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The role of power in market control in supplier-buyer relations

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of power dynamics in market control within supplier-buyer relationships, with a specific focus on blockchain technology adoption in supply chain networks. Using five focus group discussions, comprising of diverse participants categorized by sector, location, gender, and company size, the research explores how power influences decision-making processes. Findings reveal that larger companies often prioritize stability over innovation, limiting their willingness to adopt disruptive technologies like blockchain. In contrast, smaller firms demonstrate greater flexibility and openness to change. Beyond company size, factors such as product uniqueness, strategic network positions, and the personalities of decision-makers play critical roles in shaping blockchain adoption. Participants also reported persistent pressure from both suppliers and buyers to accept unfavorable terms, underscoring power imbalances that constrain smaller players. The analysis is framed within the conceptual structure of a model with a focus on the nuanced interplay of power and decision-making in the context of supply networks. Qualitative analysis of the discussions, conducted with Atlas.ti software, highlights the influence of sectoral differences, geographical variations, and gender dynamics in supply chain negotiations. This study provides valuable insights into the barriers and enablers of blockchain adoption within complex supply chain networks, emphasizing the critical interplay of power and communication in shaping market control.

Keywords: *Isomorphism, Power, Supply Network, Technology adoption.*

1. Introduction: Increased Digitalisation of the Supply Network

The general increased digitalisation of society and business – including the supply network -has led to an increase in studies how this process of digitalisation takes place. Both the technical aspects [1] and the organisational aspects [2] are object of study, leading to new concepts, theories, models and terminology [3]. This study will focus on the organisational aspects and in particular will use the so-called 3Arena model [4] as starting point. This model looks at the *decision flow* that deals with the adoption of a new technology using blockchain technology as a case. In the model, each arena is a 'battle' between alternatives. The first Arena deals with the Genesis of the mind map of the individual actors. Resulting from education, training, job experience and authority. The Arena 2 is described as "the battle of the egos" at the meso-level of the company study identifies the hierarchy of functions in organisations: Finance, Marketing, HRM, Purchasing and Production (or Operations); which one exerts the most influence over decision-making related to adoption of new technologies like blockchain technology. It results in a particular company World View [5] of how to do things. Then, the company enters the Arena 3: *the network it will be part of.* It implies selecting particular types of relationships with other network actors – sometimes opportunistic, sometimes cooperative, sometimes supportive, sometimes short-term and sometimes long-term.

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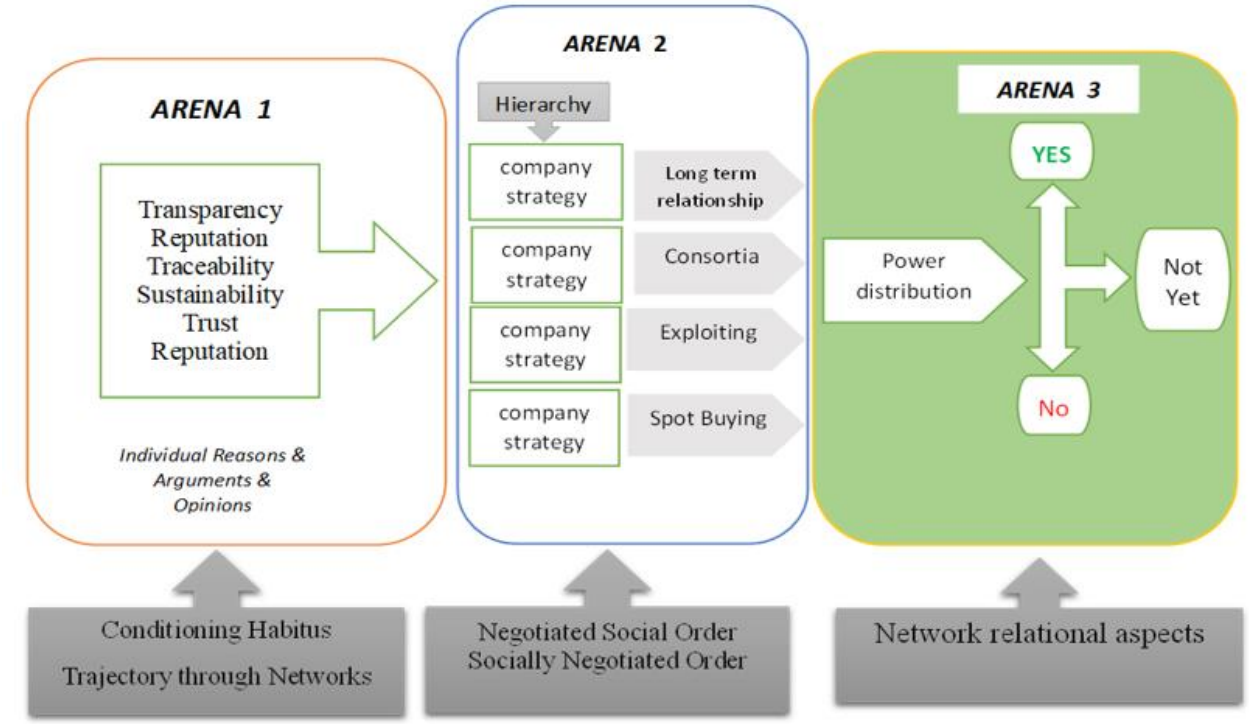

