

GAINING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE THROUGH STRATEGIC ALLIANCES: THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL JOINT VENTURES IN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the competitive position of the hospitality industry in terms of the strategic alliances in an international joint venture operating a luxury destination in Antalya region of Turkey. The gap in literature concerning the resource-based view in the context of international joint venture's in luxury resort hotel management motivated this study. This study used a case study method to examine the strategic alliance of a recent IJV firm operating a luxury resort hotel industry in Turkey. The data for the study were collected through in depth interviews with the general manager and nine top level managers of the foreign partner and the domestic partner. The thematic analysis of the interview notes revealed that the foreign partner and domestic partner are initially interested in acquiring their partners' valuable resources through strategic alliances. Database of local/global conditions, reservation systems, technological skills, high reputation, local/global brand name and experience were some of the resources and capabilities that were mentioned to achieve competitive advantage. The results of the study indicated that the IJV offered direct benefits to the foreign partner and domestic partner members including gaining quick access to innovation, knowledge and lowering risk by sharing costs. Thus, the Turkish hospitality industry provides a good example to examine the use of international joint ventures for competitive advantage in an industry.

Keywords: Strategic alliance, international joint venture (IJV), resource-based view, luxury resort hotel

INTRODUCTION

Resource-based view (RBV) has brought a new perspective to strategic management by analyzing competitive advantage based on firm-specific resources instead of industry structure. Wernerfelt (1984) proposed that firms gain competitive advantage through alliances, acquisitions and subsequent use of strategic resources vital for competitive advantage. He defined resources as “tangible and intangible assets which are tied to the firm” (1984: 172). The work of Wernerfelt (1984) has opened the way to specific criteria for resources and capabilities which would enable firms to sustain competitive advantage (e.g., Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Amit and Schoemaker, 1993; Collins and Montgomery, 1995). Following work supported that the resource stocks and capabilities, belonging to or controlled by firms- is distributed heterogeneously and is imperfectly mobile (Barney, 1991). Hence, trading and accumulation of resources become a strategic necessity. In today's intensely competitive environment it is not surprising to see that trade contacts represent one of the most important resources likely to bring firms higher returns in the long run. Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1996) stated that when efficient market exchange of resources is possible, firms are more likely to continue alone. Some resources are not perfectly tradable, since they are either mingled with other resources or embedded in organizations (Chi, 1994). From a resource-based view, firms are interested in accessing or acquiring their partners' valuable resources through alliances. Thus, the RBV considers strategic alliances as strategies used to access other firms' resources, for the purpose of competitive advantage (Das and Teng, 2000:36).

The present study intends to explore the rare and valuable resources in conjunction with strategic alliances, as a strategy in accessing important resources in a luxury resort hotel industry. The competitive

environment in which today's hotels have realised that value adding resources are becoming more scarce. Also they have realised that entering into alliance networks with competitors, suppliers and customers, and firms in other industries is an opportunity for building strengths (Lewis, 1990). A number of academic studies have emphasized that strategic alliances promote competition in a number of ways, i.e. the reduced cost of sharing resources, the critical mass created by a pool of specialized skills, expertise, know-how and value added products (Tan and Thai, 2014; Raguz et al., 2015). Grant and Baden-Fuller (2004: 62) proposed that activities covered in a strategic alliance may include supplier-buyer partnerships, outsourcing agreements, technical collaboration, shared new product development, common distribution agreements, cross-selling arrangements, and joint ventures. Particularly, international joint ventures (IJV) are one of the most important types of strategic alliances, especially in hospitality industry which requires considerable tangible and intangible assets on foreign and domestic parent firms (Preble et al., 2000; Chathoth and Olsen, 2003; Plummer et al., 2006; Ammirato and Felicetti, 2013). Partners can participate in partnership with intangible resources such as technology, patents, general management information, and tangible resources such as machines, equipment, and information about the market, distribution channels, materials, labor and financing the hospitality industry (Cullen and Johnson, 1995; Ammirato and Felicetti, 2013). This industrial undertaking form cooperative relationships with other tourism stakeholders to acquire skills, knowledge and complementary competences that contribute to consumer satisfaction, representing competitive strength (Jesus and Franco, 2016). For example, Cline (2000:71) stated that "...contemplate joint marketing, the linking of Web sites, the opening of an Internet portal and the sharing of databases between Leading Hotels of the World and Relais & Chateaux..". According to Preble et al. (2000) Choice Hotels such as Holiday Inn, Marriott, and Sheraton hotel chains aligned themselves with international partners for using global brands for regional expansion or, as a transition strategy to increase the competitive position. Seeking the joint venture dynamics behind the hospitality sector in Antalya region is of interest, because it has performed as the fastest growing business in Turkey, which is highly complex compounded service brought about through the assembly of different services like travel agents and tour operators. Thus, the paper will address the following questions: "What resources and capabilities do the parent firms acquire through IJV in terms of RBV?", "Whether any resources provided by IJVs had any meaningful contribution to competitive advantage?"

