to understand this phenomenon (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Besides, SaP
scholars have also argued that focusing on strategy tool uses necessitates moving away from
rich single case studies towards 'developing equally rich but also methodologically robust
comparisons of doing strategy in multiple case studies' (Jarzabkowski, 2004, pp. 551–552).

The decision was made to go for multiple cases at the beginning of the study in order
to generate variety and contrast. In other words, with a multiple case study design, variation
can pertain to the different combinations of strategy tool uses in customer and supplier
perspectives, the different relationships and interaction types. A multiple case design was thus
chosen due to its potential to yield empirical material of a variegated nature, rather than based
on replication logic.

Figure 3 provides a snapshot of the empirical design that was drawn up at the
beginning of the study to investigate how managers might use strategy tools in their most
important customer and supplier relationships. This empirical design evolved at the same time

as I was conducting the literature review and preparing to 'go out to the field'. Approaching tool uses from customer and supplier perspectives would generate variety and would also be practical, as potential informants would be rooted mainly in one of these two functions.
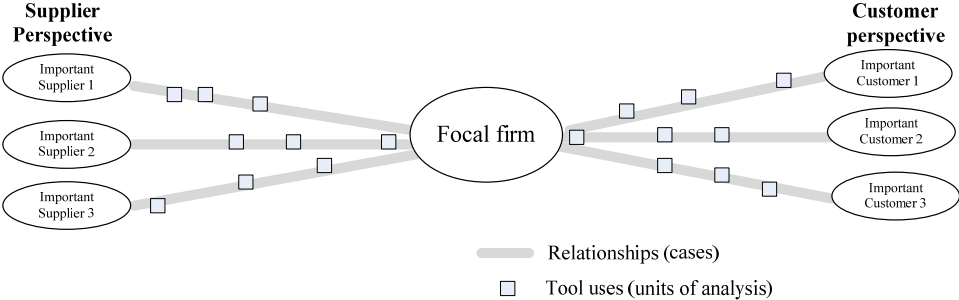
When conducting multiple case studies, the choice of a set of cases, and what these should be cases of, has to be made at the beginning of the study and cannot emerge as an outcome of the research process, as it can for single case designs (Dubois and Araujo, 2007). When one conducts a study with multiple cases, it is fair to say that the cases are determined at the outset to enable some form of case comparison later (Aaboen et al., 2012). For this study, while it was clear that the set of cases would comprise business relationships, there is still the additional challenge of how many relationships should be studied and which ones, and whether a holistic or embedded design would be more suitable.

3.1.4 Multiple case embedded design

A multiple case study design can be holistic or embedded. Whereas holistic designs entail a single unit of analysis, embedded designs involve multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2009).

This study can be described as a multiple case study embedded (in terms of 'structure') with multiple units of analysis, in order to put it into perspective with case study designs (Yin, 2009). However, the process of arriving at such a design is more a continuous process rather than a discrete event at the beginning of the study. It is part and parcel of handling the challenges of case research. The final matching of the empirical and theoretical domains is usually the most difficult to account for and make transparent to the reader (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010), I have therefore devoted Section 3.3 to further elaborate on this

process. To complete the picture of the motivating choices made in the research strategy, the following will explain why interviews were the primary method of data collection in this study.

3.1.5 Why interviews as the primary method of data collection?

Case studies can be supported by six sources of evidence, including documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artefacts (Yin, 2009). The interview inquiry has been widely used in the IMP tradition to understand the complexity of relationships. I also took note that qualitative data collection methods in the form of interviews have already emerged in strategy tool studies (Knott, 2008; Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Whittington et al., 2006) in addition to the quantitative studies in the form of surveys. Adding participant observations would be very interesting to investigate tool uses, but negotiation for access is difficult and they are often part of a more longitudinal study. When considering SaP's recommendations to broaden research methods, practitioners' self-investigation with diaries and logs might be useful as part of the data collection method within the case study approach, but coordinating them is difficult and might be considered for a more longitudinal study.

The primary method of data collection adopted in this study is the qualitative research interview method (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). As I outlined in Chapter 2, the concept of strategy tools is broad and far from being definitive (Stenfors, 2007), and tools for strategizing in business relationships have relatively been under-explored. Therefore, the interview method was most suited to capture the description and explanation of tool uses and the complexity of the relationship(s) from knowledgeable informants. A face-to-face interview with the informant was also necessary to obtain understanding of the context of the relationships (historical and others) or to be able to clarify aspects of the tool uses.

If possible to be used in conjunction with site visits, face-to-face interview with the informant might also allow first-hand understanding of the possible tools being used, such as being shown by the informant the physical setting where customer seminars are typically being held, or how a physical tool such as a supplier scorecard actually works. For example, one such opportunity emerged when one informant spontaneously related how he handled his top supplier representatives in the presence of his management team, by pressing a button and having the meeting room screen populate this supplier's performance rating and trend curves online in real time. This was possible as the interview was conducted onsite in the same

meeting room where he had interacted with the supplier. It was a moment of using a tangible object (Huff et al., 2010) – the informant working with his tool in front of me – to elicit more descriptions of the strategizing task and tool uses in the relationship context.

Using the qualitative research interview method is also connected to the theoretical perspective adopted in this thesis. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggested two metaphors for the interview method as a knowledge-producing activity: that of the interviewer as a miner and as a traveller. In the *miner metaphor*, knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. The knowledge remains constant and is waiting in the subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. In contrast, in the *traveller metaphor*, the traveller explores the many domains of the country, as unknown terrain or with maps, roaming freely around the territory. A traveller's epistemology will lead to a view of the conversation as a construction site of knowledge (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 301). For the traveller, the journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveller might change as well. This study adopts the qualitative research interview method from the viewpoint of an interviewer-traveller. The approach is try and encourage informants to allow the stories of a variety of tool uses to unfold given the challenging tasks of strategizing in business relationships and networks.

For the preparation of the interviews, I consulted the seven stages of an interview investigation (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 19). The first four stages encompassed thematizing, designing, interviewing and transcribing, which characterized the more formal aspects of my interview investigations compared to the last three stages of analysing, verifying and reporting. The reader can have a better idea of how the interviews were set up from the template of the interview guide provided in the Appendix. Using the semi-structured type of interviewing (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130), the interview questions were designed to obtain an understanding of the focal firm's most important relationships and to pinpoint possible aspects of using tools when strategizing in business relationships.

The last three stages of an interview investigation are interdependent and non-linear, and for my study they are better conveyed by way of how the empirical material and theoretical concepts are intertwined, to be described in Section 3.3. The next section provides an overview of the empirical material, including the development of the set of cases and the units of analysis to contribute to the study.

3.2 Overview of empirical material

To provide the reader with a better picture of the empirical material with which I have worked, this section provides a brief description of each focal firm, an overview of the interviews conducted and the most important relationships for each focal firm, so that the reader is better able to appreciate the development of the set of cases (relationships) and units of analysis (tool uses).

3.2.1 Brief description of focal firms

Given the empirical interest, possible research sites were industrial companies with good potential to provide sufficient access in order to be able to study tool uses in deep and long-term business relationships. Three focal firms emerged as case sites for the study: ConstructionCo, ContractorCo and LiftCo (see **Table 1**). They are from different but not too drastically dissimilar industrial contexts to allow for variation in relationship types yet analysis of important and complex relationships.

Table 1 Overview of focal firms

Focal firm	Industrial context	Description of department/business unit where business relationships were studied
ConstructionCo	Construction; advanced offshore engineering	Civil engineering and construction – public infrastructure and residential apartment blocks
LiftCo	Oil and gas	Manufacturing and assembling components of lifting and handling systems, including cranes and winch systems
ContractorCo	Oil and gas	Maintenance, modifications and operational services and solutions for extending the lifetime of oil and gas fields

ConstructionCo operates within advanced offshore engineering, infrastructure and construction. Within the sub-division specializing in constructing public infrastructure (such as highways and bridges, municipal schools and hospitals) and residential apartment blocks, its main customers are public entities such as the county authority and road authority, as well as builders of residential homes. At the point when the interviews were being conducted, ConstructionCo described itself as quickly internationalizing and embarking on a strategic initiative to shift to providing more value-added consulting engineering services locally, with the aim of transferring more fabrication to other countries with lower labour costs. This

strategic initiative was described as affecting its network of local suppliers and international suppliers.

LiftCo is a fully owned subsidiary of a worldwide leader in the design, manufacture and sale of equipment and components for oil and gas drilling and production. LiftCo operates within a sub-segment of the subsidiary responsible for manufacturing and assembling components of lifting and handling systems. These include cranes and winch systems for offshore construction, drilling and production. LiftCo is especially mindful of maintaining its reputation as an international supplier of innovative, high-technology solutions. At the time of the interviews, the pendulum was changing direction within the cyclical oil and gas industry towards niche and experienced operators.

ContractorCo is a global provider of products, systems and services to the oil and gas industry. Within the business unit responsible for maintenance, modifications and operational services and solutions for extending the lifetime of oil and gas fields, its customers are international, national and independent oil and gas companies around the globe, but its main customer is a national oil company. ContractorCo's ambition is to remain a 'first-division' supplier (with the reputation of being reliable though costly) and it does not want to risk being relegated to a 'second-division' supplier to its main customer. Adherence to high quality and safety standards has taken on a new sense of importance and urgency in the aftermath of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010.

3.2.2 Overview of interviews, informants and secondary material

In the empirical design, the selected informants had a working, if not extensive, knowledge of the most important relationships. As mentioned earlier, from the standpoint of the focal firms, both the supplier and customer perspectives were sought in order to generate a variety of cases to investigate a variety of tool uses (see **Table 2**).

For the customer side, in terms of job responsibility and experience, the informants ranged from middle managers to senior managers. For the supplier side, the range turned out to be wider, from the production manager and purchaser on the shop floor to senior managers. One of the procurement managers specialized in international procurement. This study also involved pilot interviews with Firm S, which provides manufacturing tools and machining solutions. Due to business reasons where one of the studied relationships carried enormous strategic implications, Firm S preferred to withdraw from the study, but is accounted for, since it served as an initial pilot interview through which the interview guide and approach

were developed, adjusted and improved. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 informants in 2013. All the informants resided at one end of the dyad.

Table 2 Overview of informants and interviews conducted

Firm	Role of informant	#Interviews	Interview (minutes)	
			1st interview	2nd interview
Supplier perspective				
Firm S	Production Manager	1	75	
ConstructionCo	Department Manager – Procurement	2	100	75
	International Purchasing Manager	2	120	165
LiftCo	Purchaser – Fabrication	1	60	–
ContractorCo	VP, Strategic Sourcing	2	105	30
Customer perspective				
Firm S	Manager, Sales & Market Support	1	65	
ConstructionCo	Dept. Manager – Sales & Market	1	65	–
LiftCo	Area Manager	2	75	90
	Director, Business Development	2	90	30
ContractorCo	VP – Strategy & Business Development	1	120	–
	Total	**15**		

I asked for 60 minutes of each interviewee's time, but the interviews averaged 90 minutes, beginning with informants replying to prepared questions and leading to more open discussion. The interviews were conducted in English, which the informants spoke fluently. Where informants felt led to use Norwegian phrases to offer a better description, I was at ease in knowing enough Norwegian to understand what they were trying to convey. For selected informants, it was possible to schedule a second interview to gain a better understanding of the tools that were used (for example, by having a first-hand look at the physical system or the locality).

Each interview was digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by me using both the digital recorder and my additional handwritten notes. The completed interview transcripts were sent to the informants for verification. The verbatim linguistic style of the transcript was time consuming, but prove to provide the most flexibility for the subsequent analysis focusing on tool uses and the contexts of the business relationships.

In addition to the formal interview method as the primary method of data collection, this study also relied on secondary material. For some of the interviews, it was possible to be

allowed a first-hand view of some of the physical tools, such as the department's supplier and customer databases, and documents which were available on the informant's laptop computers. For some informants, it was also possible to visit the production facilities, test beds and physical premises to have a better understanding of products, strategy meetings and event initiatives mentioned by the informants. In addition to the interviews, document studies in the form of publicly available reports on the three focal firms and their industries, including articles in the business press, newspapers, press releases and information from other types of organization, such as INTSOK (Norwegian Oil and Gas Partners) and the Federation of Norwegian Construction Industries (BNL), were also consulted.

3.2.3 Selecting the cases (relationships)

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), what is termed empirical material exists in many transitional research products and there can be at least three cuts of it. Apart from *raw data*, a distinction can also be made between *data reduction and analysis products* and *data reconstruction and synthesis products*.

There are many ways to reduce and analyse the raw data of interview transcripts and documents, and this was a challenge in this study. The sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) enabled me to look at the raw data from different angles. Conversely, the empirical material also led me to search for additional literature in particular directions in order to organize and structure the data. As mentioned earlier, it was clear that the set of cases would comprise business relationships. However, there is still the additional challenge of how many relationships should be studied and which ones. Seven relationships that did not allow for in-depth analysis in terms of structural and process characteristics were excluded (see ☒ in **Table 3**).

Table 3 Overview of most important business relationships for each focal firm

	Focal firm	Relationship with	Description	Perspective	Excluded/ Remarks
1.	ConstructionCo	PlumbCo	Supplier of plumbing services	Supplier	
2.		ConcreteCo	Supplier of cement, concrete	Supplier	
3.		ElectricCo	Supplier of electrical services	Supplier	
4.		PrefabCo	Supplier of prefabricated concrete elements	Supplier	☒

	Focal firm	Relationship with	Description	Perspective	Excluded/ Remarks
5.		**FacadeCo**	Supplier of façade systems	Supplier	☒
6.		**TecCo**	Supplier of technical installations	Supplier	
7.		**PublicCo1**	Regional public roads administration	Customer	☒
8.		**PublicCo 2**	Regional county authority	Customer	☒
9.		**StaffCo**	Supplier of contract employees	Supplier	
10.		**ChemCo**	Supplier of specialized chemical cleaning and pressure testing	Supplier	
11.		**CanopyCo**	Supplier of insulation, scaffolding and painting supplies and services	Supplier	
12.	**ContractorCo**	**PipesCo**	Supplier of pipes and pipe fittings	Supplier	Also potential relationships with PipesAlt1Co and PipesAlt2Co
13.		**PolarisOilCo**	International oil and gas company headquartered in Scandinavia	Customer	
14.		**HeliosOilCo**	International oil and gas company headquartered in Northern Europe	Customer	
15.		**EagleOilCo**	International oil and gas company headquartered in the US	Customer	
16.		**IntUnit1**		Supplier	☒
17.		**IntUnit2**		Supplier	☒
18.		**SigmaShipyardCo**	Major shipbuilder in Asia	Customer	Also indirect relationship with DrillCo
19.		**OmegaDrillCo**	Owner and operator of drilling units with global headquarters in Scandinavia	Customer	
20.	**LiftCo**	**LambdaOilCo**	Fully integrated oil and gas company in South America	Customer	☒
21.		**AlphaDrillCo**	Owner and operator of advanced fleets in the offshore drilling industry	Customer	
22.		**BetaOilCo**	International energy company headquartered in Scandinavia	Customer	
23.		**ZetaShipyardCo**	Major shipbuilding company in Asia	Customer	

On the supplier side of ConstructionCo, a supplier of prefabricated concrete elements and a supplier of façade systems were excluded even though they were important. Although deep relationships with public customers are possible, the two most important customers which are public organizations were excluded on the customer side of ConstructionCo. Likewise, on the supplier side of LiftCo, the two most important suppliers which are internal business units in Norway and in Korea were excluded (even though sometimes such relationships are studied in the IMP). On the customer side of LiftCo, an important relationship with a fully integrated oil and gas company was also excluded. As it happened, the informants here did not lead me in a direction that allows for rigorous analysis even though they were important relationships.

