

Networking dimensions and performance of event management ventures in Kenya

Jacqueline Cheptekeny Korir

School of Tourism Hospitality and Events Management, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

Email: jtepkenny71@gmail.com

The role of networking in the sharing of knowledge and information is well documented. What is not clear, however, are the facets of networks that best drive firm performance, and whether or not the nature of business is a factor. The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of networking dimensions on the performance of event management ventures in Kenya. The researcher conceptualised that performance of ventures was a function of networking dimensions such as network capability, network structure and network dynamics. The study adopted a covariance-based confirmatory research design that sought to confirm indicators of the four variables under study, and also to establish the causal link between networking dimensions and venture performance. A population of 313 ventures was targeted, from which a sample of 288 proprietors was drawn. Using Structural Equation Modelling as the principal analysis approach, the study established that networking dimensions positively and significantly predict events venture performance. Moreover, the measurement model confirmed that the customer and learning and growth perspectives were the main indicators of events venture performance.

Keywords: event management, network capability, network dynamics, network structures, structural model, venture performance

Introduction

The event management business continues to gain more attention among scholars owing to the exponential growth witnessed in the events industry in the recent past (Duncan et al., 2013). It is argued that the dynamic nature of the events sector requires good relationships that are often the outcomes of thriving networks among entrepreneurs offering complementary products or services. Evidence does suggest that entrepreneurs' ability to start and grow businesses is a function of embeddedness in social networks (Ostgaard & Birley, 1996, as cited in Stam, 2010, p. 625). The argument is that besides exposing entrepreneurs to business opportunities (Ozgen & Baron, 2007), networks also enable them to source financial and human resources (Shane & Cable, 2002, as cited in Stam, 2010, p. 625).

Event management is a business that is attracting a lot of interest among entrepreneurs in Kenya. According to the Kenya directory, Soft Kenya, a total of 111 events companies, covering diverse fields, had been registered by 2013. This expanded interest in events management has resulted in suspicion and heightened competition for customers among entrepreneurs. Such competition therefore requires that indicators for measuring the performance of these ventures should factor in customers' preferences. The present study therefore takes cognisance of the networks theory to argue that the direction events venture performance takes is dependant on the robustness that individual entrepreneurs' show in terms of network structures, capability and dynamism. The goal of this study was therefore to establish the causal link between the three network dimensions of capability, structure, and dynamics, and the performance of events management ventures.

Literature review

Events and events management

Silvers (2004), defines event management as a process through which the planning, preparation, and production of an event is realised. Event management in Silvers' views therefore broadly focuses on activities such as concept, planning, economics, communication, sponsorship, human resources, promotion, marketing, monitoring and evaluation, logistics, and design, among others. Silvers (2004), however, observes that event management in contemporary society focuses mainly on experience delivery, irrespective of the size and type of the event. The present study, therefore, argues that event management ventures ought to turn to networks in order to facilitate the realisation of their goals and objectives and fulfil guest's needs and expectations.

Networking is viewed in extant literature as a reciprocal "grant and receive" situation aimed at leaving all concerned partners contented (Burg, 1998). Brüderl and Preisendörfer (1998) concur that entrepreneurs who are able to make reference to a diversity of social networks and those who receive support from such networks are bound to be more successful. Johanson and Mattsson (1987) support the views of Brüderl and Preisendörfer in arguing that ventures rely on networks with other players to enjoy resources that they would have not been able to enjoy so easily.

In line with the arguments made with references to the potency of networks in the realisation of events management ventures' goals, the present study identified network capability, network structure, and network dynamics (Clegg et al., 2016) as the dimensions of networks that could be used to explain the robustness required by events management ventures to deal with the rigours of event management and, by extension, lead to improved performance.

Events venture performance

Measurement of the success and performance of events management ventures remains a matter of concern among scholars (Langen & Garcia, 2009; Talwar et al., 2010). Taking cognisance of the concerns of Witt (2004) regarding the lack of consistency in variable definition, and bearing in mind that events management ventures are mainly socially oriented, the present study postulates that the performance of these ventures could best be measured using the balanced scorecard. The balanced scorecard, as cited in Margarita (2008), was developed by Robert Kaplan and David Norton in 1992, ostensibly to measure performance on more than just financial statements. The balanced scorecard theory noted by Margarita (2008) envisages that financial performance measures are ineffective for the requirements of modern business enterprises. Consequently, the recognition by Kaplan and Norton that besides focusing on financial performance, business entities need to consider other performance perspectives such as customer satisfaction, internal processes of business processes, and growth (Margarita, 2008), becomes ever more important.