The authors hope to develop some propositions concerning the tangible and intangible resources affecting the strategic alliances, specifically IJVs. Any variation related to resources specific to the hospitality sector would contribute to the strategic management and international business literature. The paper is organized as follows: The first section summarizes the literature regarding strategic alliances, international joint ventures and resource-based view. Next section deals with the methodology. Then the findings will be presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strategic Alliances and Resource-Based View

A strategic alliance can be defined as a cooperative agreement involving two or more firms through which linkages are built to share resources, leading to the joint accomplishment of individual goals (Parkhe, 1991). According to Gulati (1998:293) strategic alliance is a group of firms who get into voluntary arrangements that involve exchanging, sharing, or co-development of products or services. These interfirm alliances involve cooperative relationships that are not fully defined either by formal contracts or by ownership. Hence, in terms of the theory of economic organization, they fall between the polar models of markets and hierarchies. As a result, cooperative relationships between firms have been viewed as intermediate or hybrid organizational forms (Grant and Baden-Fuller, 2004). The term 'strategic alliance' has been used to refer to 'agreements characterized by the commitment of two or more firms to reach a common goal of entailing the pooling of their resources and activities' (Teece, 1992:19). In their theoretical work, Grant and Baden-Fuller (2004: 62) indicated that these resources and activities lead to different types of strategic alliances such as supplier-buyer partnerships, outsourcing agreements, technical collaboration, joint research projects, shared new product development, shared manufacturing arrangements, common distribution agreements, cross-selling arrangements, franchising and international joint ventures. While the defining governance mode is the informal relational contract, strategic alliances may involve contractual agreements and ownership links (e.g. franchising, cross-licensing agreements,

cross-equity holdings and joint ventures). These collaborations reduce risks and share critical resources and capabilities among the firms (Gulati, 1998; create opportunities for accessing new product development (Rothaermel and Boeker, 2008) and gain competitive advantage (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Tan and Thai, 2014).

The impact of strategic alliances for building competitive advantage has become an essential inquiry track in strategic management and international business literature. Studies aim to explain this topic from different theoretical streams (Varadajaran and Cunningham, 1995). For example, Dyer and Singh (1998) suggest that there are three views to explain strategic alliances, i.e., relational view, industry structure view and resource based view. The resource-based view argues that a firm's performance depends on its ability to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage derived from possessing or having control over unique resources (Barney, 1991). As explained above, the ultimate objective of this study is to employ the concepts of the RBV in explaining the strategic alliances of the hospitality industry in Antalya region of Turkey.

The Role of International Joint Ventures in Hospitality Industry

Growth in global markets has remarkably led to a dramatic rise in strategic alliances during the last three decades (Park, 2010; Schildt et al., 2012). International joint ventures (IJVs) constitute one of the most crucial types of strategic alliances, in industries which require considerable tangible and intangible resources. Harrigan (1985) stated that a joint venture is created when two or more firms collaborate to create a newly incorporated company in which each has an equity position. Thus, IJVs are convenient ways for the foreign and domestic parent firms for sharing firm-specific knowledge (Coombs et al., 1998). Major motives for IJVs are to complement each other's resources and knowledge and to lead to competitive advantage in the long run (Inkpen et al., 1998; Beamish and Lupton, 2009; Meier, 2011; Choi and Beamish, 2013). In their work, through discussing how international joint ventures gain competitive advantage, Inkpen et al. (1998) indicate four keys which they labelled as technology sharing, interaction between IJV partners, employee transfers and strategic integration. Research results show that IJVs possess strategic rather than tactical importance. It arises from the fact that resources, risks, responsibilities, returns and new product development costs are shared between partners (Pothukuchi et al. 2002; Chathoth and Olsen, 2003; Endo, 2006). From a resource-based view, firms are interested in accessing or acquiring their partners' valuable resources through IJVs (Chathoth and Olsen, 2003). In parallel to international business practice, the number of IJVs during the last decades has remarkably increased; they have also received increased academic attention as a new unit of analysis.