Handling of the empirical material is a continuous process. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), as a transitional research product, data reduction and analysis products include condensed notes, unitized information and summaries. The following two sub-sections try to provide a glimpse into how the data reduction and analysis products looked during the research process. What constitutes data reconstruction and synthesis products is described later in Section 3.3.

3.2.4 Cases

A selection of 16 business relationships makes up the potential cases in the empirical material. The cases that have been selected were those where the tool uses for strategizing in business relationships have emerged as particularly relevant (see next section). Each the 16 relationships (cases) constitutes part of the data reduction and analysis products. It is debatable whether 16 relationships constitute an appropriate number of cases for this study. My approach has been to be mindful of, but staying open to, what would be considered representative and deemed satisfactory as part of my theory development strategy. On the one hand, excluding the seven relationships has been part of this strategy. On the other, using some relationships more extensively than others when presenting the empirical material in Papers 2 and 3, depending on the research focus, has also been part of this strategy.

3.2.5 Units of analysis

Whereas the 16 cases comprise relationships that can be analysed with rigour, the units of analysis involve tools that were used for strategizing. Relying on SaP's interpretation of strategy tools as well as strategy tool uses, the possible tools were discerned from the empirical material and analysed during the research process.

In the initial stages of data reduction, strategy tools present themselves as overlapping, iterative and non-sequential practices that resist systematic categorization. One challenge is to determine which ones to include (and exclude). I addressed this through an iterative process of revisiting the empirical material and searching the literature relevant for the IMP approach to strategizing and selected strategy tool studies. Although analysing strategy tool uses is quite established in SaP studies, analysing tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks is a novel situation.

Table 4 presents the selection of the 20 tools uncovered in the empirical material that constitute units of analysis in the study. These are arranged by supplier perspective and customer perspective down the y-axis. Across the x-axis are the 16 business relationships (also arranged by supplier perspective and customer perspective). From the empirical material, tool uses can pertain to different aspects such as actively in use, deliberately not used, to be in development or an emerging practice.

Table 4 Overview of potential cases and units of analysis for the study

		Supplier perspective								Customer perspective							
		ConstructionCo				ContractorCo				LiftCo							
		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.
	CASES: Relationships / UNITS OF ANALYSIS: Relationship and networking strategy tools	PlumbCo	ConcreteCo	ElectricCo	TecCo	StaffCo	ChemCo	CanopyCo	PipesCo	PolarisOilCo	HeliosOilCo	EagleOilCo	SigmaShipyardCo	OmegaDrillCo	AlphaDrillCo	BetaOilCo	ZetaShipyardCo
1.	Framework agreements	✗	✓	✗	⧗												
a)	Exclusivity					✓											
b)	Parallel frame agreements								✓								
c)	Enterprise-type contracts						✓										
d)	Under 'contract regime' of customer							✓									
2.	Procurement process templates		✓														
3.	Spend data harvest		✓						✓								
4.	Supplier scorecards/trend curves		⧗		⧗				✓								
5.	Supplier base/supplier classification	✓	✓		⧗	✓	✓	✓	✓								
6.	Procurement manager forums					✓	✓	✓	✓								
7.	'Key supplier management'	✓		✓	⧗	⧗	⧗	⧗	⧗								
8.	Onsite factory visits				✓												
9.	HSE days					✓	✓	✓	✓								
10.	Supplier reviews								✓								
11.	Qualification in proprietary databases									✓	✓						
12.	Communication matrices									✗							
13.	Tender tracking templates									✓	✓	✓					
14.	'Area of focus' templates									✓	✓	✓					
15.	Customer portfolio thinking									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16.	Peripheral sales databases									⧗	⧗	⧗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17.	Staff training and education												✓	✓			
18.	'Key account management'									✗	⧗		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19.	In-house seminars														✓		
20.	Conferences												✓	✓			

Note:
✓ Described by informant to be actively in use
✗ Described by informant to be deliberately not used
⧗ Described by informant to be in development/an emerging practice

As outlined earlier, this study can be described as a multiple case study embedded with multiple units of analysis, to put it in perspective with case study designs (Yin, 2009). However, that was in terms of the 'structure' of the case study design. Beyond raw data, the challenge in the research process is to transform the data reduction and analysis products (which at one point appeared as **Table 4**) into what is termed data reconstruction and synthesis products, which the next section will try to convey.

3.3 Systematic combining

There tend to be two main approaches for developing theory: the deductive and the inductive approaches. Both are very much influenced by the theoretical perspective adopted and the nature of the research. Whereas deduction is concerned with developing propositions from current theory and making them testable in the real world, inductive approaches rely on grounded theory, where theory is systematically generated from data (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

At this point, it is worthwhile making a distinction between theory generation and theory development. The latter implies refinement of existing theories rather than inventing new ones that embody the former. However, there is also a third way, where theoretical frameworks evolve simultaneously and interactively with empirical observations and the analysis. This approach, called abduction, has been recognized by Dubois and Gadde (2002) as 'systematic combining' of theoretical and empirical findings, enabling the researcher to move back and forth between the two throughout the research process. This section will try to convey how the various theoretical concepts and the handling and presentation of the empirical material are intertwined and how the study was 'cased'.

3.3.1 Abductive in the form of multiple cases

Case studies have been described as providing opportunities to confront theory with empirical data in an evolving fashion (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010). For this study, the abductive approach provides the most truthful reflection of the research process. Even though this study has a multiple case design, the use of systematic combining is most suited to explaining the analytical aspects of the research process, beyond determining the 'structure' of the cases at the beginning of the study, for the following reasons.

Firstly, the IMP approach to strategizing has informed the study in the way that theoretical concepts guided what to look for in the empirical world. My empirical study departed from the literature review, where studies in the IMP approach to strategizing were systematically reviewed to consider what tools might look like in the literature and how managers might use them for strategizing in business relationships.

Secondly, during analysis, the interview transcripts were sifted through for condensation through active writing of case summaries. Many themes emerged as possible ideas to be further explored, and not all with absolute certainty. It was discovered that tool

uses can be viewed in very imaginative ways for strategizing in business relationships. It was also discovered that the ARA model could be taken in more deeply as I went back and forth between the conceptual framework that was suggested and the empirical material. In this trajectory, it emerged that selected tool uses can be subject to further scrutiny in conjunction with a deeper analysis of relationship layers. Gradually, the ARA model began to serve as a powerful device to allow reading of the empirical material. More theory was sought as soon as the ways in which tool uses can affect links, ties and bonds became apparent, and this focus was reported in Paper 2. This was not anticipated at the beginning of the study.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, I started out mainly concerned with the relationship column of the ARA model – in other words, the dyadic functions of tool uses – in managing the scope of my study. This is not to say that the other dimensions are not important, they were just bracketed in the background in order to manage the scope of my study. Subsequently, it was found that limiting myself to the relationship column became problematic. Led by the empirical material, I soon found a way to place more equal weight on the three layers and three functions, and this focus was reported in Paper 3. This continuous back-and-forth movement in the research process can be described as assimilating theoretical concepts, but also discarding ideas that no longer work.

Thirdly, the process also entailed discovering new dimensions of the research problem. As put forth by Dubois and Gadde (2002), the abductive approach is fruitful if the researcher's objective is to discover new things. Parallel findings in the empirical world of the tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and the search for complementary theoretical ideas within the IMP perspective allow pinpointing of new dimensions of the research problem. The literature was again extensively consulted (such as Hillebrand and Biemans, 2003; Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Håkansson and Ford, 2016) in order to refine the research questions in Paper 3. That tool uses can explain aspects of how the business relationship is a way to connect the external and internal networks became clearer beyond the initial conceptualization of thesis research question #2. Again, this was not anticipated at the beginning of the study.

In sum, this study in the form of multiple cases has captured a fraction of the empirical reality of how managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships, and efforts have been made to match the best possible theory to explain it. While acknowledging that theoretical assumptions are vital starting points, the empirical material served as a partner for critical dialogue, as a source of inspiration and as a guide and ultimate arbitrator. By

permitting revisits to both the theoretical and empirical domains, and consequently allowing for discovery of new dimensions of the research problem, I was able to employ an abductive approach using the advantage of the flexibility of the case method, in the form of multiple cases.

So far, I have downplayed the critical role played by the research network of which I have become part during this study. My involvement in the research network with like-minded colleagues and scholars has influenced the research process in terms of fine-tuning my research questions, consulting additional literature and operationalizing the methodology. I will revisit this point when coming to evaluating the credibility criterion concerning the trustworthiness of the study in Section 3.4.

The rest of this section aims to provide the reader with a better picture of the casing process and how the study was cased in Papers 2 and 3.

3.3.2 Casing

Intricately linked to the systematic combining process is the process of casing, which is a methodological step deemed appropriate to convey the process of the research. Casing is typically viewed as a methodological tactic that occurs especially at the beginning and at the end (Ragin, 1992). In each casing, ideas and evidence interact. Not only must cases be selected, they must also be 'pruned' as part of handling the empirical material.

In this study, decisions on which relationships and which tool uses to use were made as the study progressed. As explained earlier, even though a single case study design had not been adopted in this work, I argue that the processes of systematic combining and abductive logic (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, 2014) are suited to explaining the process of the research. Accounting for the multiple case embedded design (that is, casing) at the end of the study is part of the systematic combining process.

Casing can also be understood as an aspect of the research process in transforming the data reduction and analysis products into data construction and synthesis products. For this study, the cases emerged 'at the beginning' of the study in terms of the 16 relationships shown previously in Table 4. These can be viewed as the transitional research product, termed 'data reduction and analysis products'. The cases that were selected 'at the end' of the study can be viewed as 'data construction and synthesis products'.

For example, in Paper 2, in analysing how tools are used to affect business relationships, the focus was to trace effects in specific resource ties, activity links and actor

bonds, and only the best examples of tool uses were selected for that purpose. From a slightly different angle, in Paper 3, in trying to see tool uses in terms of level of involvement, the focus was directed to tracing how managers use strategy tools to think about and involve not only external but internal counterparts.

In the next sub-section, I try to make transparent how casing was carried out in this research and provide an overview of the final cases for the reader: three cases reported in Paper 2 and eight cases reported in Paper 3.

3.3.3 Structuring and pruning

The set of what were deemed relevant cases for tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks for contrast and comparison shifted many times in the study. When prominent themes began to emerge, case descriptions were written up. Many rounds of provisional casing took place behind the scenes, and not in any particular linear order.

In each casing, the empirical world of tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks is more structured by theoretical ideas. For example, which resource ties, activity links and actor bonds are affected by the tool uses, and how three cases were invoked to link these ideas, are reported in Paper 2. Similarly, which theoretical concepts cannot adequately describe tool uses for strategizing in business relationships, and how we simply cannot neglect the internal network in understanding tool uses for strategizing in business relationships, are reported in Paper 3. Therefore, in each casing, more and more of the empirical world is 'pruned' from the analysis.

3.3.4 Final casing

As noted by Ragin (1992, p. 6), 'What it is a case of will coalesce gradually, sometimes catalytically, and final realisation of the case's nature may be the most important part of the interaction between ideas and evidence'. This subsection tries to inform the reader how I have arrived at the final casing for the study. The reader should be aware that the casing described here is akin to putting bookends to the interaction among the theoretical frame of study, the empirical material (research product) and the methodology employed (research process), for the purpose of reporting and closing this study. It describes how the empirical material has been used in different ways as it became clear that not all the relationships and tool uses involved in the study were needed to support the evolving theory narrative and data narrative (Bansal and Corley, 2012).

For Paper 2, the three 'best' stories of tool uses in the respective relationships (cases) were used to provide the basis for tracing specific interactive effects in relation to ties, links and bonds. These three cases are indicated in the 'Paper 2' column in **Table 5**. For Paper 3, the focus was to illustrate the variety of tool uses and how strategic interaction in the internal–external network interplay is handled. In invoking casing, eight cases were used to provide the basis for justifying two additional strategizing configurations which the current literature cannot fully explain. These eight cases are indicated in the 'Paper 3' column in **Table 5**.

Table 5 Case selection

	Units of analysis (tool uses)	Cases (Relationship/s)			Perspective	Paper 2	Paper 3
		Focal firm	Direct counterpart	Indirect/ potential counterpart			
1.	Framework agreements	ConstructionCo	ConcreteCo		Supplier	☑	☑
2.	Supplier scorecards	ContractorCo	PipesCo		Supplier	☑	☑
3.	Supplier reviews	ContractorCo	PipesCo	PipesAlt1Co PipesAlt2Co	Supplier		☑
4.	Conferences	LiftCo	ShipyardCo	DrillCo	Customer	☑	☑
5.	Peripheral sales databases	LiftCo	ShipyardCo		Customer		☑
6.	Tender tracking templates	ContractorCo	PolarisOilCo HeliosOilCo EagleOilCo		Customer		☑
7.	'Area of focus' templates	ContractorCo	PolarisOilCo HeliosOilCo EagleOilCo		Customer		☑
8.	Procurement manager forums	ContractorCo	StaffCo ChemCo CanopyCo PipesCo		Supplier		☑

In sum, the study is abductive, encompassing the process of systematic combining (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), the methodological steps in casing (Ragin, 1992) and the non-linear steps of the interview investigation (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Whereas the previous sections in this chapter have focused on presenting choices made in the research process, the following two sections will present an evaluation of the trustworthiness of the thesis, followed by what I consider its challenges, weaknesses and strengths.

3.4 Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is an indispensable part of case research so that the findings can be evaluated according to principles recognized among researchers. The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is to persuade the audience that the findings of the study are worth paying attention to and taking account of.

In case study research, four criteria are commonly used to establish trustworthiness – credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) – as alternatives to the conventional internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity in the rationalistic method of inquiry. These four criteria have been widely recognized among researchers doing case studies relying on an abductive approach (Karim, 2017; Norrgrann, 2015; Insanic, 2014; Aune, 2013; Lind, 2006; Gressetvold, 2004; Hulthén, 2002; Holmen, 2002). I shall address each of these criteria in turn.

3.4.1 Credibility

The credibility of a study concerns the establishment of confidence in the truth of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The procedures I have used to uphold this criterion are member checking and peer debriefing.

Member checking is a process in which data, analytical categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members from whom the data were originally collected (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To be considered as a reasonably valid way for establishing credibility, the integrity of informants is crucial in order to establish the meaningfulness of the findings and interpretations. In this study, the selected informants had at least a working, if not extensive, knowledge of the focal firm's most important relationships. The first round of member checking took place during each interview, as clarifying questions were asked continually. The second round of member checking followed in the weeks after each interview, when the verbatim interview transcript was sent to the interviewee as a technique to 'play back' the interview and interpretations to the person who provided it for reaction. All my interview transcripts were sent to the informants after the interviews for changes, to add information and to remove errors or sensitive information. This procedure was also explained to the interviewee at the start of each interview, and it is likely to have increased the interviewee's willingness to share information and ideas, as the procedure gives the informants an immediate opportunity to correct errors of fact and challenge what are perceived to be wrong interpretations. In addition, opportunities for member checking include summarizing the

interviews informally during company visits, as well as follow-up conversations over email and telephone to ensure that terms were correctly understood.