Accordingly, the study argues that the performance of events management ventures should seek to measure: 1) learning and growth, captured through job satisfaction, employee turnover, levels of specialist knowledge, and training opportunities; 2) internal business processes focusing on activities undertaken per function, process alignment, and process automation; 3) customer satisfaction, customer retention, event delivery and event quality; and 4) the financial performance captured via return on investment (ROI), cash flow, and financial results.

Network capability and events management venture performance

Network capability is grounded in the competency-based theory advanced by Hunt and Lambe (2000). According to Hunt and Lambe (as cited in Human & Naude, 2009, p. 3), the competence-based theory is an internal factors theory that strives to explain resource exploitation strategy development with a view to gaining competitive advantage. Walter et al. (2006) argue that as a higher order construct, network capability is more important than just having networks. Dyer and Singh (1998) define network capability as the skill used in applying appropriate control mechanisms, common procedures, and spearheading any required changes with a view to creating and handling numerous connections.

Walter et al. (2006), on the other hand, conceptualise network capability as a venture's ability to create and make use of external and internal relationships. They therefore identify four constructs that may be used to measure network capability. The first construct, *coordination*, connects ventures with common interests for purposes of mutually supportive interactions. The second construct, *relational skills*, focuses on the management of relationships among businesses. *Partner knowledge*, the third construct identified by Walter and colleagues, brings stability to a firm's position within a network. The fourth construct, *internal communication*, concentrates on the assimilation and dissemination of more current information regarding partnerships, resources, as well as mutual agreements between partners.

Previous studies have given inconclusive findings regarding the effect of network capability on venture performance.

Human and Naude (2009) established that network capability as a latent variable relates positively and significantly with firm performance, but they failed to identify the particular firms under consideration. Besides, the finding by the two scholars that network capability explains a mere 22.9% of the variation in firm performance calls for more scrutiny of this variable in other contexts. Mitrega et al. (2017) provide evidence that network capability has a positive influence on a firm's product innovation, as well as on overall firm performance through an improved supplier relationship. Such findings are, however, inconclusive because the study conducted by Mitrega et al. (2017) focuses on only one setting (the automotive parts industry). The heterogeneity experienced in events management ventures, coupled with the inconclusive findings leads to the postulation that

H_01 : Events management venture performance is independent of network capability.

Network structure and events management venture performance

The network structure variable is founded in the social network theory (Barnes, 1954), and posits that the structure of the relationship has the potential to affect beliefs or behaviours of an individual, group of individuals, or organisation. Hoang and Antoncic (2003, as cited in Maina et al., 2016) define network structure as the pattern of ties that binds different actors. Such ties have been noted in literature to be important in a firm's acquisition of external resources and competitive capabilities necessary for their operations (McEvily & Marcus, 2005; Zaheer & Bell, 2005). It is argued that due to the need for accountability to partner business ethics, firms ought to have network structures in place commensurate with expected company culture (Smelser & Baltes, 2001).

The success of network structure is reportedly pegged on resources within the network, ties between network partners, partner characteristics and type, and the amount of trust manifesting in partner relationships (Marsden & Campbell, 2012). Consequently, the present study conceptualised that network structure could be aptly measured using the following constructs: 1) type of partners drawn from among relatives, friends, institutions, and service providers; 2) resources held by partners; 3) strength of ties; and 4) trust among partners.

Although several studies have been conducted and show evidence of positive effects of network structure on firm performance, most of them focus on supply network structure. Bellamy et al. (2014), for instance, examined the influence of supply network structure on firm innovation and reported that structural network characteristics tended to impact positively on firm innovation. Moreover, though networks remain powerful metaphors in an endeavour to explain social realities, critiques continue to decry the destruction of prior tightly woven communities that were hitherto location specific at the expense of individual connectedness (Wellman, 2002). It is argued that networks in their present structure tend to undermine productive forms of sociality (Mejias, 2006).