Recently, it has become popular to investigate the resources provided by IJVs that have any meaningful contribution to competitive advantage. It becomes essential for service industries to support into the concepts underlying RBV to be able to assess this business strategy as a source of competitive advantage to sustain firm competitiveness. Li et al., (2006) argued that although the financial performance of joint ventures has not appeared favorable in the short term goals, these investments are realized towards long term goals. Around the world many international hospitality firms have used IJV model which has helped the rapid development of tourism industry (Endo, 2006). However, in contrast to the global trends, franchising or cross-licensing agreements are the foremost business formats in Turkey. Hospitality is a high value-adding industry both for its investors and the region and country as well. Have regard to the strong growth in demand in this sector, Turkey seems to become an investment hub for worldwide hotel management groups. After 1980s with the winds of global neo-liberal tendencies, public-private sector partnership models were adopted in Turkey. In accordance with this trend, privatization of hotels has been done by IJVs. With the privatization of the hospitality sector in Turkey, productivity increased, sector gained a more competitive position, capital base was expanded and incentive mechanisms were developed in order to increase the performance of management and employees. Nowadays, regardless of the fact that hospitality investments in Turkey have been affected by the political and financial crisis, Turkey has been continued to be one of the most promising countries for hospitality investments. Empirical findings from different studies showed that IJVs improved hotel's efficiency in Turkey (Tatoğlu, 2000; Özalp et al., 2010; Met and Erdem, 2011; Doğan et al., 2012). Thus, IJVs are designated as useful platforms for the foreign and domestic parent firms for generating barriers to entry, gaining new

market opportunities, increasing the speed of market entry, using technological synergies, and sharing resource.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection Method

In this research, which was designed depending on the case study method, in depth interviews were conducted with the general manager and nine managers of a luxury resort hotel in Antalya region. In a 2 months period (between March 2017- May 2017), semi structured interviews were conducted with information technology managers, quality managers, food and beverage managers, marketing managers, human resources manager, and general manager, all who have active roles in strategic alliance process of the resort hotel (See Table 1).

Table 1. Information about interviewees

Respondents	Information Technology	Quality	Marketing	Food And Beverage	Human Resources Manager	General Manager
FP*	√	√	√	√		
DP*	√	√	√	√	√	√

*FP: Foreign partner, DP: Domestic partner

Each interview took 90 to 120 minutes; interviews were tape recorded upon permission and the interview notes were transcribed and thematic analysis was performed. The transcribed texts and the selected documents were subjected to content analysis; first the important and pertinent information was highlighted and then the main themes, central ideas were identified. The original expressions of interviewed managers were conserved.

In-depth Interview Questions

Interview questions were developed according to the prior studies (e.g. Grant, 199; Inkpen et al., 1998; Helfat and Peteraf, 2003; Guillet et al., 2011). This was a subjective evaluation of the managers interviewed. Besides, general information regarding the IJVs was obtained from news reports, some popular magazines and newspapers that were accessible from the web sites of the hotel. The relevance of the interview form to the industry was controlled by a pilot study, and after confirming its appropriateness. It was given its final format. Prior research has demonstrated that this perception-based measure of strategic alliances and IJVs is reliable for the luxury resort hotel. The interview questions form consisted of two parts. First part contained some relevant information about the departments of the hotel and second part contained IJV, resources and capabilities. The authors asked them the following questions: “What resources and capabilities do the parent firms acquire through strategic alliances in terms of RBV?”, “Whether any resources provided by IJVs had any meaningful contribution to competitive advantage?”.