Peer debriefing is an activity that provides an *external* check on the inquiry process by maintaining a dialogue with other like-minded academics. It is described as a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session. And it is very useful for exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind. In terms of maintaining a dialogue with other like-minded academics, all the independent papers (in various stages of development) have undergone the process of gaining feedback during internal department seminars from scholars knowledgeable about the IMP tradition. The independent papers were also presented in external forums such as IMP workshops, conferences and symposiums. Furthermore, peer debriefing can include the activity to provide *internal* checks on the inquiry process by co-authoring with an interested peer. The following describes how I have handled trustworthiness in the development of all my three independent papers.

As part of my literature review study, Paper 1 started out to 'classify' what I termed at one point 'relational strategy practices' in collaboration with my advisor. I found this idea interesting, but I was not without doubts. The idea for Paper 1 was first presented at the 22nd Nordic Workshop on Inter-organisational Research held in Trondheim, Norway and subsequently at the 28th Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Conference in Rome, Italy. Through continuous dialogue with IMP scholars, Paper 1 evolved to be 'characterizing relationship and networking strategy tools' and, in that way, it started the work of outlining the IMP toolbox. The paper also went through a continuous review process at the *Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Journal* (IMPJ) and 'dialogue' with anonymous reviewers before being published as 'Relationship and networking strategy tools: Characterizing the IMP toolbox' in the IMPJ.

From the analysis of my empirical material, many themes emerged as possible pathways to develop the study. From Strategy-as-Practice paper development workshops at the European Group of Organizational Studies Colloquium, I gained ideas to think about various ways to apply SaP concepts to analyse tool uses (Cheng, 2014; Cheng & Holmen 2011). I also gained valuable insights from internal seminars for possible ways to 'cut' the empirical material. It was from one of these internal seminars that I gained the initial idea to try to 'view' tool uses as resources in the IMP research tradition. Paper 2 was first unveiled at the IMP Workshop in Manchester, UK. With feedback from the 'debriefers' in the workshop

and from discussions with my co-author, Paper 2 evolved to try to take an interactive perspective on tool uses. The paper was also submitted to IMPJ to obtain comments from the journal reviewers. Paper 2 was then presented at the IMP Symposium in Uppsala, Sweden, which was held from 31 May to 1 June 2016. Finally, the paper emerged in its final form as 'Investigating strategy tools from an interactive perspective', published in the IMPJ.

The journey for Paper 3 started earlier than that for Paper 2. My initial idea was to try to make some sense of tool uses for strategizing in business relationships in practice. I presented an earlier version of the paper at the 30th IMP Conference, Bordeaux, France, from 4–6 September 2014, as 'How managers work strategically with procurement and selling using strategy tools' (Cheng & Harrison, 2014). Through discussions with my co-advisor, Paper 3 was further developed into 'How managers use strategy tools: Working strategically with procurement and selling'. It was submitted to *Industrial Marketing Management* in May 2016, from which very constructive comments were obtained for developing sensible next steps, even though it was declined for publication. This allowed me to take another look at what I could consider as data construction and synthesis products. Therefore, as part of the peer debriefing process, the small setback was a necessary step to arrive at the final casing as explained in Table 5. With its renewed focus, Paper 3 has been completed and submitted as 'How managers interact using strategy tools' to the *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, which was deemed more suitable.

Thus, peer debriefing encompasses *external* checks on the inquiry process by maintaining a dialogue with a disinterested peer, as well as *internal* checks on the inquiry process by co-authoring with an interested peer. All of my three independent papers have undergone external peer debriefing and internal peer scrutiny, which have helped me to make the findings and analysis more explicit.

3.4.2 Transferability

The notion of the transferability of a study concerns the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry have relevance and resonance in companies that are familiar with the phenomenon being investigated or that operate in similar contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Establishment of transferability is, in a strict sense, impossible. However, what can be done is to provide the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility.

However, there are at least two inherent factors that work against attempts to address this criterion. Firstly, the format of this thesis, in the form of a compilation of scientific papers rather than a monograph, restricts the presentation of the cases in their entire richness. Secondly, this study is based on a multiple case embedded design. As part of the analytical process, pruning of cases, as explained previously, often reduces the richness. There is a trade-off between reducing data for analysis and maintaining richness. The attempt I make to address this criterion is to provide the richest descriptions I can of each case and its units of analysis (as reported in Papers 2 and 3), without undermining analytical power or compromising conciseness.

To reiterate, what transferability means is to provide satisfactory details for the interested reader to think about transferability to similar contexts, such as to the same relationship later or to other relationships, and even to novel situations that have similar characteristics, at other points in time. How I have dealt with this aspect is to draw up what can be termed vignettes of strategy tool uses, such as those employed by Whittington et al. (2006), and applied them in paper 3. Vignettes are helpful to provide the context of the tool uses (thick description in a concise way) to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility. The vignettes of tool uses can also be helpful to provoke learning and change without being turned into rote templates to be followed blindly. In other words, I try to provide sufficient details for the interested reader to recognize transferability when thinking about the tendency or the propensity to use and combine different tools when strategizing in business relationships and networks.

3.4.3 Dependability

Dependability concerns the research process itself (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). If this dependability criterion had been interpreted in the conventional sense, a researcher would ask him- or herself whether other researchers would be able to follow the same procedure and discover the same underlying mechanisms. In the setting of this study, the answer is no, because the theoretical framework, the data interpretation and the research questions have emerged interactively rather than in a sequential way. However, this does not mean that the dependability criterion can be ignored.

Qualitative researchers use different methods, and at different times, and would be immersed in the phenomenon of interest with different orientations. A researcher not making use of the IMP approach would probably have approached the collection of empirical material differently, would have analysed the material in other ways, and would have arrived at other conclusions. And never in the same way, a researcher making use of the IMP approach might be interested in other emerging themes, weighed choices differently and arrived at other conclusions. Likewise, a researcher making use of the IMP approach might case the empirical material differently and obtain different insights.

The dependability of a study concerns the enactment of case study procedures to identify a stepwise documentation trail. The way I have addressed this criterion is to provide an open and transparent description of the research process as best as I can. The descriptions of the systematic combining process (going back and forth between the conceptual and empirical world) and the casing process are attempts to outline these processes so that the reader is able to get a sense of the nature of the research process underlying this thesis.

3.4.4 Confirmability

While dependability concerns the research process itself, the confirmability of a study concerns the product – the data, findings, interpretations and recommendations. The confirmability criterion can be operationalized by ensuring 1) that findings are solidly grounded in events and data that can be traced back to 'raw data'; 2) that there is consistency between the data, concepts and findings; and 3) that a priori theoretical concepts have not been imposed on the data in an unreflective manner (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The way I have addressed this criterion is firstly to ensure that all 'raw data' (interview notes, audio files and interview transcripts) have been archived, making it possible to trace all the empirical findings back to the sources. Secondly, I also try to take heed that the data are needed to give the theory context, and the theory is needed to give the data meaning (Bansal and Corley, 2012). This cannot be rushed, but the effort is to dovetail my data narrative with my theoretical narrative in each independent paper and in this thesis. Again, the systematic combining process is best suited to describing how consistency is being maintained. Thirdly, regarding confronting theory and data with thought and reflection, I have thoroughly addressed this in the section on systematic combining. The way I have approached my data collection has been influenced by my theoretical frames of reference. At the same

time, I have also allowed the data to evolve with increased theoretical insight, as I returned to the literature iteratively and refined the precision of my research questions.

3.4.5 Overall trustworthiness

How the four criteria have been used and the actions taken to attend to the trustworthiness of the study are summarized in **Table 6.**

Table 6 Actions taken for the four criteria of trustworthiness

	Criteria	Procedures	Actions taken
1.	Credibility	Member checking	- Select quality informants - Implement two rounds of member checking
		Peer debriefing	- Present to disinterested peers via internal seminars, IMP workshops, conferences and symposium - Subject drafts of papers to internal peer scrutiny by co-authoring my papers
2.	Transferability (Note: article-based thesis; multiple embedded case study design)	Providing thick description	- Provide satisfactory details to provoke thinking about transferability - Provide vignettes of tool uses
3.	Dependability	Assessing the process of the inquiry	- Provide an open and transparent description of the research process (systematic combining; casing)
4.	Confirmability	Assessing the product of the inquiry	- Ensure interview transcripts are archived - Make effort to dovetail data narrative and theoretical narrative

3.5 Challenges, weaknesses and strengths of the study

So far in this chapter, I have addressed the methodological choices made during the research process, tried to make transparent the systematic combining and casing processes of the study and addressed the four criteria for trustworthiness. In this section, I will highlight some of the challenges faced during the study and reflect on its weaknesses, but also acknowledge some of its strengths.

Firstly, a number of challenges were faced during the study. After making the choice to gather the empirical material for the study with interviews, gaining access to the right

people at the right time was challenging. The informants are managers with busy schedules. Business exigencies meant that some interviews had to be postponed at the last minute. For all the interviews in this study, I was the only researcher involved. During the interviews, while planning well in advance ensured that they proceeded smoothly, it was at times challenging to manage briefing the informants on the procedures, handling audio recording, adhering to the interview guide and asking clarifications continually. It was also challenging in some instances to get the informants to provide sufficient description of aspects such as the industrial context without digging too deeply into technical or non-relevant issues. It might have been very helpful to involve another researcher, if one is available, in conducting the interviews, as two heads think better than one, and especially in taking down interview notes that could be cross-referenced with each interview transcript. Another challenge pertains to the uncertainties when entering the field. Although sensitizing concepts provided support, there were a number of uncertainties depending on where the informants led me despite my interview guide. This uncertainty was difficult to manage, given that I only knew sketchy contours of what to look. While managers may have a tendency to use tools when strategizing in business relationships, which are the possible tools and how they are used remained to be unveiled. It was challenging to keep an open mind and to be concerned about gathering data that might be too general and with insufficient detail. In the same way but on a different level, I also found it challenging to keep an eye on my overall research questions while allowing the paper research questions to emerge. Finally, I have experienced that it is very challenging to obtain a clear idea of what my cases were cases of. This is particularly true for the cases in Paper 3, as the 'bookends' to my cases shifted a number of times until the final phases of the study. My papers all took trajectories that were not anticipated in the early phases of the study. Many rounds of writing up case descriptions were required before I could eventually finalize the cases. The transformation of data reduction and analysis products to data reconstruction and synthesis products was certainly an upward, slippery slope.

Secondly, this study is not without its weaknesses. One weakness that can be identified involves the number of informants and the 'following period' in the study. More interviews could have been arranged to generate more variety in my empirical material had I had better clarity on my research questions when entering the field. I could also have gone deeper into the interviews, arranged to have follow-up interviews with selected informants or sought to access informants at the other end of the dyad to close in on selected tool uses. One possibility could have been the use of the supplier scorecard and its outcomes in the

ContractorCo–PipesCo relationship to gain more insights into the tool use in the development of the business relationship and its strategic implications. It could be argued that another weakness is that the study is limited by the choice of theory, which has elevated the attention to and focus on some aspects of the phenomenon while downplaying others. As O'Brien (1993) pointed out, 'we can see social theory as a sort of kaleidoscope – by shifting theoretical perspective, the world under investigation also changes shape' (pp. 10–11). There are innumerable angles on any topic. Appropriately, chapter 2 is called 'Theoretical frames of reference', and the IMP approach to strategizing is the main lens I have chosen to pursue the study and to formulate my research questions in a direction that can offer new perspectives of tool uses for strategizing in business relationships. It might have been possible to combine a variety of theories to pursue this study, but I have chosen depth, as the main intention has been to make connections between tool uses and the IMP approach to strategizing and to develop theory in this area.

Finally, to conclude this chapter, despite the challenges and weaknesses, I should also mention one or two strengths of this thesis. One is identifying a research area that is acknowledged to be interesting not only from a researcher's perspective, but also from a practitioner's perspective. At every meeting with the informants (among them the Director of Business Development at LiftCo), the enthusiasm of the practitioners was always evident. They also encouragingly point out that the outcome of the study would be very interesting and useful for them. I also consider it a strength that two of the independent papers in this thesis have been published and the third has undergone peer debriefing at a conference and one round of a review process, with constructive feedback from an academic journal.

4. Summary of the three papers

This chapter presents the findings of the independent papers. I introduce each independent paper and present a summary of each of its findings that contribute to the thesis. The chapter ends with the status of each of the three independent papers.

4.1 Paper 1: Relationship and networking strategy tools – characterizing the IMP toolbox

This article directs attention to the possibility of making an overview of tools for strategizing in business relationships. As explained in chapter 3, I began with orienting concepts from theory and made the choice of using manual qualitative content analysis (Easton et al., 2003; Brennan et al., 2008; 2009) to approach the IMP literature relevant for strategizing in networks.

This article introduces the term '*relationship and networking strategy tools*' (RNSTs) and develops a working definition for it to encompass the plurality of tools for grasping and handling interaction in different ways and to varying degrees in the IMP literature. Narrowing down from an initial sample of 766 articles and papers to arrive at 49 studies, it was found to be possible to identify 49 tools that have been used and/or can be used for strategizing in business relationships. This article therefore has started the work of outlining the IMP strategy toolbox. The sheer variety of tools offered within the IMP tradition does not readily lend themselves to being organized. However, it was found possible to organize them in relation to three key emphasis, namely interconnectedness, interdependence and the notion of limited managerial autonomy.

This article also highlights six possible dimensions for characterizing tools for strategizing in business relationships. For the first dimension, it was found useful to distinguish between researcher-derived vs. empirical observed RNSTs. Researcher-derived RNSTs are those that have been suggested for use as a managerial tool while empirically observed RNSTs are those that have been tested for their applicability in industrial settings. In other words, researcher-derived RNSTs are proposed by IMP researchers based on observations of how managers work; they may be inspired by empirical inquiries but have not yet been applied in practice, nor have they been found or observed in practice. In contrast,

empirically observed RNSTs are based on actual tools used by managers to facilitate strategy work.

RNSTs can also be scrutinized by level (dyad, portfolio, network) and layer of analysis (activities, resources, and actors), as well as perspective of interaction, namely supplier or customer, constituting the second and third dimensions. For the fourth dimension, RNSTs can be examined by the respective sub-processes of network strategizing (comprising visioning, positioning and adaptation). In terms of the fifth dimension, RNSTs can be dissected by their orientation, whether external only, or both external and internal.

Last but not least, in terms of dimensions, RNSTs can be discerned by their use for "strategizing on" vs. strategizing in". "Strategizing on" denotes the use of a RNST to make strategic choices related to one or more important business counterparts, without interacting with the parties concerned in the process, while "strategizing in" denotes using a RNST while interacting with one or more important business counterparts. To be more precise, "strategizing in" implies that due to the interactive nature of the process, the counterparts may influence both what is seen as relevant information, and how the information is considered. Therefore, using tools for "strategizing in" relationships and networks infers that there is active involvement and dialogue between the parties involved in the strategizing process and that the agenda for the process as well as the information that is considered useful in the process may change as a result of interaction during the process. Taken together, these six dimensions constitute a conceptual framework for characterizing RNSTs in IMP literature.

The article then draws attention to how RNSTs are positioned along each of these six dimensions by summarizing the pattern using the pie chart technique for ease of interpretation (p. 196 of the article). For the first dimension, in terms of being researcher-derived vs. empirical observed RNSTs, it was discovered that the majority of RNSTs in the IMP literature are researcher-derived. This pattern could reflect a natural progression of the literature for strategizing in business relationships and networks in IMP where we have been preoccupied with understanding, describing and explaining the interactive phenomenon and the implications for strategizing, and in the process, have obtained inspiration for suggesting tools that could support managers strategizing in business relationships and networks. However, if this pattern should persists, it also means that IMP researchers may have paid insufficient attention to engaging our models and techniques with the realities of managerial life.