According to Mejias (2006), current social networks concentrate more on the connecting nodes at the expense of the space between the nodes. In the event management industry, it is prudent to analogously view the proprietors as the nodes and employees as the space between the nodes. The question arising therefore is whether event management

venture entrepreneurs in Kenya take cognisance of the space between the key nodes in their networks and whether this impacts on eventual venture performance. I think that this may not be so and postulate as follows:

H_02 : Events management venture performance is independent of network structure.

Network dynamics and events management venture performance

Network dynamics is embedded in the dynamic network theory perspective. Westaby et al. (2014) contend that the dynamics theory perspective seeks to explain the influence that social networks may be having on business outcomes such as goal achievement, learning, performance, and emotional attachment. Håkansson and Waluszewski (2004) argue that dynamics are the agents of change in business-oriented networks. As a consequence, dynamics contribute to observed changes in relationships within the network. Larson and Starr (as cited in Hoang & Antoncic, 2003, p. 175) posit that through network dynamics, networks can be viewed from the organisational formation, structural, and network evolution perspectives.

Although network dynamics has been credited with transformative impacts in terms of knowledge exchange and innovation (Clegg et al., 2016), evidence suggests that challenges exist in decoding network dynamics. Easton (1992, as cited in Chou & Zolkiewski, 2012, p. 247) notes that decoding network dynamics is made difficult by the challenge of delimiting the network boundary for purposes of research. Moreover, it is also argued that the embeddedness and connectedness of networks make it difficult to understand the context within which to situate network dynamics and its causal effects (Ford & Håkansson, 2006).

Network dynamics have also been found to be limited by topological effects such as rainfall, time variability, social rank, network density, and triadic closure (Ilany et al., 2015). In Kenya, time variability is a major factor to network dynamics in events venture networks. Most events management ventures do booming businesses during festive seasons, and others often fold soon after. Triadic closure, where events management entrepreneurs form associations with friends, and friends of friends, is another limitation to network dynamics in the event management industry in Kenya. Such limitations and challenges to the delimitation of network dynamics beg the question “has network dynamics as a dimension of networking any impact on events management venture performance?” To this end, the study postulates that:

H_03 : Events management venture performance is independent of network dynamics.

Research approach

The study focused on establishing the effect dimensions of events management venture networks have on eventual venture performance. Consequently, I assumed the positivism paradigm that advocates for organised methods to discover and confirm a set of probabilistic causal laws useful in predicting patterns of human activity through precise empirical observations of individual behaviour (Neuman, 2007). In view of this positivist position, the study adopted the confirmatory research design that is covariance based and focuses on the explanation of relationships among variables (Butler, 2014).

The study targeted proprietors of events management ventures specialising in catering, cake baking, floral arrangements, event planning, and hiring tents, chairs, furniture and public address systems. The study population comprised 313 events ventures drawn from Kisumu, Nairobi, and Uasin Gishu counties of Kenya. Bearing in mind the number of parameters under study, and the need to avoid overcorrection of standard errors (Yu & Muthén, 2002), a total of 288 ventures were sampled. Study units were first stratified according to the genre of events they specialised in, thereafter simple random sampling using the random number approach was used to select the required units from each genre.

A self-administered proprietors’ questionnaire comprising four sections consistent with the four latent variables under study was developed and used to collect the required information. Data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), which Chin (1998) argues is a second generation multivariate method that allows analysis of all variables in the model simultaneously as opposed to holding some variables constant while examining the influence of one, like in the case of multiple regression. The choice of SEM for the present study was therefore informed by the need to establish how well the conceptualised indicators measured the four latent variables (confirmatory), as well as to establish the causal link between the network dimensions and venture performance (structural). Evidence shows that SEM has previously been used for both confirmatory and causal modelling (Amir et al., 2012). Variables were operationalised and measured as indicated in Table 1.

The structural model

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was conducted on the structural model to test the formulated hypotheses (Figure 1). The SEM path model was conceptualised to show that network dimensions impact directly on events management venture performance.