Figure 1.
The 3Arena model of the decision flow of adoption

In doing this, companies also have to face the following three issues that have an assumed impact on the actual adoption of standards and new technologies:

- Market power and dominance: How do large companies leverage their position to set terms in their favour?
- Pressure on smaller players: How do smaller suppliers or buyers navigate these power imbalances?
- Impact on negotiation tactics: How do power dynamics dictate the strategies and decisions made by both suppliers and buyers?

This means, that any study that aims to shed some light on what is happening in these supply networks today in terms of the adoption of new technologies, has to deal with these issues.

In properly dealing with these issues, this contribution follows the following structure.

2. Meso-Perspective of Network Interaction: ARENA 3

2.1. The Individual Company and Its Network Relations

Each individual company faces its industry specific 'Selection environment' [6] or 'Task environment' [7] with shareholders, employees and labour unions, competitors, trade associations, communities, creditors, customers, special interest groups and governments. In a wider societal context, it faces the STEPE factors, standing for Social-cultural forces, Technological forces, Economic forces, Political-Legal forces and Environment . All these forces and factors differ per industry and per country, as was discussed earlier. Furthermore, company behaviour – especially their attitude in communication - also seems to be rather size dependent [8;9].

Some companies may use some type of *portfolio analysis* to differentiate network partner relationships, using for instance [10,11,12] or Kamann's cube [13;14] (cf. [15]). According to Dubois and Pedersen [16], the fundamental assumption of portfolio analysis seems to be the differences in *power* and *dependence* between buyers and suppliers. This matches the statement that "the general idea of

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the portfolio approach is to "minimize supply vulnerability and make the most of potential buying power" [10, p. 112].

In this context, of course, companies may also follow a type of network behavior consistent with the organizational GREMI model [17;18] or the IMP network model [19;20]. These frameworks highlight the dynamic and interconnected nature of businesses, where previous interactions—referred to as the "shadow of the past"—are crucial in building trust, reputation, and relational capital within networks [21]. Likewise, the "shadow of the future" affects strategic choices, as companies weigh the potential long-term advantages of nurturing or expanding relationships to foster sustainable collaboration and gain a competitive edge [22].

Companies may be able to accommodate aspects such as countervailing power [23] to offset the power of dominant, exploitative, demanding actors. Or, They may build their own power-based networks, enabling them to cultivate a framework of resources, alliances, and capabilities that strengthen their position [24]. By doing so, they can address dependencies effectively, reducing vulnerabilities that arise from relying too heavily on dominant players or systems [25]. This self-reliance empowers them to establish a degree of independence and control, allowing them to counterbalance external dominance. In particular, it fosters resilience and adaptability in critical areas such as technology and innovation [26;27]. By proactively developing these networks, they can respond more effectively to challenges, whether they come in the form of competitive pressures, technological advancements, or shifts in market dynamics [28]. This strategic approach aligns with authors [29] emphasizing the importance of leveraging networks to enhance both current capabilities and future readiness.