For the second dimension, it was discovered that tools focusing on dyad and network level of analysis are most prevalent, suggesting the IMP tackles strategizing at the dyad and network level of analysis most actively, in line with the IMP's main units of analysis - relationships and networks. It was also discovered that a handful of tools have considered differentiated layers (actors, resources and activities) of strategizing, supporting the view that the ARA model is very helpful for its analytical power and seeing complex situations and dependencies in a different light (Axelsson, 2010).

For the third dimension, it was found that although the IMP downplays the traditional separation in analysing either the process of industrial purchasing or of industrial marketing and puts the dyad centrestage, tools that either take the buyer or the seller perspective are most common. This pattern suggests that where it concerns tools for strategizing in business relationships, it might have been a practical thing to do, especially if a researcher publishes and disseminates research findings and insights to practitioner audiences who are typically organized in functions that discern marketing practitioners from purchasing practitioners.

For the fourth dimension, it was discerned that tools tend to focus on one sub-process of strategizing activities in order to keep it simple. This might have also been a practical thing to do, when a researcher intends to disseminate research insights to the managerial community in a modular manner which enables managers to mix and use them to fit their needs.

As for the fifth dimension, as expected, the majority of RNSTs are externally oriented given the IMP's emphasis on relationships as a research perspective. However, the article also reveals that the IMP toolbox has some tools that are both externally and internally oriented. This pattern shows that IMP researchers are concerned with the intra-organizational context for strategizing in business relationships and networks (Ritter et al., 2004; Zolkiewski et al., 2007) even though it can be difficult to make useful abstractions of reality that capture the complexity both within organizations as well as the environment (Axelsson, 1982).

Finally, regarding the last dimension, a central finding in this paper is that few tools (8 out of 49) have been described or suggested for use for "strategizing in" business relationships and networks, a pattern that seems out of line with a research tradition that aims to better understand strategy as an interactive process. The speculation is that tools for "strategizing in" relationships and networks would appear to be more applicable after the usefulness of tools for "strategizing on" relationships and networks has been acknowledged and incorporated into the strategy literature.

By offering a conceptual framework with six differing dimensions that encompass approach to tool development, level (and layer) of analysis, perspective of interaction, activities of network strategizing, external or internal orientation, and use for 'strategizing on' versus 'strategizing in' relationships and networks, the article provides a vocabulary for content analysing and discussing strategy tools in IMP. The article can therefore be seen to be a start in taking an IMP perspective on strategy tools. By making available an IMP toolbox, the article also provides an overview for both researchers and practitioners to attend to RNSTs that were previously dispersed in the literature.

4.2 Paper 2: Investigating strategy tools from an interactive perspective

This article focuses on how managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships. The literature review discusses strategic action as addressed by IMP in terms of the firm's embeddedness in business networks (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992) and builds on how the individual firm is engaged in strategic action in each relationship layer in terms of actors, resources and activities. It is argued that the concept of strategy tools can be reappraised from IMP by focusing on the strategic action in each relationship layer.

Based on the more open interpretation of strategy tools proposed in the Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) perspective, the article highlights there are at least two areas of incongruence between IMP and SaP where it concerns investigating strategy tools from an IMP perspective. One area is the level of embeddedness. Here, the paper explains that SaP takes on a broad sociological perspective where the practices of strategy depend on the particular social system in which strategy-making takes place. In contrast, in IMP, the firm is embedded in relationships with identifiable counterparts, and strategizing is understood from the perspective of interconnected and interdependent relationships (Gadde et al., 2003). The other area is the interpretation of (extra-organizational) actors. Here, the paper explains that SaP has taken small steps to recognize categories of extra-organizational actors such as management consultants, business schools, financial institutions, but short of customers and suppliers. In contrast, in IMP, actors are always part of exchange processes in direct or indirect contact with the individual firm, highlighting the significance of relationships.

Based on the IMP approach to strategizing in business relationships, the article seeks to investigate if and how strategy tools are used to affect the layers of substance of business relationships. Following an empirical route, the article also seeks to explore what roles strategy tools have for the strategic action of the firm, as embodied in the IMP approach.

The empirical material comprises three cases involving the most important relationships in three companies, ConstructionCo, LiftCo and ContractorCo, respectively. The cases are selected business relationships while the units of analysis are tool uses in the relationship(s). Based on the empirical material, the paper puts three conventional management methods and techniques, namely framework agreements, conferences and supplier scorecards under further scrutiny by focusing on the three substance layers of business relationships when strategizing in business relationships. The analysis explains how tool uses can be engaged in strategic action in the three layers of a business relationship.

In terms of the resource layer, ConstructionCo's relationships with its two most important suppliers, ConcreteCo and PlumbCo, are used for describing the use and non-use of framework agreements as a tool. While framework agreements were used primarily to motivate ConcreteCo to share product knowledge, no agreement or tool was used for PlumbCo. The article details how and why. This case highlights the resource layer (see top of **Figure 4**) as most useful to exemplify the interactive use of framework agreements as a tool.
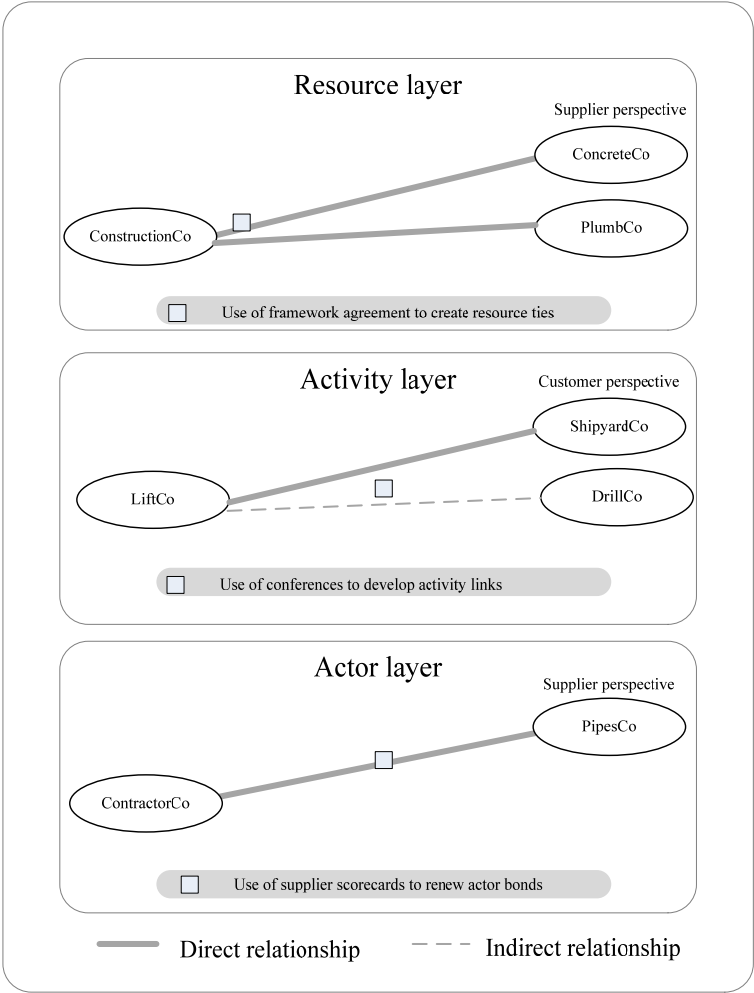

Figure 4 How tools are used to affect the layers of the relationship

In terms of the activity layer, both a direct and an indirect customer relationship with LiftCo are used to illustrate how tools are used to influence an indirect party, DrillCo, even

though its main customer is ShipyardCo. This case underlines the activity layer (see middle of **Figure 4**) to illustrate the use of conferences in networking as embodied in the IMP approach and is elaborated upon in the article.

In terms of the actor layer, the development of one specific business relationship, that between ContractorCo and PipesCo, sheds light on the interactive effects of the use of supplier scorecards as a tool. This case pinpoints the actor layer (see bottom of **Figure 4**) as the most prominent in terms of renewing social bonds in the relationship and is discussed in depth in the article.

Combining the literature and the empirical material, it has been found that tools can be viewed as being used to handle resource ties, activity links and actor bonds. The paper discovered how the use of conventional tools such as framework agreements, conferences and the supplier scorecard can be directed towards trying to affect the respective layers of the relationship (resource ties, activity links and actor bonds) and towards influencing important counterparts in specific ways. The paper can therefore be considered taking a step to analyze tools from an IMP perspective by making explicit that tools are strategic when used to affect the long-term development of important business relationships.

The article also makes clear that when tools are considered alongside the substance of a relationship, they become an integrated part of a networking pattern in order to get the desired effects regarding positioning the company in the overall network. In this way, this article clarifies how strategy tools are embedded in the series of actions and counteractions in interaction, and by the same token, reappraises the concept of strategy tools from an IMP perspective. In other words, the article highlights how tools can be engaged in 'strategic (co-)action', where (co-)action is introduced not only to emphasize a way to engage others and involve others, but also to establish the idea that using strategy tools when strategizing in business relationships is two-way. Returning to the point of departure of the article, the empirical material provides a clearer picture of why it is problematic to limit the conceptualization of tool uses as practising on others in a unilateral way (such as independent action and pursuing victory over others).

By making explicit the strategy tool uses to bring about a desired network position, the article also makes it easier for practitioners to see strategy tools in 'strategic (co-)action'. The article therefore invites managers to find a purposeful, interactive way of using a strategy tool as one opportunity to engage in strategic (co-)action.

4.3 Paper 3: How managers interact using strategy tools

This paper also deals with how managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships, but takes a different focus by considering the intra-organizational context. The literature review discusses how firms strategize deliberately in business relationships and in a network setting, in particular in terms of level of involvement. It considers a central aspect of strategizing in business relationships and networks to be the interplay between inter-organizational relationships and intra-organizational cross-departmental relationships (Ritter et al., 2004; Håkansson and Ford, 2016). Based on the IMP premise that business relationships are a way to connect external and internal networks, it is argued when investigating tool uses in interactive strategizing, one might look at both inter- and intra-organizational aspects.

Based on the IMP approach to strategizing in business relationships, the paper investigates if and how strategy tools are used for organizing and influencing interactions. Following this line of inquiry, the paper also seeks to explore how strategy tool uses in interactive contexts can be categorized. The cases are selected business relationships of ConstructionCo, LiftCo and ContractorCo respectively while the units of analysis are tool uses in the relationship(s), with particular attention to identifying and establishing appropriate levels of involvement with significant others.

Eight vignettes of ST uses, that of framework agreements, supplier scorecards, supplier reviews, conferences, peripheral sales databases, tender tracking templates, "areas of focus" templates and procurement management forums, in the three focal firms are presented. The central finding in this paper is that managers doing the 'process of relating' actually use tools both in detached ways and interactively. Detached means using tool(s) to make strategic choices without interacting with the parties concerned in the process, while interactively means using tool(s) in active involvement and dialogue with one or more important business counterparts who may influence both what is seen as relevant information, and how the information is considered. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that while using tools both in detached ways and interactively, managers take one key counterpart into account some times and more than one key counterpart into account at other times.

Figure 5 provides an overview of the first four vignettes with which the paper goes in depth to detail the respective tool uses in all these four cases. These respective tool uses can be explained by existing concepts in the literature. Whereas 'strategizing on' and 'strategizing in the presence of others' are considered detached modes (denoted by □) in using tools with

one or more than one important business counterparts respectively, 'strategizing in' and 'strategizing among equals' are considered interactive modes (denoted by ■) in using tools with one or more than one important business counterparts.
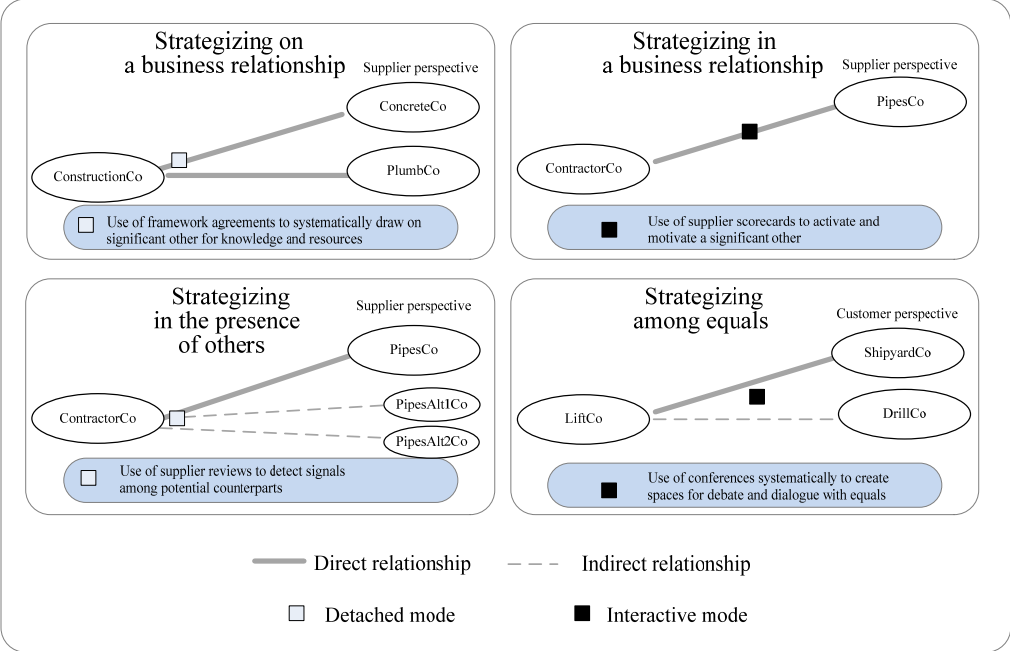
Figure 5 **Tool uses for organizing and influencing interactions inter-organizationally**

For strategizing on a business relationship, ConstructionCo's relationship with its most important suppliers, ConcreteCo is used to describe the use of framework agreements as a tool to systematically draw ***on*** a significant other for knowledge and resources. For strategizing in a business relationship, the development of the business relationship between ContractorCo and PipesCo is used to shed light on how the use of PipesCo's supplier scorecard is used as a tool to activate and motivate itself ***in*** the relationship.

For strategizing in the presence of others, ContractorCo's handling of the potential relationships with piping suppliers (PipesAlt1Co and PipesAlt2Co) in conjunction with its relationship with PipesCo is detailed in the vignette to illustrate the use of supplier review meetings as a tool to detect signals among potential counterparts. ContractorCo was strategizing in the presence of these two potential piping suppliers without their involvement, and this led to a revision of its planned strategy to award two parallel frame agreements. For strategizing among equals, LiftCo's direct and indirect relationships with its biggest customer

ShipyardCo and its "indirect" relationship with its technology sparring partner DrillCo are used to illustrate how conferences are systematically used as a tool create spaces for debate and dialogue with "equals", that is DrillCo even though LiftCo's main customer is ShipyardCo.

In the analysis of tool uses, it was further revealed that while doing strategic work in relating to others, managers do not only use tools only for inter-organizational contexts, but also for sharing information and coordinating priorities with the internal network to make strategic choices related to one or more important business counterparts. Furthermore, it was also found that for intra-organizational contexts, managers also use tools in detached ways and interactively.