The criterion for model evaluation was the “goodness of fit” idea. The essence was to find out how the hypothesised structural model fitted the sample data. Consequently, three categories of fit indices, namely absolute, incremental, and parsimony were employed to test the model fit. The overall fit was achieved by

Table 1: Variables – definitions and measurement

Variable	Nature	Indicator	Measurement
Venture performance (VP)	Endogenous (latent)	Financial performance (FP)	Ordinal scale
		Customer performance (CP)	
		Learning and growth (LG)	
		Internal business process (IB)	
Network capability (NC)	Exogenous (Latent)	Open communication (OPC)	Ordinal scale
		Partners knowledge (PAK)	
		Initiating relationships (INR)	
		Developing relationships (DER)	
Network structure (NS)	Exogenous (Latent)	Strong partners (STP)	Ordinal scale
		Weak partners (WEP)	
		Resource-based partners (RBP)	
		Ethnic partners (ETP)	
Network dynamics (ND)	Exogenous (Latent)	Respect (RES)	Ordinal scale
		Support (SUP)	
		Trust (TRU)	
		Cooperation (COO)	

comparing the default fit indices with the recommended indices shown in Table 2 (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002).

The model was then modified as suggested by the modification indices, if needed. The path estimates (standardised regression weights) in the structural model and variance explained (R^2 value) in the endogenous variable was examined for causation and power.

Analysis and findings

Construct and model validation

Results of the Cronbach’s alpha reliability test presented in Table 3 indicate that all the questionnaire items developed for measuring

Table 2: Fit indices recommended

χ^2 /sig.	χ^2 /df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	RFI	CFI	RMSEA
$p \leq 0.05$	<5.0	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	0.90	0.90	0.05

Chi-square (χ^2); Degrees of Freedom (df); Goodness of Fit Index (GFI); Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI); Normed Fit Index (NFI); Relative Fit Index (RFI); Comparative Fit Index (CFI); Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA)

Table 3: Construct reliability

Constructs	Cases	Items	Cronbach’s alpha
Network capability	271	18	0.862
Network structure	271	17	0.855
Network dynamics	271	13	0.834
Social capital	271	10	0.834
Venture performance	271	12	0.935

the constructs in question had reliability coefficients above the recommended value of 0.7 (Butler, 2014). This indicates that the items were consistent in measuring the constructs.

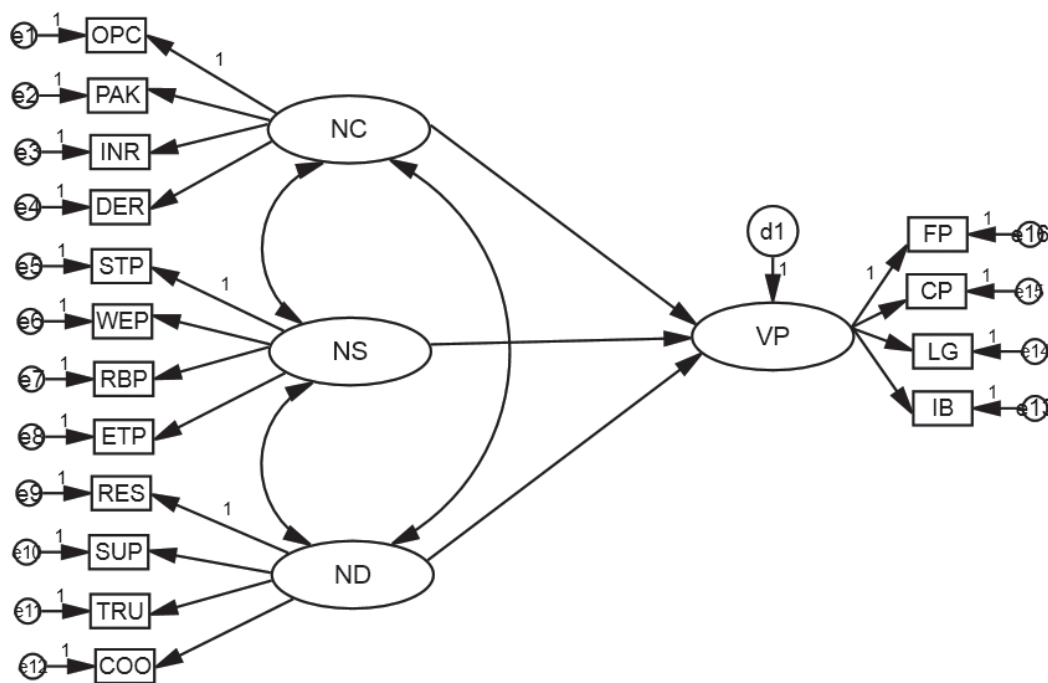
Validation structural model

After establishing and confirming the measurement model, the next step involved validating the hypothesised structural model. Figure 2 presents the results of the validation of the initial structural model.