Companies are likely to belong to different industrial and territorially embedded networks, following different paradigms [17;30]. Because of this, they tend to show different strategies and internal settings, assumed to be best fitting the environment they operate in. The location plays a pivotal role, as it influences access to critical resources, market conditions, and the specific socio-economic and regulatory environment in which firms operate [31]. Consequently, companies tend to adopt varied strategies and internal structures that are specifically tailored to align with the unique environmental and locational factors they encounter [32].

2.2. Paradigms to Describe Network Behaviour in Arena3

As paradigms available to describe, explain and predict company behaviour inside the networks of Arena 3, six classic paradigms are selected. The term 'paradigm' is used in the meaning of *"an institutionalised way of thinking among a large group of scientists about the relationships between entities and the processes that play a role"*. The more 'economic' paradigms considered to be relevant and useful for this part of the study are: *(1)* the Structure-Conduct-Performance paradigm [33;34]; *(2)* Transaction Cost Economics [35]; *(3)* the Product Life Cycle paradigm [36] and *(4)* the Resource Dependence approach [37], all combined with *(5)* the Resource Based View [38;39;40;41] and finally *(6)* the more sociological oriented Institutional Isomorphism paradigm [42]. While each of these paradigms is useful in explaining a part, *together* they explain the total [43]. This study is aware of more interesting paradigms in sociology [44] but focused on the use of the paradigms mentioned above.

Combining the various paradigms, we may conclude that from a network perspective, companies - or 'actors' - belong to different industrial and territorially embedded networks following different paradigms [17;45]. They tend to show different strategies and internal settings, assumed to be best fitted with the particular type of environment they operate in and their WorldView.

This supports both the *contingency theory* [46] which states that "there is not one best way to structure work or an organization but that an optimum depends on the *external* and *local* conditions in which an organization is inserted" and the *congruency theory* [47] that emphasizes the successful alignment of four critical aspects: work, culture, structure and people (which actually relates to Arena 2 as well). All these differences affect the way actors interact.

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2.3. What Does It All Mean: Operational Variables To Observe

2.3.1. The Specific Industry

Having studied the usefulness of the various paradigms in giving any relevance to the topic of this study, the following variables were selected initially if one wants to study any specific *industry* with its specific networks of actors*:*

1) Degree of concentration (CR4=70 or higher seems rather a rule than an exception)
2) Typical Product differentiation among the actors
3) Entry barriers: consultants (low) versus oil refineries (high) as examples
4) The Herfindahl index, being the measurement of the size of firms in relation tot the industry and an indicator of the degree of competition

3. Methodology

3.1. Communication Between Actors in A Specific Network

Five focus group discussions, comprising diverse participants by sector, location, gender, and company size (4-6 per group), investigated communication and power dynamics in supply chain networks. These discussions revealed that larger companies often prioritized stability over innovation, hindering blockchain adoption, while smaller firms showed greater flexibility. Beyond size, factors like product uniqueness, strategic network positions [48], and individual personalities [9;49] influenced decision-making. Crucially, participants reported consistent pressure from both suppliers and buyers to accept non-ideal terms, limiting the negotiating power of smaller players. This underscored the constraints on decision-making within complex networks.

Table 1.
Participants of Five focus group discussions.

Group	Company size	Gender	Location	Sector
1	B	F/M	Netherlands	Fashion/ Sustainable development/IT
2	B	F/M	Hungary	Food/ Education
3	S	F	Germany	Food/ Customer Service
4	B/S	F/M	Germany	Automative/Food/IT
5	S	M	Turkey	Customer Service/IT

The qualitative insights from these group discussions, combined with prior interview and contact analysis data, provide a richer understanding of factors influencing blockchain adoption within diverse supply chains. The interplay of company size, individual characteristics, and powerful actors' pressures on smaller firms is vital to understanding these adoption patterns. These findings suggest a need to address the power imbalances and the non-ideal conditions faced by smaller actors to support wider blockchain adoption within complex networks.