However, for tool uses involving the internal network, there were no concepts available in the literature. Based on the literature and the empirical material, the paper suggests *strategizing 'alongside' the internal network* and *strategizing 'with' the internal network* as the two strategizing configurations additional to the four that the literature had discussed, in order to sufficiently address tool uses involving the internal network in interactive settings. **Figure 6** provides an overview of the next next four vignettes with which the paper elaborates to exemplify examples of tool uses that can be attributed to these two additional configurations. Whereas strategizing 'alongside' internal network is considered a detached mode (denoted by □), strategizing 'with' internal network is considered an interactive mode (denoted by ■).
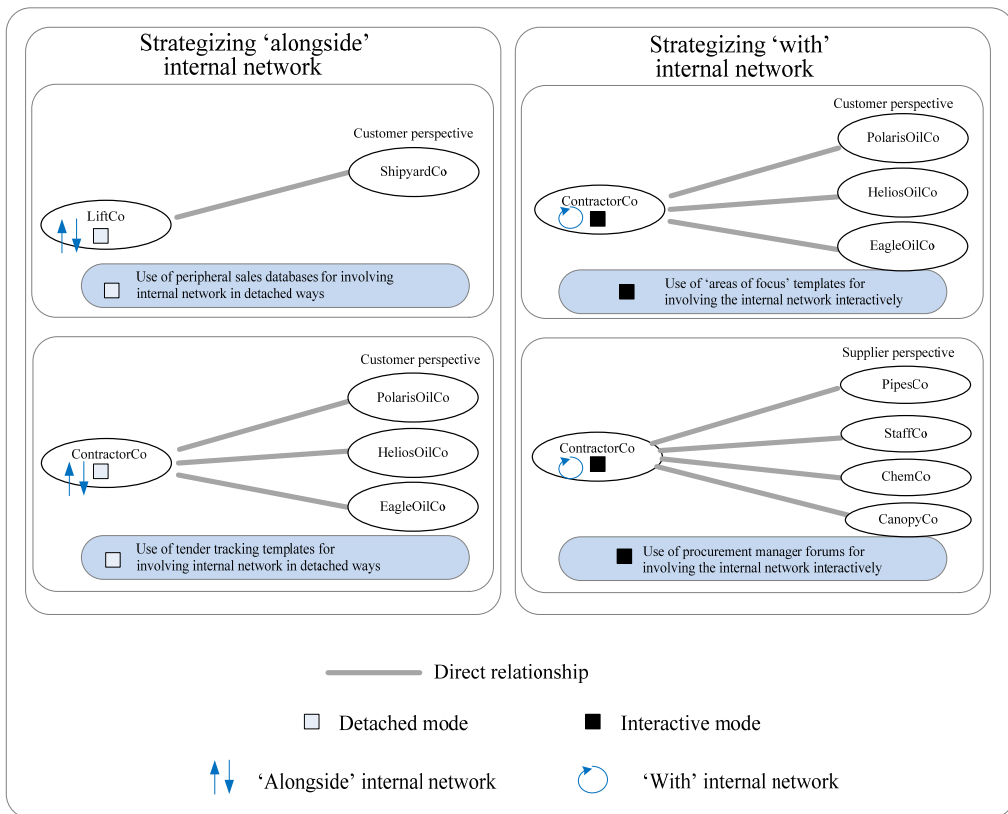
Figure 6 Tool uses for organizing and influencing interactions intra-organizationally

For strategizing 'alongside' internet work, two cases are used to demonstrate the tool uses. In the first case, in LiftCo's relationship with ShipyardCo, peripheral sales databases are used as a tool to keep track of the interactions and what the organization should remember in the next interaction with ShipyardCo. This is done to align the internal network in handling this important external counterpart due to the complexity of the relationship. In the second case, when ContractorCo approaches its most important customers, PolarisOilCo, HelioOilCo and EagleOilCo, tender tracking templates that are continuously updated are used as a tool for ContractorCo to keep its internal network attuned to the reactions and moves by these important customers as developments in the respective relationships unfold. In these two cases, the tools can be regarded as being used in detached ways because they are not used in active involvement and dialogue with the counterparts who are not able to influence how the information gathered is being considered.

For strategizing 'with' internal network, two cases are also used to demonstrate the tool uses. First, in ContractorCo's handling of its most important customers, PolarisOilCo, HelioOilCo and EagleOilCo, 'areas of focus' templates tailored for each customer that actively involve the support and coordination of the internal network are being used as tools to facilitate the maintenance and development of these important relationships. The three-to-five specific areas of focus for each customer are discussed and developed in conjunction with insights from members from the internal network. In the second case, in ContractorCo's handling of its most important suppliers, which apart from PipesCo, includes StaffCo, ChemCo and CanopyCo, procurement manager forums are being used as tools to facilitate the maintenance and development of these important relationships. The knowledge and challenges pertaining to these important suppliers are gathered from internal managers in procurement activities from various business units and geographical regions and discussed intra-organizationally. Furthermore, strategies to handle them are developed intra-organizationally. In these two cases, the tools can be regarded as being used interactively because they are used in active involvement and dialogue with the internal network who not only influences how the information gathered is being considered, but also contributes in the process such that the information that is considered useful in the process might change as a result of interaction intra-organizationally.

By making explicit the strategy tool uses in involving the internal network, this paper makes clear that the internal network is an indispensable part of the 'process of relating', where the level of involvement internally needs calibration. The paper also makes it clear that internal involvement and external involvement need to be studied in tandem and deserve more attention in IMP strategizing studies.

The paper then develops an expanded categorization of interactive tool uses, a six-part typology, for strategizing in business relationships and networks. The paper specifies what this six-part topology comprise. If introduced to practitioners, the six-part typology makes it easier for practitioners to see strategy tools in use in interaction when coordinating and creating interactive plans with the significant counterparts, where it is also pertinent to develop an internal network that is able to match the variety and complexity of the external network. Furthermore, the six-part typology will be helpful as a means of discussing the realities of strategizing in business relationships and networks and sensitizing managers to the fact that strategizing is underpinned by the interactions in inter-organizational and intra-organizational relationships.

4.4 The types of RNSTs in practice

To provide a better overview of the findings from the empirical studies, the types of tools when strategizing in business relationships and networks found in practice from papers 2 and 3 are summarised in two tables. The tables try to show that the strategizing work of relating is not characterized by a determinate set of tools, as each business relationship with a direct counterpart can incorporate its own tributary of tools. At the same time, a tool can also be used in a handful of business relationships with direct counterparts simultaneously. In addition, a tool can also be used jointly in direct and indirect relationships, as well as in potential relationships. Tools in the form of event-like initiatives (presented in **Table 7)** and physical tools (presented in **Table 8)** are used for strategizing in business relationships and networks. As presented earlier in the respective papers, the tools are employed to create benefits in relationship layers (paper 2) and to involve, communicate and co-ordinate (paper 3).

      Table 7 and **Table 8** show that these tools in practice can be analysed by their levels and layers of analysis (second dimension in the conceptual framework of RNSTs), external or internal orientation (fifth dimension) as well as use mode (last dimension) for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

Table 7 Event-like initiatives used for strategizing in business relationships in practice

	Tool uses (Units of analysis) What the tools comprise/ emphasize	Relationship(s) (Cases)			Dimensions from RNST conceptual framework									
					Level			Layer			Orientation		Use	
		Direct counterpart(s)	Indirect counterpart(s)	Potential counterpart(s)	Dyad	Portfolio	Network	Actor	Resources	Activities	External	Internal	Detached mode	Interactive mode
	Event-like initiatives													
1.	Conferences Refer to the practice of systematically planning towards attendance and participation of key conferences whereby important indirect and direct counterparts are expected to attend. Such systematic planning of conference can be integrated or also serve as a frame for the annual budget planning.	X	X				●			●	●			●
2.	Supplier reviews Refer to the practice of arranging a series of one-day events where important counterparts and potential suppliers are invited to participate in the focal firm's strategy process. Supplier days (dedicated to one supplier) are usually part of the supplier review process. In supplier reviews, the suppliers also get the chance to comment on some of the information given out by the focal firm regarding its strategy. Supper reviews are also spaces for the focal firm to discern interaction among potential suppliers.	X		X X			●				●		○	
3.	Procurement manager forums Refer to regular meetings set up for the purpose of gathering managers involved in procurement activities to discuss common challenges faced when handling important suppliers and sharing the knowledge among the internal network (especially from various business units and from different geographical regions).	X X X X				●						●		●

Table 8 Physical tools used for strategizing in business relationships in practice

	Tool uses (Units of analysis) What the tools comprise/ emphasize	Relationship(s) (Cases)			Dimensions from RNST conceptual framework									
					Level			Layer			Orientation		Use	
		Direct counterpart(s)	Indirect counterpart(s)	Potential counterpart(s)	Dyad	Portfolio	Network	Actor	Resources	Activities	External	Internal	Detached mode	Interactive mode
	Physical tools													
1.	Framework agreements Refer to formal, contractual instruments to formalize prices (such as price per senior engineer), delivery times and scope of responsibility. Also to accord status to most important suppliers. Framework agreements can also be used to contain clauses to use the supplier's expertise in a particular field, a way to access "free tips and tricks" such as sharing product knowledge and getting updates on market movements in other geography regions.	X			●			●			●		○	
2.	Supplier scorecards Refer to indicators (formally in supplier information systems, or informally by extending the Procurement Plan spreadsheets) to get signals on how the collaboration with the most important suppliers has been during a certain period. It is a dashboard tool comprising of selected performance indicators using most relevant criteria to the firm. It can rise up to the occasion to be improvized as a motivational and goal-matching tool.	X			●					●	●			●
3.	Peripheral sales databases Refer to internal informal database systems developed specifically for keeping deep data about important customers beyond the financial details in formal systems. It can exist in a variety of forms to get signals on the quantity of interaction in the key customer relationship, or to do "a lot in detecting or getting information about how the focal firm has done business with its most important customers, and what are the challenges, if there are, and what do you need to remember the next time."	X			●							●	○	

	Tool uses (Units of analysis) What the tools comprise/ emphasize	Relationship(s) (Cases)			Dimensions from RNST conceptual framework									
					Level			Layer			Orien-tation		Use	
		Direct counterpart(s)	Indirect counterpart(s)	Potential counterpart(s)	Dyad	Portfolio	Network	Actor	Resources	Activities	External	Internal	Detached mode	Interactive mode
4.	Tender tracking templates Refer to a live formalized document (known internally as the "Long List") that prioritizes ongoing tenders and all upcoming business prospects – with bid priority settings and prognosis of future revenue- for the focal firm to follow up with the important customer. It is a live document, which is continuously updated and shared with relevant individuals of the focal firm.	X X X				●						●	○	
5.	"Areas of focus" templates Refer to a formalized document that outlines important concrete action items (not more than 5 simple areas of focus) to be accomplished for a particular tender for the important customers. It is tailored from client to client and from tender to tender.	X X X				●						●		●

4.5 Status of supporting papers

In the next chapter, the papers will be discussed in combination to address the two thesis research questions. As this thesis has been written as a compilation of three independent scientific papers, I provide an overview of the papers here, including my responsibilities and independent contribution for each paper, as well as their respective status (see **Table 9**). As of the submission date of this thesis, Papers 1 and 2 have been published and Paper 3 is in review.

Table 9 **Overview of my independent work as main author and status of supporting papers**

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3
Title of paper	Relationship and networking strategy tools: Characterizing the IMP Toolbox.	Investigating strategy tools from an interactive perspective.	How managers interact using strategy tools.
My independent work as main author and collaborative efforts	Conducted literature review and the content analysis; wrote the entire article. Collaborative efforts were made in discussing the idea, findings and patterns as well as providing comments on drafts of the article.	Responsible for the literature review, collected the empirical material, conducted the data analysis and wrote the majority of the article. Collaborative efforts were made in discussing the analysis of the empirical material, providing comments on drafts of the article, and shaping aspects of the theoretical narrative and the concluding remarks sections.	Responsible for the literature review, collected the empirical material, conducted the data analysis and wrote the entire article. Collaborative efforts were made in discussing the positioning of the article and providing comments on drafts of the article.
Number of co-author(s)	1 (Holmen, E.)	1 (Ingemansson Havenvid, M.)	1 (Harrison, D.)
Status of paper	Published in 2015 in the *IMP Journal, 9* (2), 177–207.	Published in 2017 in the *IMP Journal, 11* (1): 127–149.	Completed in April 2017 and submitted to *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a starting point to address 'strategy tools' conceptually and empirically within the IMP approach to strategizing. The term 'relationship and networking strategy tools' (RNSTs) has been introduced in Paper 1. Section 5.1 and 5.2 discuss the combined findings in line with the two thesis research questions. Section 5.3 then discusses the answers to these two research questions in combination.

5.1 *Which types of tools for strategizing in business relationships have been conceptualized and discussed in the IMP literature?*

The first thesis research question posed is *Which types of tools for strategizing in business relationships have been conceptualized and discussed in the IMP literature?* When this study was designed, it seemed reasonable that there may exist some types of tools for strategizing in business relationships, and if so, we may identify them and possibly distinguish some dimensions to characterize them. In addition, when this study was conceived, we have not had empirical investigations dedicated to tool uses for strategizing in business relationships. Putting the papers together, we can address the first thesis research question by first discussing the variety in the IMP toolbox and its overall tone and language. To systematically discuss the types of tools used for strategizing in business relationships, I focus conceptually on RNSTs (paper 1), but with inspiration from the empirical studies (papers 2 and 3).

5.1.1 Presenting the variety of RNSTs in the IMP toolbox

There is no definitive list of RNSTs in the IMP literature but what this study has done is to outline an initial toolbox of RNSTs belonging to the IMP tradition. The IMP toolbox can be organized in many ways. From Paper 1, it has been suggested that tools for strategizing in business relationships can be organized by the three commonalities (interconnectedness, interdependence and the notion of limited managerial autonomy). A separate category was also catered for to contain tools expressed in the language of familiar and classical tools such as portfolio matrices and the balanced scorecard.

A network theory is not managerially empty (Möller and Halinen, 1999; Easton, 2000) and there is something to apply (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002; Cova et al., 2015). Using literature review and manual qualitative content analysis, the findings uncovered 49 studies

from the IMP literature exhibiting a great variety of tools, with a majority being researcher-derived, relevant for strategizing in business relationships.

With the IMP archive building up for four decades, a rich collection of conceptualizations concerning strategizing in business relationships have mushroomed resulting in an amorphous literature (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989, 2006; Möller and Halinen, 1999; Gadde et al., 2003; Tikkanen and Halinen, 2003; Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Holmen & Pedersen, 2003; Ritter et al., 2004; Baraldi, 2008; Ford and Mouzas, 2008; Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Harrison et al., 2010; Aaboen et al., 2013; La Rocca and Perna, 2014; Öberg et al., 2016; Håkansson and Ford, 2016). Naturally, the tools that emerge would reflect the heterogeneity in considering the implications for strategizing offered by the IMP approach. RNSTs are presented as an initial eclectic IMP toolbox, comprising an array of tools that handle interaction in different ways and to varying degrees. The IMP toolbox is likely to remain eclectic as strategizing continues to develop as an important theme in the research agenda.

5.1.1.1 Tools for different levels of analysis and differentiated layers of the relationship

There are tools for tackling different levels of analysis, from dyad (Pardo et al., 1995; Pardo, 1999), portfolio (Persson and Håkansson, 2006) to network levels (Möller and Svahn, 2003; Möller et al., 2005). These types of tools suggest that the IMP toolbox most actively tackles strategizing at the dyad and network level of analysis, which is in line with the main focus – relationships and networks – in the IMP perspective.