Fit indices of the initial structural model revealed that the chi-square p -value was below 0.05. However, the other fit indexes contravened the recommended values (χ^2 /df = 4.140; GFI = 0.848; AGFI = 0.793; NFI = 0.590; CFI = 0.647; TLI = 0.582; RMSEA = 0.108) indicating a poor fit in the initial model.

In order to achieve a better model fit, the post-hoc modification indices suggested that the model could be improved further. The model was therefore modified by correlating error terms as suggested by the modification indices (Figure 3). Results of the first modified structural model indicated that χ^2 /df = 2.645 was within the acceptable limits, however, the other fit indices (GFI = 0.894; AGFI = 0.851; NFI = 0.746; CFI = 0.821; RMSEA = 0.078) were not within the acceptable limits. Overall, the fit statistics still indicated a poor fit between the data and the modified model.

The second and final modified structural model (Figure 4) was developed by allowing the suggested error terms to be correlated. The results yielded an excellent fit of the model to the data. Fit indices of this final modified structural model were as follows: chi-square statistic value of 131.099 with 82 degrees



Abbreviations: COO: Coordination; CP: Customer; DER: Developing relationships; ETP: Ethnic partners; FP: Financial performance; IB: Internal business; INR: Initiating relationships; LG: Learning and growth; NC: Network capability; ND: Network dynamics; NS: Network structure; OPC: Open communication; PAK: Partner knowledge; RBP: Resource-based partners; RES: Respect; STP: Strong partners; SUP: Support; TRU: Trust; VP: Venture performance; WEP: Weak partners