3.2. Influence of Company Size and Inter-Network Dynamics on Blockchain Adoption

The size of a company plays a crucial role in inter-network communication and the adoption of new technologies like blockchain [50]. As mentioned earlier, 'Size' (L/S) turned out to be an important factor, where larger companies (often multinationals) have more market power, derived from factors such as product uniqueness, patents, market share, and strategic positions within networks [48]. These companies can leverage blockchain for operational efficiency and secure transactions [51]. However, their hierarchical structures often slow down the adoption of disruptive technologies like blockchain due to their risk-averse nature and focus on stability [52].

On the other hand, entrepreneurs—typically from SMEs—tend to be more flexible and open to innovation. This mindset contrasts with the behavior of managers in larger corporations, who may focus on minimizing risks and maintaining established systems [53]. A crucial difference was observed

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in behavior between entrepreneurs and managers, with entrepreneurs more likely to adopt new technologies like blockchain [53]. The personalities of decision-makers are also influential; those who are cooperative, tolerant, or inspiring (clustered as 'total flexibility') tend to adopt blockchain more easily, while those that are selfish, exploitative, or rigid (clustered under 'total denial') may resist technological change [9;49].

Inter-network communication and blockchain adoption are further influenced by power dynamics [54]. Power in a network often comes from factors like the uniqueness of products, patents, or market share [55]. Companies with strategic positions—especially those in linking pin positions—hold significant influence in shaping the direction of blockchain adoption [48]. As seen in interviews and analyses of inter-network communication, the power derived from company *size*, *genders*, *location and sectors* plays a key role in determining the success of blockchain adoption across network partners.

3.3.Key Findings from Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions offered valuable insights into the drivers of blockchain technology adoption within supply chains. The *qualitative analysis* of interview data conducted using *Atlas.ti software*, highlighted key factors such as sectoral differences, geographical variations, and gender dynamics. These findings integrate qualitative perspectives from discussions with quantitative data, as depicted in the uploaded diagram, which outlines:

- **Sectoral Differences (43%)**: Industries with high product differentiation, such as fashion, depend more on trust and long-term relationships, whereas commodity sectors like food prioritize cost efficiency.
- **Geographical Variations (42%)**: Cultural norms influence decision-making processes and communication styles, with some regions favoring hierarchical approaches and others emphasizing collaboration.
- **Gender Dynamics (15%)**: Female participants often emphasized ethical considerations and sustainability, aligning with broader trends in responsible supply chain management.

These factors contribute to a complex network of interactions affecting blockchain adoption, as detailed below:

1. **Supply Chain Power Asymmetry**: Larger corporations tend to resist blockchain adoption, prioritizing stability over innovation. Smaller firms, though more flexible and open to experimentation, often face strained decision-making due to limited negotiation power. This imbalance creates unequal power dynamics, where smaller companies must comply with unfavorable terms imposed by larger players.
2. **Company Size**: Discussions revealed that larger firms have greater resources and infrastructure to implement blockchain but are often resistant to change. Conversely, smaller firms, while agile and willing to innovate, face resource constraints and challenges in negotiating favorable terms with larger partners.
3. **Strategic Network Positions**: Participants highlighted that firms occupying strong positions within their networks—such as key suppliers or distributors—can drive blockchain adoption to enhance transparency and efficiency. In contrast, firms in weaker positions struggle to initiate adoption due to external pressures and limited influence.
4. **Individual Characteristics and Decision-Making**: Leadership styles, risk tolerance, and attitudes toward innovation were noted as critical factors influencing adoption decisions. These individual characteristics interact with organizational and industry-wide dynamics, shaping the overall pattern of adoption

These findings underline the importance of understanding network-level dynamics in blockchain adoption. The uploaded diagram complements these insights by visually illustrating the relative influence of sectoral, geographical, and gender-related factors. This integrated approach emphasizes how multifaceted interactions—ranging from organizational power imbalances to cultural and individual considerations—affect the trajectory of blockchain adoption in supply chains.