There are also some tools that considered differentiated layers of the relationship (Freytag and Clarke, 2001) when strategizing. This supports the view that the ARA model is very helpful as it offers a method for systematic analyses and seeing complex situations and dependencies in a different light (Axelsson, 2010; Cova et al., 2015).

5.1.1.2 Tools catering for the interacting party and tools that differentiate between buyer and seller perspectives

There are tools that cater for the interacting party (they do not differentiate between buyer and seller perspectives) (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999; Mouzas and Naude, 2007). This is in line

with the IMP perspective that focuses on developing concepts for buyer-seller relationships that put the dyad centre stage (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson and Gadde, 2018).

At the same time, there are also tools that are focused just on buyer (Gadde and Snehota, 2000) or seller perspectives (Turnbull and Zolkiewski, 1997). This suggests that differentiating tools that take the buyer or the seller perspective may be a practical thing to do for tool dissemination. The managerial technology transfer process has been of concern in the IMP research tradition (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002; Easton, 2000). Taking the perspective of one of the two sides can be seen as one way to facilitate the transfer process for two likely reasons: 1) tools are typically disseminated via bodies of purchasing or marketing literatures and journals and 2) the practitioner audience is typically embedded in a buyer or a seller context.

5.1.1.3 Tools for network strategizing activities

There are tools catered for network visioning (Holmen and Pedersen, 2003), network visioning-positioning (Ojasalo, 2001) and adaptations-as-strategizing (Brennan and Canning, 2002). Such tools suggest that IMP researchers find it useful to break down the process of network strategizing into sub-processes (Tikkanen and Halinen, 2003). Even though strategy within the IMP approach (as well as outside the IMP perspective) increasingly recognizes that strategy planning and strategy implementation are intertwined, designing separate tools for handling the sub-processes may be a practical approach to better explain and reach out to a managerial audience. In this way, tools are also kept simple. As Spee and Jarzabkowski (2009) point out, effective tools must be simple rather than complex.

5.1.1.4 Tools oriented externally only or both internally and internally

There are tools that are externally oriented (Ritter, 2000), in line with the IMP perspective which traditionally put more emphasis on the external network. However, as pointed out by Araujo et al. (2003), IMP sees the boundaries of the firm by paying more attention to their bridging function and the interactive processes of relating to and negotiating with others. The 'drawing of boundaries is an interactive and negotiated process mediating a variety of internal and external relationships and involves more than establishing a difference between the inside and outside of the firm' (Araujo et al., 2003, p. 1257).

Since the individuals involved in the different business relationships of the company may work together to consider, connect and relate these relationships in the overall strategizing of the firm, the importance of considering the internal network is also emphasized in the IMP approach to strategizing (Ritter et al., 2004; Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Håkansson and Ford, 2016). There are therefore tools that also consider the relevance of the intra-organizational context in strategizing in business relationships (Ivens et al., 2009) in the IMP toolbox.

5.1.1.5 Tools for strategizing "on" and strategizing "in"

And last but not least, there are tools for use for strategizing "on" (Henneberg et al., 2006) and strategizing "in" (Holmen et al., 2003) business relationships. Strategizing "on" means there is no active involvement and no dialogue between the company and the counterparts being considered in that company's strategizing process. In contrast, strategizing "in" implies active involvement and dialogue between the parties involved.

So far, the IMP toolbox comprises a minority of tools that have been described or suggested for use for strategizing *'in'* business relationships and networks. This might seem surprising in a research tradition that aims to better understand strategy as an interactive process. However, the interest is not in the strengths or weaknesses of tools per se which are often elusive and not sustained, but rather how they are being used (Whittington et al., 2006; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014). Tools in the IMP toolbox are open to interpretation as IMP researchers have chosen to give room to managers to conceive of and mix the tools to tailor the interactive processes to the interacting parties.

5.1.2 "Weak general prescriptive" tone and language

According to Easton (2000), there are three possible forms of managerial prescriptions: "specific prescriptive models", "general descriptive models" and "weak general prescriptions". General descriptive models, as the name suggests, often require a lot of skill in making them fit certain circumstances in order to predict outcomes (Easton, 2000). With regards to weak general prescriptions, these are often found where researchers try to translate their important findings and insights laden with phrases such as "take account of", "place more emphasis on" and "be aware of" (Easton, 2000).

The IMP approach to strategizing clearly steers away from offering specific prescriptive models. As for general descriptive models, it is questionable if the IMP toolbox could have included the Interaction Model. One of the disadvantages of the Interaction Model, according to a study conducted by Axelsson (2010), is that it does not offer much explicit guidance in making decisions and taking action. Since the selection for inclusion in the IMP toolbox entailed a concept, model, technique, framework or methodology that can be applied, the Interaction Model was excluded from the IMP toolbox.

Reflecting on the general characteristics of the variety of tools, the IMP toolbox largely adopts a 'weak general prescriptive' tone and language. That ideas and insights generated by IMP researchers mostly resemble the form of weak general prescriptions is not surprising since, as a research tradition, the IMP prefers to demonstrate caution and restraint. As Håkansson and Ford (2002) put it, "our aim as researchers is to construct tools to help managers understand their world, not to tell managers how to carry out their tasks."

Such "justified reticence" (Easton, 2000) is for a very good reason. Every relationship is unique and there is therefore no straitjacket approach. It is very difficult to provide any form of fixed managerial toolkit because "all major situations are unique and only can be understood in the context of the network situation and from the perspective of the history that has produced the current relationships and positions" (Möller and Halinen, 1999, p. 423).

The IMP toolbox is likely to retain a weak general prescriptive tone and language for two reasons. One is to caution managers to proceed modestly in relationship and networking situations, while taking into account interaction and business relationships with rigour (Ford and Håkansson, 2006b; Ford and Mouzas, 2008). The other is to give room to managers to rely on judgements based on implicit or experience-based knowledge when strategizing in business relationships and networks (Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Easton, 2000). A manager´s toolbox is as unique as its owner. Practitioners must be able to select their own tools and mix them to fit their needs and contexts.

5.1.3 The types of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks

To systematically discuss the types of tools used for strategizing in business relationships, I focus conceptually on RNSTs (paper 1), but can also take inspiration from the findings in the empirical studies (papers 2 and 3).

From the empirical investigations, the central finding is that managers do use a variety of tools, particularly those of coordination, communication and goal matching, in the form of

event-like initiatives and physical tools, when strategizing in business relationships. *Event-like initiatives* such as conferences, supplier review meetings and procurement management forums potentially offer a vehicle for direct and indirect counterparts, potential counterparts and members of the internal network to become "strategists" in the IMP approach to strategizing. The shared creation and maintenance of *physical tools* such as framework agreements, supplier scorecards in supplier information systems, peripheral sales databases, "areas of focus" templates and tender tracking templates potentially offer a vehicle for coordination and communication.

In Stenfors (2007)'s definition, strategy tools can be conceptual, process related including workshops (Hodgkinson et al., 2006) or physical including databases, spreadsheets and Power Point (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Kaplan, 2011). The IMP toolbox has captured tools that are more conceptual, emphasizing the interpretation of strategy tools being conceptual. From the empirical investigations, it seems that there is room for the IMP toolbox to be expanded to consider process-related tools including event-like initiatives and physical tools encompassing management information systems and databases.

5.2 *How do managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships?*

The second thesis research question posed is *How do managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships?* When this study was conceived, it seemed reasonable that managers might use tools while strategizing in business relationships. If so, this may not only increase the pool of empirically observed RNSTs but also create a basis for developing theory that complements existing theory.

While focusing empirically on how event-like initiatives and physical tools are in use for strategizing in business relationships (papers 2 and 3), I can also take inspiration from the initial conceptualization of RNSTs. This section further specifies how event-like initiatives and physical tools are used for strategizing in business relationships in terms tool uses in relationship layers as well as tool uses in relationship functions. I then discuss how extant categories of interactive tool uses can be expanded. These three discussions are also according to the logic of the second, fifth and sixth dimensions of the conceptual framework of RNSTs. Reflecting on the initial conceptualization of RNSTs, an additional distinctive commonality of RNSTs also emerges.

5.2.1 Tool uses to affect relationship layers

With regards to the second dimension where tools can be scrutinized by layer of analysis, it was found that tools can be used to strengthen the respective layers of the relationship to create benefits and affect developmental paths (paper 2). In other words, tools can be used to affect the long-term development of an important business relationship, where their outcomes can be analysed by relationship layers. In this way, tools can be viewed as being used to handle resource ties, activity links and actor bonds.

Paper 1 has found that the IMP toolbox comprises a handful of tools that have considered differentiated layers of strategizing (Pardo et al., 2011; Pardo et al., 1995; Leek and Mason, 2009). In this sense, that tools might be used to affect the relationship layers in practice is not surprising. What was discovered is that the power of the ARA model, which allows for reading and analysing a huge number of B2B exchange situations (Axelsson, 2010; Cova et al., 2015), is also helpful in analysing tool uses in relationship layers and for seeing the tools phenomenon in a new light (via relationship layers). Based on the empirical investigations, when tracing interactive aspects, tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks can be analysed by the relationship layers in the following manner (see **Table 10**).

Table 10 Tracing interactive aspects with strategy tool uses in relationship layers

What are we tracing? A tool would be strategic if it helps in…	
Layers of substance	
Activities	- Relating to essential processes of counterpart to achieve efficiency - Coordinating activities to increase interaction spaces to influence indirect counterpart - Increasing activity links by building interdependencies systematically with counterpart
Resources	- Gaining access to counterpart's resources such as knowledge - Overcoming hurdles of communication with internal network - Developing resource ties with counterpart by combining and using resources in new ways with counterpart
Actors	- Matching goals mutually with counterpart - Aligning perceptions and behaviours with counterpart - Renewing actor bonds by relating to the ambitions and potential of counterpart

5.2.2 Tool uses to affect relationship functions

The empirical investigations also show that the tools that practitioners use to relate to significant others pertain not only to the layers of substance, but also to relationship functions as well. From paper 3, it became clear that managers actually doing the 'process of relating' use tools at least on three levels - on the dyad level, with regards to the external network, and also taking into account the internal network. In other words, even though tools are used for strategizing in business relationships, they can be internally oriented to influence intra-organizational relationships. Although the empirical investigations had the intention of concerning itself with the dyad level, investigating tool uses for strategizing in business relationships directed research attention beyond the dyad because one function of relationships is that they are a way to connect external and internal networks. This implies that in terms of tool uses, when incorporating at least some of the goals and mutual interests of external counterparts, firms need to bring the strategic centre together and involve individuals in the internal network as well. When strategizing in business relationships, firms must also manage the interactions that take place within their relationships internally (Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Ritter et al., 2004; Baraldi, 2008).

While IMP research has stated the importance in describing processes of interactions *within* the company in combination with interactions among companies (Zolkiewski et al., 2007; Ritter et al., 2004; Ritter and Gemunden, 2003; Öberg, 2010; Andersen et al., 2013; Håkansson and Ford, 2016), this aspect has received limited attention in IMP strategizing research.

Strategizing in business relationships and networks is underpinned by the interactions in inter-organizational and intra-organizational relationships. Individuals involved in the different relationships of a company work together to consider, connect and relate these relationships in the overall strategizing of the firm. Developing an internal network that is able to match the variety and complexity of the external network is an indispensable part of the 'process of relating'. Investigating tool uses for strategizing in business relationships also mirrors this aspect.

The power of the ARA model is also helpful in analysing tool uses by relationship functions. Based on the empirical investigations, when tracing interactive aspects, tool uses can be connected to the relationship functions beyond the dyad column in both directions (shown by the arrows ←   →) (see **Table 11**).

Table 11 **Tracing interactive aspects with strategy tool uses in relationship functions**

What are we tracing?	Functions of the relationship		
	Internal network	**← Dyad →**	**External network**
A tool would be strategic if it helps in…	- Sharing information and coordinating priorities with the internal network - Developing an internal network that is able to match the variety and complexity of the external network	- Relating to counterpart to create benefits and affect development paths in the relationship	- Inviting direct and indirect counterparts to jointly develop and shape the vision and plans for all the different participants who are viewed as valuable contributors

5.2.3 Categories of interactive tool uses

From what the empirical investigations have shown, when interactive strategizing is seen as a "chronic feature of organizational life", strategizing in business relationships involves detached uses and interactive uses of tools to organize and influence interactions (Holmen et

al., 2003; Harrison et al., 2010). From paper 3 paying particular attention to identifying and establishing appropriate levels of involvement with significant others, interactive uses of tools become clear on three levels.

With regards to interactive tool uses at dyad level, the empirical investigations demonstrate that managers are using tools to strategize "in" a business relationship, in addition to using tools to strategize "on" a business relationship (paper 2 and paper 3). As an interactive mode, strategizing 'in' denotes tool uses interactively in a relationship to co-develop strategies jointly with an important counterpart who is aware of the information used in the strategizing process and is involved in providing feedback and support.

In terms of interactive tool uses on a network level, empirical investigations show that managers are using tools interactively to strategize 'among' equals in the external network (paper 3). This is not the same as strategizing 'in the presence of others' in the external network.

Considering interactive tool uses with the internal network, it was found that managers are also using tools interactively to coordinate priorities with the internal network to identify strategic options related to one or more important business counterparts (paper 3). I suggested distinguishing using tools interactively and in detached ways with the terms strategizing 'with' and strategizing 'alongside' (paper 3) respectively.

Taken together, when taking one counterpart into account some times and more than one key counterpart into account at others, and when sharing information and coordinating priorities with the internal network, managers use tools in six categories: strategizing 'in', 'among' and 'with' in interactive ways, as well as strategizing 'on', 'in the presence of others' and 'alongside' in detached ways. **Table 12** describes each category.

Table 12 Categories of detached and interactive tool uses

Categories of detached and interactive tool uses		
Category	**Description**	**Mode**
Strategizing 'on'	- denotes the use of a tool to make strategic choices related to one or more important business counterparts, without interacting with the parties concerned in the process,	Detached
Strategizing 'in'	- denotes using a tool while interacting with one or more important business counterparts. - implies that due to the interactive nature of the process, the counterparts may influence both what is seen as relevant information, and how the information is considered. - infers that there is active involvement and dialogue between the parties involved in the strategizing process and that the agenda for the process as well as the information that is considered useful in the process may change as a result of interaction during the process.	Interactive
Strategizing 'in the presence of others'	- denotes using a tool in a detached way to make strategic choices related to more than one important business counterpart, without interacting with those concerned.	Detached
Strategizing 'among' equals	- denotes using a tool by inviting the counterparts to jointly develop and shape the vision and plans for all participants. - These counterparts are viewed as 'equals' and valuable contributors. - Through interactions, the managers within the focal firm expect and seek to modify their own visions and plans.	Interactive
Strategizing 'alongside'	- denotes using a tool for sharing information in detached ways with the internal network to make strategic choices related to one or more business counterparts. - The members of the internal network are viewed as valuable contributors and should be kept abreast of the complexity of the relationship as far as possible.	Detached
Strategizing 'with'	- denotes the use of a tool for coordinating priorities interactively with the internal network to identify strategic options related to one or more business counterparts. - infers that there is active involvement and dialogue with the members of the internal network in the strategizing process towards the important business counterpart(s) - the agenda for the process as well as the information that is considered useful in the process may change as a result of interaction with the members of the internal network during the process.	Interactive

Paper 3 also suggests extant categories of interactive tool uses needs to be elaborated to include tool uses concerning the internal network as well as designating them as detached or interactive in order to sufficiently capture tool uses empirically. Paper 3 therefore suggests a six-part typology for strategizing in business relationships and networks. If introduced to practitioners, the six-part typology will be helpful as a means of discussing the realities of strategizing in business relationships and networks and sensitizing managers to the fact that

strategizing in business relationships and networks entails tool uses in interactive and detached ways concerning the dyad, the external network and the internal network to organize and influence interactions.