Figure 1: Proposed structural model

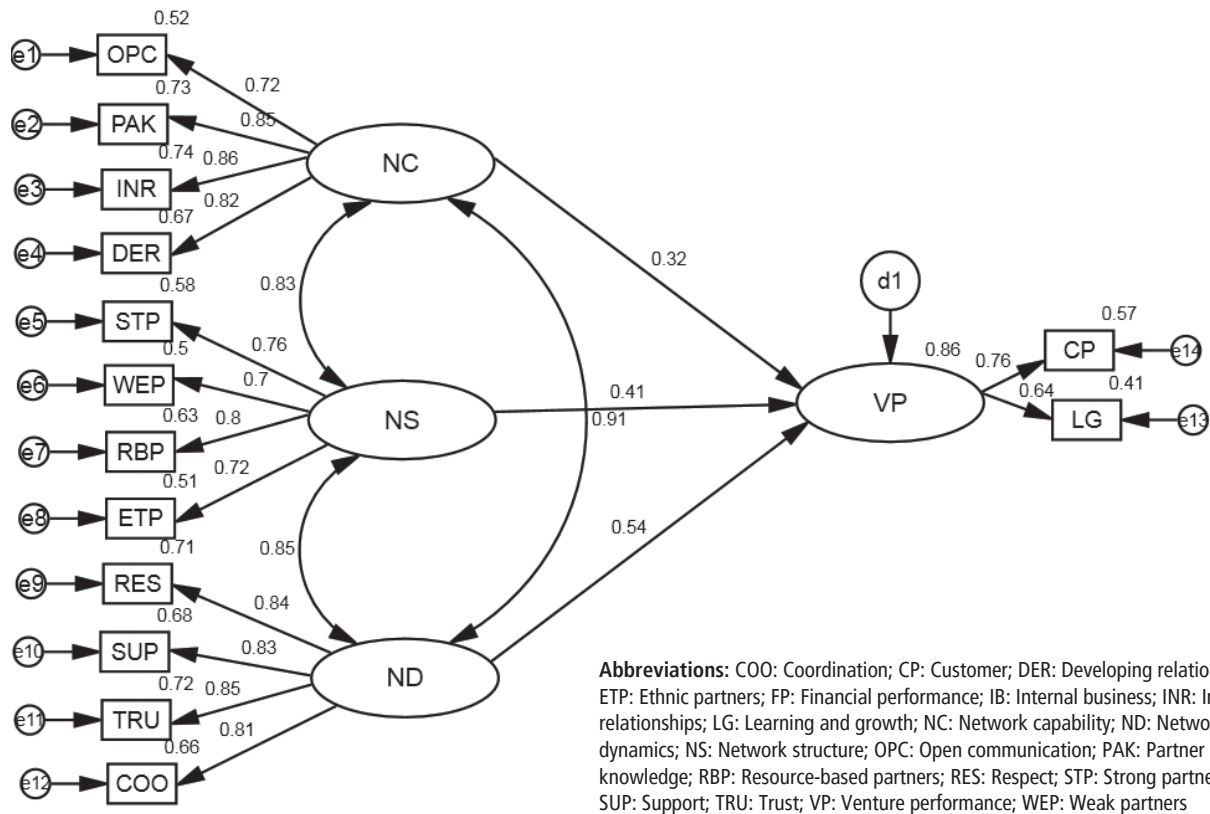


Figure 2: Initial structural model

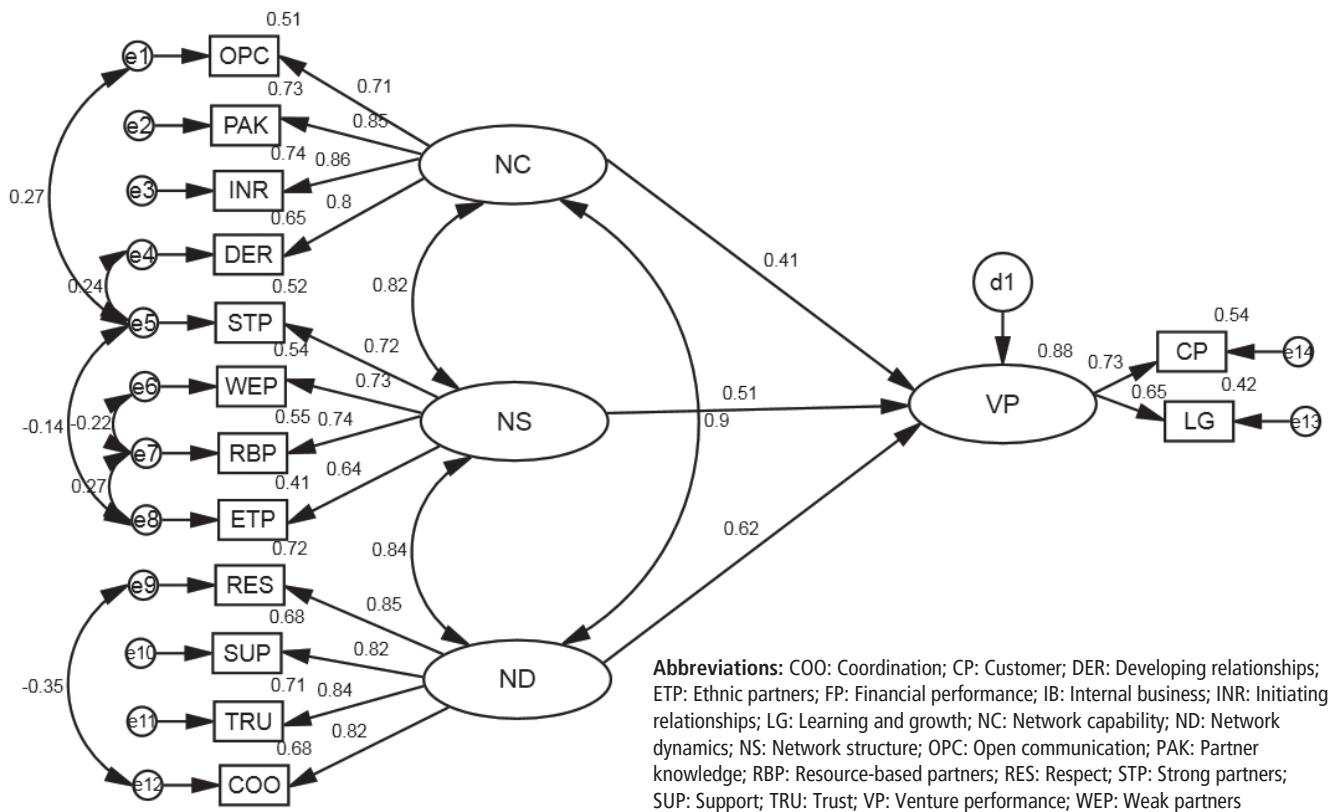


Figure 3: First modified structural model

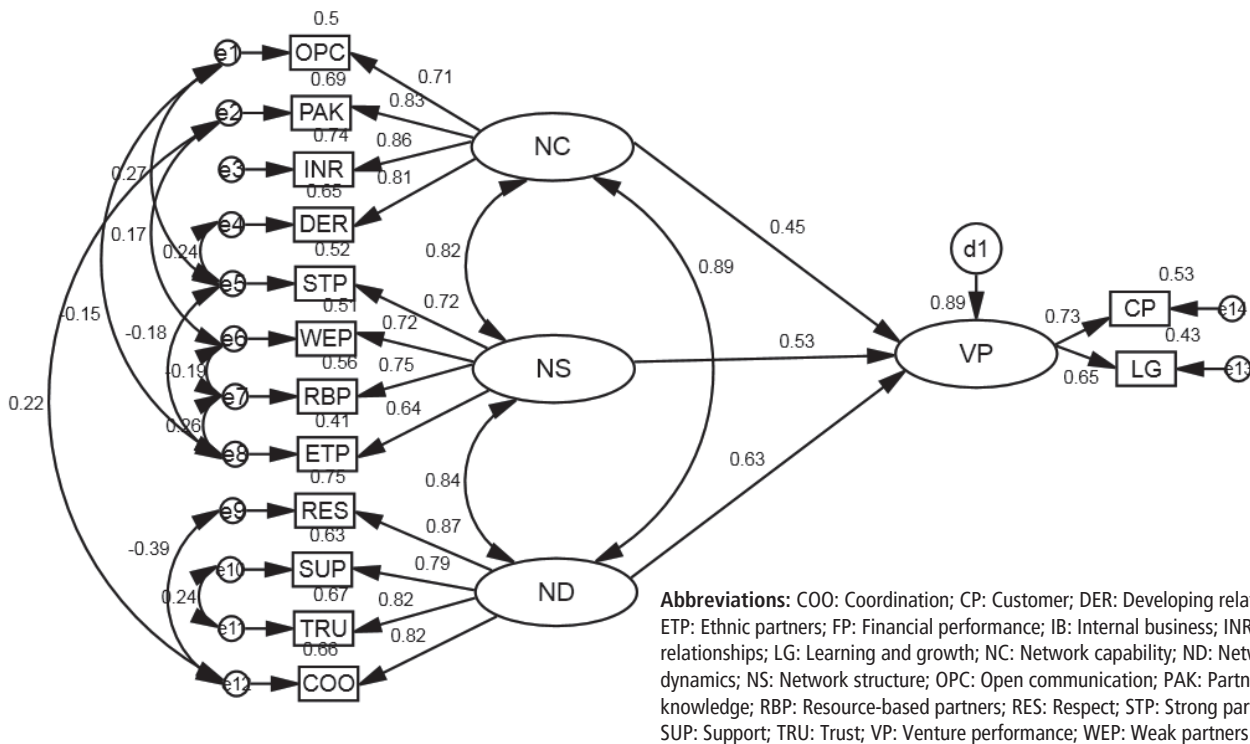


Figure 4: Final structural model

of freedom was statistically significant. The other fit indices were as follows: $\chi^2/df = 1.599$; $GFI = 0.946$; $AGFI = 0.910$; $NFI = 0.870$; $CFI = 0.945$; $RMSEA = 0.047$. This indicated a good fit between the data and the final modified structural model. This model was considered to be the final model since there were no further modification indices suggested.

Results of hypotheses testing

Hypothesis H_01 postulated independence between events venture performance and network capability. Regression weights shown in Table 4 indicate that network capability is a positive and significant predictor of venture performance ($\beta = 0.451, p < 0.05$). The postulation was therefore not supported by the data. The standardised regression weight suggests that an increase of 1 standard deviation in network capability is likely to result in an increase of 0.451 standard deviations in venture performance.