FINDINGS

Characterization of Case

The domestic partner company (AR Hotel)* in this case study is one of the world’s fastest growing all-inclusive luxury resort hotel in Turkey and 5 countries, while it is also one of the leading luxury destination brands in Turkey and within the Middle East due to its best-in-class facilities, dining options and entertainment venues. AR hotel distinguished specialist professional bodies such as the World Travel Awards and Great Hotels of the World. This firm has enjoyed a high total volume trade rate in recent years and provided considerable contributions to the economy of Antalya and Turkey. The foreign partner company (RA Hotel)* in this case study is a world-leading digital innovator and travel group in more than

7000 hotels around the world. Benefiting from dual expertise as an investor and operator through its hotel services and hotel investment divisions, it operates in 50 countries. RA Hotels' portfolio comprises internationally acclaimed luxury brands.

Last year, AR hotels and RA Hotels announced a strategic partnership illustrating hotels' strategy to expand its presence in the luxury market, with a primary focus on developing global activities in the resort segment. A joint venture company, AR hotels and RA Hotels and a 50% equal partnership structure were established. With this joint venture, RA hotels have integrated in its network some luxury hotels that are ideally located in premium resort markets in Turkey. AR hotels have reorganized some city-centre hotels to RA hotels brands. This IJV is a shared managed joint initiative considered as one of the leading resort hotels worldwide which has been experiencing a rapid and dynamic growth in Turkey. Thus, in this present study, it seemed worthwhile to investigate the conceptual relations of this IJV in Antalya region of Turkey.

Strategic Resources and Capabilities

Based on the discussion above, from a resource-based view, firms are interested in accessing or acquiring their partners' valuable resources through alliances. The findings demonstrate that the main dimensions of resources and capabilities provided by IJVs are knowledge sharing and marketing strategies. Table 2 and Table 3 present all findings including the dimensions, contents of resources and capabilities verbatim from interview notes.

One of the most important results derived from the interviews was that frequently mentioned knowledge sharing operations were related to the competitive advantage. According to Berdrow et al. (2003) knowledge sharing is the movement of current knowledge between parent firms and from parent firms to the IJVs. It can take place through activities such as copying or using the technology of the partner through imitation, transferring personnel or know-how. By sharing knowledge effectively, organisations increase their capability to manage the right knowledge in the best way possible and decrease the potential misuses of resources such as time and investment. It was found that knowledge sharing between parent firms occurred in five strategic resources and capability including database of local conditions, database of global conditions, reservation systems, technological skills and experience (Table 2). According to Preble et al. (2000) when a hotel enters a foreign market, it does so with a limited knowledge of local conditions and customer preferences. It seems that the hotel industry is facing problems in this large foreign market, partially due to resort hotels. The IJV can provide greater economies because the domestic/foreign firm is frequently allied with a firm having a national/international network of skills and resources. The quality manager of the AR hotel emphasized "...*They (RA Hotel) wanted to establish a joint venture with us. Because they benefit from the AR hotel's political connections and knowledge of the laws, rules and regulations, and local preferences. We know laws and regulations of the tourism sector. So we can*

** The letter "AR" and "RA" were assigned as a nickname for domestic partner and a foreign partner used in a case study to be more understandable in following text*

easily adapt the legislation environment. Other side, RA Hotels can easily adapt the legislative environment with us". RA Hotel marketing manager pointed out as "We collaborate with our tour operators. Our partner met our tour operator. Nowadays they plan to establish a new business together". The high frequency of comments made by all respondents on innovation operations underlined the inclusion of reservation systems as part of the luxury resort hotel. The general manager of the AR Hotel stated, "The fact that the RA Hotel has a more serious technological system. We can also benefit from this technological system and gain from it. For example, our specialized Internet portal and the sharing of database system were developed by the RA Hotel. Another example is the corporate software system developed by the foreign partner which was transferred to us.". Hospitality industry needs to use and develop information technologies to compete. Especially in using the internet as a marketing platform, and to improve management and customer reservation and satisfaction (Yang, and Cai, 2016). For example, Hilton, Accor and Forte created a joint internet purchasing system that has enabled them to increase their bargaining power as well as to reduce operating costs (Chathoth and Olsen, 2003). The general manager of the AR Hotel also mentioned about reservation operations and said "Previously, we

used different reservation systems. Those were very cumbersome!!After our collaboration, we were happy because we learnt fresh reservation systems from our partner”. The AR Hotel information technology manager stated “We use new information system whose name is Opera. It is useful for networking among not only suppliers and customers, but also partners”. Above mentioned collaborations between the partners and their adaptation efforts indicate this IJV is seen when partners come together to share local conditions and technology capabilities to enhance their competitive positions.