5.2.4 Network position as an additional commonality of RNSTs

While focusing empirically on the tools used for strategizing in business relationships and networks, one can also reflect on the initial conceptualization of RNSTs. In Paper 1, it has been suggested that tools for strategizing in business relationships can be characterized by the three commonalities (interconnectedness, interdependence and the notion of limited managerial autonomy). RNSTs pertain to these three commonalities which stem from the three sets of paradoxes or tensions surrounding strategizing in industrial networks (Gadde et al., 2003) widely used by IMP researchers to characterize the modest strategist's predicament in relationships and networks (Ford and Mouzas, 2008; Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Harrison et al., 2010; Baraldi et al., 2007). The constant challenge to IMP researchers pertains to getting to the heart of interaction: 1) to emphasize the interconnectedness of business relationships, 2) to bring out the more salient aspects of interdependence and 3) to bring home the notion of limited managerial autonomy. Therefore, it is helpful to distinguish these underlying commonalities of RNSTs.

From the empirical investigations, uses of RNSTs have been shown to bring about some desired effects in positioning the company vis-à-vis important relationships (paper 2). Outcomes of using RNSTs have been pinpointed to facilitate or create interactions for a company in manoeuvring for a favourable position in the business network (paper 3). This stems from the notion of strategic action (Johanson and Mattson, 1992) which can be defined as efforts of a firm to influence its position in the network of which it is part. How tools are engaged in strategic action across the cases to influence the network position is evident in the empirical findings.

It seems that there is opportunity to further develop the three underlying commonalities of the conceptual framework to highlight the outcomes of using tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks – to maintain or influence a firm's network position. It therefore emerges that tools for strategizing in business relationships can also be characterized by another distinctive commonality – that of network position. I will revisit this again in Section 5.3.

5.3 Concluding discussion

Prior to this study, tools for strategizing in business relationships was an underexplored area in two respects. First, despite tools being helpful to assist managers to move beyond cognitive boundaries who may otherwise rely on implicit or experience-based knowledge, there is a lack of conceptual attention given to tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Second, in spite of tools being a significant part of managerial life as an empirical phenomenon, little empirical attention has been given to tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

By combining a manual qualitative content analysis and a multiple embedded case study, the combined findings in the previous two sections have supported the two lines of inquiry pursued in this thesis. One prong of the investigation has been to explore the types of tools conceptualized for strategizing in business relationships. The other prong of the investigation has been to examine how managers use tools when strategizing in business relationships. This section discusses the answers to these two research questions in combination so that the insights from the independent papers come together into a coherent contribution.

The term 'relationship and networking strategy tools' (RNSTs) has been put forth in the IMP approach to strategizing as a distinct concept to encompass tools relevant for strategizing in business relationships and networks. In this concluding discussion, I consider the importance of disseminating the IMP toolbox of RNSTs. Next, I attend to the initial conceptual framework of RNSTs and suggest two fine-tunings. Based on the findings and discussion of this study, and to bring us up to date on the subject matter of tool uses in the IMP approach to strategizing, I suggest a "tools-in-interaction" matrix, which discusses an additional dimension (that of using tools proactively and reactively in interactive contexts) further to strategy tool uses in systematic and experimental ways. Finally, I reflect on the attempt taken in this study to differentiate researcher-derived and empirically observed RNSTs and provide some concluding thoughts on the approach to tool development, which is the first dimension of the conceptual framework of RNSTs.

5.3.1 Disseminating the IMP toolbox of RNSTs

Prior to this study, tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks were difficult to attend to as they were dispersed in a jungle of conceptualizations in the IMP literature. Reviewing the IMP literature focusing on the applicable concepts and techniques has been

one way to take stock of the evolving knowledge of the IMP approach to strategizing. The IMP toolbox comprising a repertoire of RNSTs represents the knowledge artefacts which more clearly outlines the IMP approach to strategizing. RNSTs constitute an important category of strategy tools with a tone and language that allows managers to have flexibility.

When it comes to developing the managerial side of IMP (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002; Baraldi et al., 2007; Möller, 2013; Ford and Mouzas, 2013), the IMP toolbox should be of high practical value to a managerial audience. While strategic management tools and techniques (Grant, 2010; Evans, 2010; McKinsey, 2000) remain influential and important to direct attention to strategic options, RNSTs can offer alternative strategic options, by pinpointing, grasping and handling interaction in different ways and to varying degrees. Given that managers are inclined to look for and use a mix of tools (Wright et al., 2012), RNSTs present themselves as an important category of strategy tools for managers to consider a wider range of strategic options.

Distinguishing and making available the IMP toolbox is only one part, disseminating it is another. The IMP toolbox could leverage existing and new channels of communication between the academic and managerial community. According to Easton (2000), there are three "vectors for influence of practitioners" in which knowledge created by academics can reach and influence practitioners. First, knowledge can be read in textbooks or articles (both academic and practitioner-oriented). In such an instance, it is often not known whether or how the knowledge is being received, understood or used. Second, knowledge can also be disseminated via teaching or training. Here, direct involvement with the student means that the flow of knowledge is much more controlled. Third, knowledge can also be made available to practitioners directly through consultancy of various kinds. Here the knowledge is used in a negotiated environment. Concentrating managerial implications within a dedicated place in an article has also been suggested to improve the dissemination process (Baraldi et al., 2014). Embracing new technologies such as blogging and social media to reach practitioners through their preferred channels has also been encouraged (Brennan et al., 2014). In terms of online access, the IMP homepage could also be a very useful resource. The IMP toolbox can leverage these existing and new channels of communication for dissemination.

Disseminating RNSTs seems to be a responsibility of IMP researchers, given the increasing availability of tools and concepts emphasizing cooperative aspects and a relational view of strategy (Greve et al., 2014; Jacobides, 2010; Kaplan et al., 2010). For one example, Greve et al. (2014) take an interest in conceptualizing concepts and models explicitly for

achieving alliance and network advantage using first, second and third degrees to think about a firm's network advantage from the perspective of an independent actor. To an indiscriminating managerial audience, first and second degrees may seem to have overlapping areas with the dyad and network levels in the IMP approach to strategizing, and the third degree may seem to have common characteristics with the concept of network position via strategic action discussed in Johanson and Mattson (1992). For another example, Jacobides (2010) recognizes that traditional strategy tools do not take into account how a firm's suppliers and customers are rapidly changing in the business landscape, and suggests a strategy play script tool that describes the underlying logic, story lines, decisions and motives of all the players. These are indications that strategic management tools are rapidly moving towards using the labels 'relationships' and 'networks' to help companies manage the complexity of the business landscape. If IMP researchers are concerned about the potential practical value of IMP research and its distinctive focus on relationships and interactions, more effort in disseminating the IMP toolbox can be helpful.

5.3.2 Fine-tuning the initial conceptualization of RNSTs

Prior to this study, it was difficult to discuss tools in IMP as there was no conceptual framework in place. The conceptual framework of RNSTs (see paper 1) lays out the concept of strategy tools and tool uses for strategizing in business relationships in terms of three commonalities and across six differing dimensions. As pointed out in paper 1, the three commonalities and six dimensions are but a first step towards conceptualizing tools in the IMP approach to strategizing. The conceptual framework of RNSTs can be expected to be continuously developed (both in number of dimensions as well as depth in the dimensions) as we gain more and more insights in this nascent research agenda concerning tools and tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Based on the findings from the combination of the three papers, I suggest two fine-tunings: include the concept of network position as one of its underlying commonalities and further opening up the last dimension by specifying "interactive strategizing categories". I discuss each in turn.

From the empirical investigations, tools used for strategizing in business relationships and networks can be viewed more fundamentally as embodying the strategizing work of aligning the strategic action of the firm. In line with an interactive approach where the firm is embedded in relationships with identifiable counterparts (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992; Gadde et al., 2003; Håkansson and Ford, 2002), the empirical investigations have

demonstrated how tools are in use in the continuous manoeuvring for a favourable position for the company in the business network (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). In interactive contexts, anyone who can affect the long-term development of an important business relationship is potentially a strategist (Baraldi et al., 2007). Even though this strategist is a modest one (Ford and Mouzas, 2008), tools can be used to bring about a desirable network position as an outcome. Therefore, in addition to interconnectedness, interdependence and the notion of limited managerial autonomy, I suggest including "network position" as the fourth commonality.

From the empirical investigations, tools used for strategizing in business relationships and networks can be interactive in a variety of ways. In particular, the six-part typology (Paper 3) emphasizes interactive and detached tool uses and with whom strategy tools can be activated (both inter-organizationally and intra-organizationally). Recognizing an expanding interactive strategizing typology in terms of tool uses is an important aspect in a research tradition that aims to better understand strategy as an interactive process, and the conceptual framework of RNSTs should reflect this development. The last dimension of the conceptual framework could therefore be opened up by specifying "interactive strategizing categories".

These two fine-tunings are depicted as ① and ② respectively in **Figure 7**.
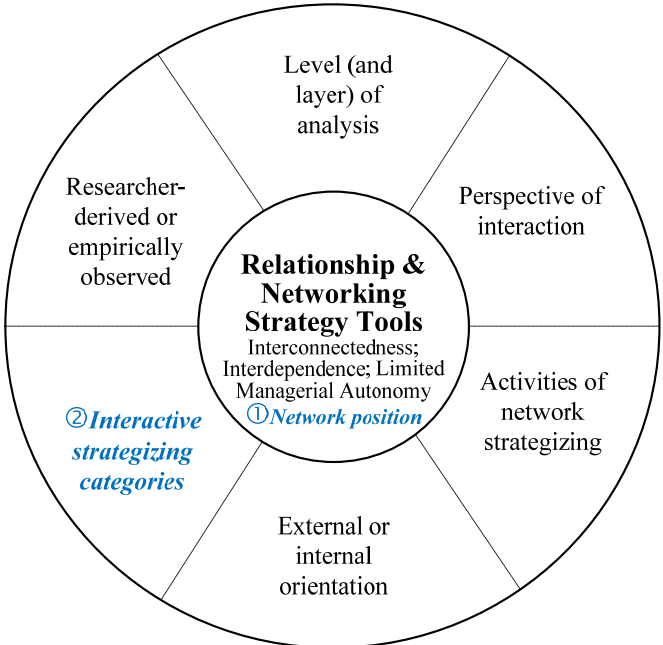

Figure 7 **Fine-tuned conceptual framework of RNSTs**

5.3.3 Outlining an additional dimension of tool uses – tools-in-interaction matrix

Prior to this study, tool uses within the IMP approach to strategizing received limited attention empirically. SaP studies point out that strategy tools can be conceptualized as tools-in-use (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014) and portrayed as fluid objects used with or without designation, systematically and experimentally (Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Stenfors, 2007; Whittington et al., 2006). In SaP studies, academic opinions about strategy tool uses had been centred on regarding strategy tools simultaneously as instruments of efficiency and as 'strategy toys' (Stenfors, 2007). However, due to strategy tools' conventional association with the general strategy literature, discussions of strategy tool uses tended to bring about the imagery of one-sided managerial control.

The empirical material has shown that managers caught up in the use of strategy tools when strategizing in business relationships have to grapple with the practical details of doing interaction in business relationships, where in particular the two-way use of tools can be discerned. In other words, the proactive and reactive aspects of strategizing in relationships can be discerned by an appreciation of the practical tools required to carry it out (paper 2).

Proactive use is demonstrated in the conscious attempts of an actor to engage in strategic action to change the process of interaction within the relationships in which it is directly or indirectly involved. Reactive use denotes *reacting* to the involved counterparts' proposals and suggestions. As interaction consists of a series of actions and counteractions, there is always a significant other or others to consider. Strategizing in the IMP approach is contingent on the actions and reactions of others, so is this embodied in the use of tools. The essence of using strategy tools *in a bi-directional way* is regarding them as being embedded in a series of actions and counteractions instead of being one-sided (such as independent action and pursuing victory over others). The reactive aspects therefore differentiate tool uses in strategizing in business relationships from the unilateral interpretation of strategy tools being practised 'on' others, the so-called limited and stylized view offered by strategic management thinking.

I suggest that tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks can be explained by a "tools-in-interaction" matrix which discusses an additional dimension- that of using tools proactively and reactively in interactive contexts- further to the thinking of strategy tool uses in systematic and experimental ways proposed by SaP.

Strategizing in business relationships and networks with tools can use tools proactively and reactively to facilitate and generate interaction and to create benefits and

affect development paths in business relationships. These four possible quadrants of interactivity can be encapsulated in the "tools-in-interaction" matrix shown in **Figure 8**.
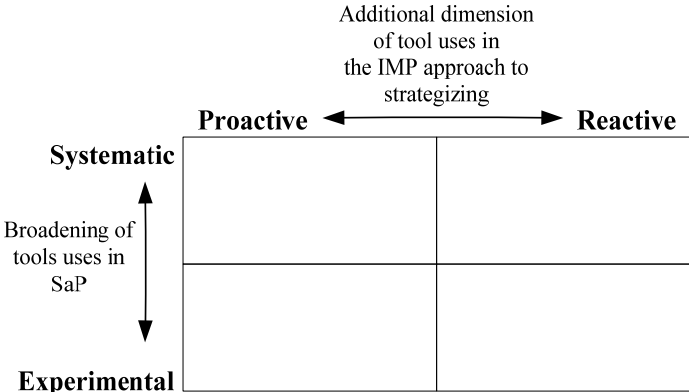

Figure 8 **Tools-in-interaction matrix**

When strategizing in business relationships, managers can use tools to proactively shape the interactive aspects in relationships. In addition, tools can be used to reactively to explore unknown opportunities from interactive effects. Business relationships never present themselves as clear and unambiguous signals that managers can act upon. Much of the information needed for strategizing in business relationships may be unclear or even conflicting. Therefore, distinguishing proactive and reactive tool uses can be helpful to consider the interactive contexts that are at play, to generate more strategic options and to promote flexibility.

Reactive tool uses can be thought of as follows. Reactive systematic uses imply using tools in an organized manner to gather more information, to gain more insights about the plans and visions of counterparts, but considering their counterparts' reaction in the relationship. Reactive systematic uses therefore can include tools used to "listen" better to counterparts', to engage counterparts with similar interests, and to improve commitment and communication with counterparts. Strategizing in business relationships entails being alert to opportunities in relationships but contingent upon others.

Reactive experimental uses imply using tools without continuously making systematic efforts to acquire new insights about the plans and visions of counterparts, to explore opportunities that were not conceived but either party before the interaction.

5.3.4 Paying attention to approach to tool development

Prior to this study, there was no distinction between researcher-derived and empirically observed strategy tools in an IMP approach to strategizing, and understandably, no discussion about the approach to tool development. However, there have been concerns about the (in)adequacy of the managerial technology transfer processes in IMP, that application has seldom been high up the researcher´s list of priorities (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002). At the same time, Easton (2000) considered it important that both contextualizing the IMP knowledge and evaluating its use in practice can provide a feedback loop that helps to modify the knowledge as understood by the academics.