Hypothesis H_02 postulated independence between events venture performance and network structure. The regression weights revealed that network structure was a positive and significant predictor of events management venture performance ($\beta = 0.533, p < 0.05$). Consequently, the postulation that events venture performance is independent of network structure was not supported. An increase of 1 standard deviation in network structure is likely to lead to a corresponding increase of 0.533 standard deviations in venture performance.

Table 4: Regression weights (default model)

Estimate	SE	CR	p
0.451	0.159	6.138	0.027
0.533	0.169	6.454	$p < 0.001$
0.630	0.158	7.469	$p < 0.001$

Hypothesis H_03 postulated independence between events venture performance and network dynamics. The regression weights shown in Table 4 reveal that network dynamics positively and significantly predicts the performance of events management ventures ($\beta = 0.630, p < 0.05$). The postulation that events venture performance is independent of network dynamics was not supported and the researcher concluded that an increase of 1 standard deviation in network dynamics was likely to occasion an increase of 0.630 standard deviations in events venture performance.

Discussion

The study findings show that the network dimensions of capability, structure and dynamics influences performance of events management ventures directly and in a positive way. The findings reflect and support other findings reported in extant literature. For instance, the finding that network structure is a positive and significant predictor of venture performance is consistent with findings showing that network structure is a crucial competitive strategy that can be adopted by firms to enhance flow of resources (Goce, 2009; Yan & Liu, 2012). This in essence implies that events management ventures stand to be more competitive if they invest in trust, and partnership with potential competitors with a view to sharing resources.

The finding in the present study showing that network structure has a positive effect on venture performance, however, contradicts findings by Teng (2007) that partnerships are often complicated by a lack of suitable partners and complexities in decision-making. The contradiction could, however, be due to a difference in study contexts or a difference in approaches, and warrants further research in the area. Partner type also emerges as a potential source of

contradiction in study findings. Oviatt and McDougall (2005) argue that establishing strong ties with friends has the potential to improve venture performance. However, they caution that ties with relatives may not be beneficial since they often hang around entrepreneurs and may not provide innovative ideas.

Salaff et al. (2003) argue that strong ties among ventures with similar ethnicity provide the advantage of ease of access to business networks. Indeed, ethnic affiliation has become a common feature in Kenya with entrepreneurs hoping to capitalise on the ethnic network. The implication then is that despite network structure having a positive and significant impact on venture performance the type of partnership and the strength of the ties will no doubt define the structure of the network and its eventual effectiveness. It is therefore incumbent upon events management entrepreneurs to interrogate such considerations when forming networks.

The finding alluding to network capability as having a positive and significant effect on events management ventures lends support to others (Walter et al., 2006; Human & Naude 2009). The finding in the present study therefore underscores the need for events management proprietors to focus more on network capabilities in order to enhance their performance. It has been documented that network capability at company level promotes behaviour geared towards networks orientations and can support performance of a superior nature (Kale et al., 2002; Walter et al., 2006).

Implications drawn from the finding regarding network capability is that events management ventures in Kenya should look to draw upon their ability to develop and use inter-venture relationships for the purpose of gaining a competitive advantage. This can further be enhanced when ventures display open communication, hone their skills in coordination and relationships, and also increase their partner knowledge. Indeed, it has been argued that good partner knowledge and relationships enhance venture pro-activity (Kim & Aldrich, 2005).

The positive and significant relationship between network dynamics and venture performance provides a new front for looking at network dynamics in relation to company performance. It is imperative to note that little or no evidence exists extolling the impacts of network dynamics as a network dimension on performance. On the contrary, existing studies have tended to address network dynamics in the realm of the dynamic interplay between network structures and rules of engagement (Dagnino et al., 2016). I contend that dynamic networks targeting associations, interactions and individuals or corporate responsibility have the potential to maintain their network position and in consequence, increase information acquisition and access to complementary resources.

On the basis of the findings made, it can be concluded that events management ventures represent occasions for entrepreneurs to join hands and form networks through which they can interact among themselves. The heterogeneity in events ventures is such that the performance of such ventures is mainly hinged on the customer and the learning and growth perspectives of performance. The study therefore confirms that events venture entrepreneurs stand to see improved performance in their ventures if they exploit opportunities for sharing knowledge by forming alliances. Alliances so formed should focus more on structures, partner capability and dynamism, which are crucial dimensions in networks, and impact positively on the performance of these ventures.

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