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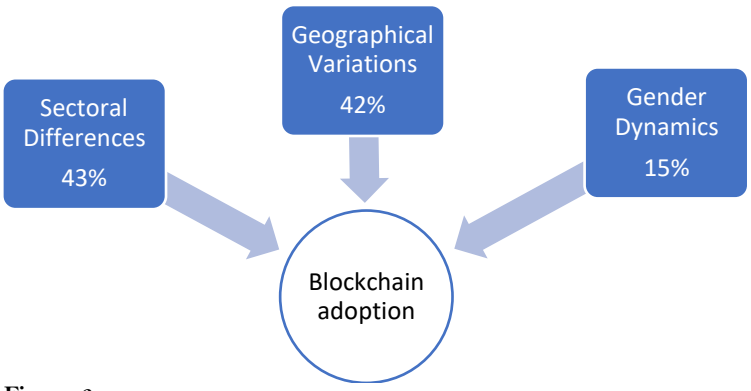

Figure 2.
The relative influence of sectoral, geographical, and gender-related factors.

3.4. Relevance for Blockchain Adoption

Empirical evidence from this study indicates the importance of network dynamics in determining blockchain adoption. The most powerful actors can force or impede adoption through an intricate interaction of influence and negotiation. Successful implementation of blockchain requires overcoming power imbalances and opening up symmetrical communication. The focus groups brought a level of detail in these dynamics and thus gave further face validity to the incorporation of multiple perspectives in the study. By investigating interactions at the network level, this study contributes to an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing blockchain adoption and, correspondingly, provides pragmatic recommendations for stakeholders navigating these challenges.

While financial considerations often drive initial blockchain decisions, network power dynamics significantly influence adoption [56]. Powerful actors, such as large customers or suppliers, can compel companies to adopt blockchain, even if it initially conflicts with their internal preferences [57]. Conversely, companies with strong leverage (e.g., unique products, market share) might drive blockchain adoption in their supply chains even if some partners are hesitant [58]. This complex interplay of power creates situations where a company's stated openness to blockchain may not align with its network relationships. For example, temporary alliances like consortia often lack the necessary internal integration to support blockchain implementation effectively unless procurement processes are already centralized [59]. Ultimately, assessing a company's true willingness to adopt blockchain requires a thorough understanding of its network position and the power dynamics influencing its relationships, recognizing that powerful actors can compel adoption regardless of individual preferences [60;61]. This crucial step is vital to ensure alignment between stated interest and practical implementation.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the adoption of blockchain technology within supply chains is deeply influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including company size, strategic network positions, individual personalities, and power dynamics. Larger companies, with their market power and hierarchical structures, often prioritize stability and risk-aversion, hindering the rapid adoption of disruptive technologies like blockchain. In contrast, smaller firms, particularly SMEs led by entrepreneurial decision-makers, demonstrate greater flexibility and openness to innovation. However, these smaller actors face significant pressure from more powerful network partners, limiting their negotiating power and influencing their ability to adopt new technologies.

The study highlights that factors such as product uniqueness, patents, and market share play a crucial role in shaping the power dynamics within supply chains. These dynamics can either facilitate or obstruct blockchain adoption, with powerful companies often pushing the adoption of blockchain across their networks. Additionally, decision-makers' personalities—whether cooperative or rigid—also influence the adoption process, adding another layer of complexity.

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Ultimately, the findings underscore the need to address the power imbalances that exist within supply chain networks to enable more widespread blockchain adoption. A deeper understanding of a company's position within its network, the power it holds, and the pressures exerted by more dominant actors is essential for fostering successful blockchain implementation. This insight is crucial for aligning a company's strategic goals with the practical realities of adopting blockchain technology in a connected, complex network environment.

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