Distinguishing between researcher-derived and empirically observed strategy tools has been suggested by SaP (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). They further point out that recognizing the two phases of dissociation inherent in strategy tools can be very useful to understand what can be considered the feedback loop of strategy tools (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006).

This study has attended to tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks conceptually and empirically. I suggest that paying attention to researcher-derived RNSTs is important, for we cannot gain a proper understanding of how managers use tools for strategizing in business relationships and why they are applied until we have a so-called base data concerning the types of tools we offer in the IMP approach to strategizing (paper 1). I also suggest that investigating tool uses for strategizing in business relationships and networks (that is, attending to empirically observed RNSTs) is also equally important, for analyzing empirically observed RNSTs provides insight in the creative and improvisatory practices involved for strategizing in business relationships and networks. The interest is not in the strengths or weaknesses of tools per se which are often elusive and not sustained, but rather how they are being used (Whittington et al., 2006; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014). This study has taken steps in this direction (papers 2 and 3) and it represents initial steps to give research priority to increase the pool of empirically observed RNSTs.

Using aspects from the dissociation model introduced in Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2006), and considering RNSTs as a special category of strategy tools, researcher-derived and empirically observed RNSTs can also be conceptualized to be interconnected via the dissociation process that comprises the two phases (depicted as ① and ② in **Figure 9**). Similarly, in the IMP approach to strategizing, one can see the two dissociation phases of RNSTs proceeding linearly in a forward manner, and also in the reverse direction.

Two phases
of dissociation

Researcher-
derived
RNSTs

① ②

Empirically
observed
RNSTs

Managerial technology
transfer processes
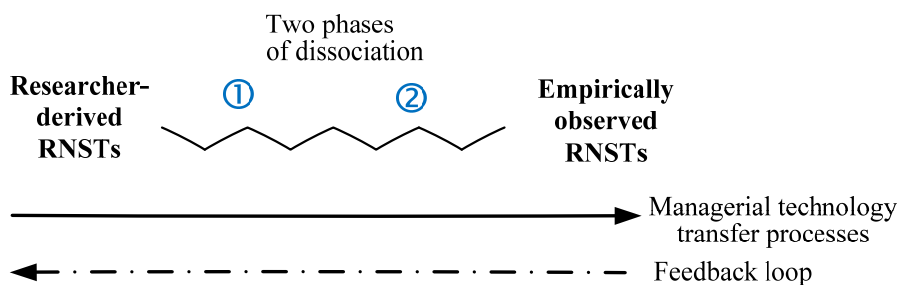
Feedback loop

Figure 9 **Approach to tool development**

I further suggest that paying attention to the approach to tool development is akin to immersing in this feedback loop of RNSTs. Distinguishing between researcher-derived and empirically observed RNSTs and recognizing the two phases of dissociation can help to keep the researcher´s attention on generating knowledge in an IMP approach to strategizing that is applicable, as well as keeping one's eye on its application.

6. Contribution, implications and suggestions for further research

Previous studies in the IMP approach to strategizing as well as selected strategy tool studies from Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) have provided valuable insights on the topic of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Based on the findings and discussion, this chapter outlines the overall contribution of the thesis, as well as the implications for researchers and practitioners. I also point out directions for future research in what can be considered an exciting topic of tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

6.1 Contribution

The thesis contributes to literature on the IMP approach to strategizing in five ways.

First, the term 'relationship and networking strategy tools´ (RNSTs) has been put forth as a distinct concept to encompass tools relevant for strategizing in business relationships and networks.

Second, a fine-tuned conceptual framework of RNSTs with four commonalities and six differing dimensions to structure and stimulate discussions concerning tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks has been developed.

Third, when it comes to developing the managerial side of IMP (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002; Baraldi et al., 2007; Möller 2013; Ford and Mouzas, 2013), an initial IMP strategy toolbox, which more clearly outlines the IMP approach to strategizing using tools, is presented.

Fourth, with regards to deliberate strategizing in business relationships and networks (Möller and Halinen, 1999; Wilkinson and Young, 2002; Tikkanen and Halinen, 2003; Ritter et al., 2004; Holmen et al., 2003; Baraldi et al., 2007; Ford and Mouzas, 2008; Harrison and Prenkert, 2009; Harrison et al., 2010; Aaboen et al., 2013; Öberg, 2010), this thesis also contributes by suggesting a six-part typology of interactive strategizing categories where two strategizing configurations additional to the literature are being discussed. 'Strategizing with' and 'strategizing beside' stood out as important strategizing categories to pinpoint the importance of considering the interplay between the external and the internal network when strategizing in business relationships and networks.

Finally, this thesis also contributes to IMP studies embracing strategizing from a practical viewpoint (Harrison, 2007; Harrison et al., 2010; La Rocca and Perna, 2014; Nyström et al., 2017) by proposing a 'tools-in-interaction' matrix which discusses an

additional dimension further to the thinking of strategy tool uses in systematic and experimental ways - that of using tools proactively and reactively in interactive contexts.

On the last point, although I did not intend to do so, this thesis may have taken another step to broaden the interpretation of tool uses than extant SaP studies (Stenfors, 2007; Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006).

6.2 Theoretical implications

The theoretical contributions offer several implications that researchers in the IMP approach to strategizing might want to consider.

First, researchers can consider using the term 'relationship and networking strategy tools' (RNSTs) to refer to a range of researcher-derived or empirically observed concepts, methods, models, techniques, frameworks and methodologies, emphasizing interconnectedness, interdependence, the notion of limited managerial autonomy and network position, that can be used for strategizing in business relationships and networks. Researchers with teaching responsibilities may introduce the IMP toolbox to students, and to MBA and experience-based master students.

Second, researchers can discern between researcher-derived and empirically observed RNSTs when reviewing and suggesting tools for strategizing in business relationships and networks. IMP studies can signal their strategic content clearly in terms of managerial implications and consider potential extension of the IMP toolbox. Furthermore, tool construction, tool dissemination and investigating tool uses are all interconnected in the feedback loop of RNSTs.

Third, researcher interested to approach strategizing from a practical viewpoint can be made aware that practices can be regarded as a set of tools, as this study has shown. Focusing on tool uses as units of analysis can be very fruitful to uncover interaction patterns in business relationships and networks.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

The thesis has started the work of refining the concept of strategy tools by suggesting the term 'relationship and networking strategy tools' (RNSTs) and the understanding of tool uses that were both previously underexplored in the research agenda of the IMP approach to strategizing. As a result of this thesis, several exciting avenues of research emerge.

6.3.1 Extend and augment the IMP toolbox

This study has started the work of outlining an IMP strategy toolbox. These researcher-derived RNSTs can be useful to stimulate further discussions about the applicability of strategy tools in interaction in business relationships. Whereas the use of strategic management tools and techniques has been critiqued as waxing and waning and needing to be retrofitted when business cycles turn (Løwendahl and Revang, 1998; Venkatraman and Subramanian, 2006), the interaction model and the ARA model have proven to be conceptually resilient (Cova et al., 2015). RNSTs may be more stable and applicable than we think, if only they stand a chance to be disseminated more incisively to the managerial community.

Further research could look into updating and augmenting the first release of the IMP toolbox presented in Paper 1 of this thesis. The manual qualitative content analysis approach deployed in this study building on earlier research (Brennan et al., 2009; Easton et al., 2003) will provide a useful reference. In addition, identifying and capturing RNSTs going forward will still need to make the effort to make the implicit explicit, but the research task would be rendered a little less difficult now that a conceptual framework of RNSTs is in place.

A possible path would be to offer a comparison of relational/relationship strategy tools, between those put forth by strategic management thinking (such as Greve et al., 2014 and Jacobides, 2010) and those suggested by IMP researchers. For example, along such a path, it might be interesting to systematize the relevant tools and lay them out on a spectrum in terms of various degrees of relationship embeddedness, akin to the theory map of business marketing presented by Möller (2013). Due its high practical interest and value and the inclination for practitioners to have a mix of tools, this research avenue could be very enticing for researchers keen on making IMP concepts and models more ready-to-use (Brennan and Turnbull, 2002) and offering a balanced approach between academic and consulting language (Baraldi et al., 2014).

Since businesses are traditionally organized in functions that discern marketing practitioners from purchasing, and practitioner audience are typically embedded in a buyer or a seller context, another path to develop the toolbox would be to orient it towards the supplier side or the customer side. Researchers interested in supplier themes could consider extending the tools in the IMP toolbox in terms of supplier involvement (Johnsen, 2009; Croom, 2001; Laursen and Andersen, 2016; Andersen and Drejer, 2009; Van Echtelt et al., 2008; Wynstra and Pierick, 2000; Wynstra et al., 2001). Researchers interested in looking on the customer side may consider augmenting the present collection of tools in the IMP toolbox in terms of customer involvement (La Rocca et al., 2016; Laage-Hellman et al., 2014) as well as relationship initiation, new ventures and startups (Aaboen et al., 2013; La Rocca and Perna, 2014; Perna et al., 2015; Aaboen et al., 2017; Aarikka-Stenroos et al., 2018).

Future studies to update the IMP toolbox can also take into account latest studies. One example would be business network foresight as a procedure for supporting actors' strategizing efforts in business networks (Andersen et al., 2018).

6.3.2 Investigate tool uses with multiple case holistic design

This study has scratched the surface of the empirical phenomenon of managers engaging with a plethora of tools when they do the work of 'relating' using multiple embedded case study design. In an IMP perspective that emphasizes the heterogeneity of all types of resources, investigating how RNSTs are used and how they create value in business relationships and networks is a very exciting prospect. Such studies are considered an effort to give research priority to increase the pool of empirically observed RNSTs.

Regarding practices as a set of tools (Rouleau, 2013; Golsorkhi et al., 2010), and building on the empirical results of this multiple embedded case study design, further research in IMP can use the multiple case study as a reference but adopt a holistic design. While cases are selected business relationships(s), the unit of analysis could be a specific tool use in the relationship(s). Many lines of inquiry could emerge by focusing on one tool. For instance, this study has provided vignettes and analysis of tool uses and pointed out that particular RNSTs are deployed in practice. One possibility is to focus on a specific event-like initiative (such as a series of procurement manager forums, conferences or supplier reviews over a specific period) or a specific physical tool (such as a supplier scorecard system or a sales database). A multiple case but holistic design would allow investigations into such a specific event-like initiative in greater depth to specify for instance how the typical agenda gets made, who else

are involved (inter-organizationally and intra-organizationally), how often are they actually implemented to support strategizing in business relationships. A multiple case but holistic design would also allow investigations into a specific physical tools more deeply to specific how they are created, maintained and used and by whom. The latter could connect with ongoing IMP studies on digitized business relationships (Corsaro et al., 2017).

6.3.3 Develop the six-part typology of interactive strategizing categories

Further research could build on the six-part typology where 'strategizing with' and 'strategizing beside' stood out as important strategizing categories. In conjunction with focusing on one specific tool in greater depth, further research could further inquire into how a tool can be used for handling strategic interaction in the interplay between the internal and the external network. Such studies could draw on extant IMP studies which shed light on the involvement of one or more members of the internal network as well as the internal routines and processes to handle the variety and scale of external variation (Pardo et al., 2011; Ellegaard and Koch, 2012; Håkansson and Ford, 2016; Ritter et al., 2004; Öberg, 2010; Holmen et al., 2013). Such a path could possibly lead to discovery of more strategizing configurations that lie beyond the six-part typology outlined in this study.

6.4 Managerial implications

The theoretical contributions offer some implications that managers might want to take into account when strategizing in business relationships and networks. These implications, which are explained below, are particularly relevant for managers who are interested in a relationship orientation to pervade the values and norms of the organization.

6.4.1 Use and mix tools in the IMP toolbox to create unique relationships and boost value creation in relationships

Strategizing in business relationships and networks is challenging but also full of opportunities. Like the Director of Business Development at LiftCo, managers should not hesitate in seeking tools to guide thinking and to scrutinize hunches relying on implicit or experience-based knowledge concerning the complexities in relationships and networks. Whether to analyze their relationship embeddedness, and those of their immediate connections, and their strategic implications, the IMP toolbox offers a wide variety of

sophisticated and original tools that can help to generate more strategic options and to be better prepared for the next interaction. While managers today have many tools at their disposal, the IMP toolbox, as as part of a set of strategy tools, can also be a useful resource to discuss the realities of the business landscape with business counterparts as well as internal counterparts.

Tools from the IMP toolbox are also toys that can be used to jointly develop unique and creative strategies with others. Seeing each business relationship as unique and as a resource, managers could actively combine the tools in the IMP toolbox with the diverse and plural features of the relationships in which they are embedded and seek opportunities to boost value creation in business relationships.

6.4.2 Use tools not only systematically and experimentally, but also proactively and reactively

As the scope of strategy shifts to an interactive perspective in which development and survival depend on relationships to actors in the surrounding networks, managers could take caution that using tools (IMP-related or not) can sometimes be one-sided and sometimes need sensitivity to the interactions in the business relationships. Therefore, tools should be used not only systematically and experimentally, but also proactively and reactively.

The tools-in-interaction matrix can be considered as a mini-chessboard of possible modes for engaging a particular tool for relating to one or more counterparts. For example, when engaging a tool focused on improving communication and coordination versus that of goal matching, the four quadrants of interactivity can inspire managers about appropriate modes of tool uses, which can entail for instance leading or directing sometimes, but following or listening at others. The four quadrants of interactivity can also be helpful in retrospectively analysing how tools might have been used and their outcomes, so that managers can reflect on their practices for reaching out to others and to envision together.

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Appendix

Interview guide

Introduction and warm up
Department and informant background
- *function and role*
- *previous experience; challenges*

How important are business relationships to the firm?
- *what are they based on?*
- *how are they evolving and changing?*

Part I Theme: relationships
- *Who are your top three (customer/ supplier) relationships?*
- *What characterizes this relationship?*
    - *history*
    - *what makes it stand out as being important?*
- *How are you "thinking" about the (relationships) to the counterparts?*
    - *on the relationship itself*
    - *in conjunction with other relationships?*
- *What are you "doing" in the relationships to the counterparts?*
    - *nature of cooperation, communication, coordination*

Part II Theme: possible tools
- *Which possible tools are involved in terms of how you are "thinking" about the relationships to the counterparts?*
    - *conceptual*
        - *concepts/ techniques?*
    - *process-related*
        - *routines?*
        - *practices?*
    - *physical*
        - *forms/templates?*
        - *physical systems?*
- *What do these tools comprise/ emphasise?*
    - *features/ elements?*
    - *outcome?*
- *How are these tools used?*
    - *Who uses them?*
    - *with whom?*

Part II Theme: possible tools (continued)
- *Which possible tools are involved in terms of what you are "doing" in the relationships to the counterparts?*
  - *conceptual*
    - *concepts/ techniques?*
  - *process-related*
    - *routines?*
    - *practices?*
  - *physical*
    - *forms/templates?*
    - *physical systems?*
- *What do these tools comprise/ emphasise?*
  - *features/ elements?*
  - *outcome?*
- *How are these tools used?*
  - *Who uses them?*
  - *with whom?*

Close
How would you like the relationship to evolve?
Which trends driving your industry are most likely to affect the relationship?

Part II

Relationship and networking strategy tools: characterizing the IMP toolbox

Caroline Cheng and Elsebeth Holmen

Paper 1

Investigating strategy tools
from an interactive perspective

Caroline Cheng and Malena Ingemansson Havenvid

Paper 2

How managers interact using strategy tools

Caroline Cheng and Debbie Harrison

Submitted to *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*

Paper 3