Table 2. Strategic resources and capabilities of the AR Hotel -RA Hotel IJV: Knowledge sharing

Emergед Themes	Resources	Capability	Supporting Quotes
Knowledge sharing	Database of local conditions	Technological skills (process technology)	<p>“There are various systems in hospitality sector. Most important one is knowledge transfer system. We believe we got it by our joint venture..”</p> <p><u>RA Hotel QM*</u></p> <p>“When we joined in this alliance, we shared our operation process to our partner”</p> <p><u>RA Hotel MM*</u></p> <p>“Absolutely, IJVs equal with mutual information transfers” <u>RA Hotel ITM</u></p> <p>“Our firm gained competitive advantage through knowledge flow between us and our partner about local customer preferences”</p> <p><u>AR Hotel MM*</u></p>
	Database of global conditions	Experience	<p>“RA Hotel has a great opportunity to reach many customer”</p> <p><u>AR Hotel GM*</u></p>
	Reservation system		<p>“AR hotel has got more resort hotels. They have efficient cost control ability.”</p> <p><u>RA Hotel MM*</u></p> <p>“Like other firms, we propose reducing cost in all activities. When we learned new operation activities from RA Hotel, we gained more profit”</p> <p><u>AR Hotel HRM*</u></p>

*GM: General Manager, MM: Marketing Manager ITM: InformationTechnology Manager, QM:Quality Manager

During the interviews respondents frequently stressed the fact that marketing operations in a luxury resort hotel industry were required for competitiveness and survival. It was found that marketing operations between parent firms occurred in five strategic resources and capability including high reputation, brand name, marketing skills, global marketing skills and local marketing skills (Table 3). Chathoth and Olsen (2003) stated that marketing activities should help both the firms increase brand awareness, trial and repurchase. The strong brand serves to attract both foreign and domestic customers. AR Hotel general manager underlined this, as “It is also a great opportunity for our customers to benefit from our participation in N Club RA Hotel, which is recognized as one of the most powerful loyalty programs in the industry with over 100 million members”. As another example of marketing operations, RA Hotel marketing manager expressed “This joint venture has many benefits for us. It enables us to become a leading luxury brand operator in a growing market and to complement our offer with attractive leisure destinations to our guests.”

**Table 3. Strategic resources and capabilities of the AR Hotel-RA Hotel IJV:
Marketing activities**

Emergед Themes	Resources	Capability	Supporting Quotes
Marketing Activities	High reputation Brand name	Marketing skills Global brand skills Local brand skills	<p><i>“Their (RA Hotel) marketing staff is very qualified. I am very pleased. Because marketing is our mission.”</i> <u>AR Hotel MM*</u></p> <p><i>“We will be able to reach up to Australia today thanks to our collaboration”</i> <u>AR Hotel GM*</u></p> <p><i>“...It is very important to hear our international partner name in our sector. This name is well known in many countries around the world.”</i> <u>AR Hotel FBM*</u></p> <p><i>“Their (AR Hotel) advertisement activities are very popular in Turkey. Therefore our recognition has increased”</i> <u>RA Hotel MM*</u></p> <p><i>“We are aware of their global brand. They (RA Hotel) have competitive advantage because of their global brand”</i> <u>AR Hotel OM*</u></p>

*GM: General Manager, MM: Marketing Manager ITM: InformationTechnology Manager, QM:Quality Manager, FBM: Food and Bevarage Manager

CONCLUSION

The present study intends to explore the rare and valuable resources in conjunction with IJV, as a strategy in accessing important resources in a luxury resort hotel industry. The question was explored based on the case of Antalya region of Turkey, which demonstrated that this region was a highly dynamic environment that achieved an assertive position in its marketing capacity, gained share from the national and international market. This was deduced from the AR Hotel- RA Hotel IJV which is a shared managed joint initiative considered as one of the leading resort hotels worldwide which has been experiencing a rapid and dynamic growth in Turkey. The contribution of this paper to the literature may be attributed to the fact that it is one of the first studies to deal with the resource-based view in the context of IJVs in a luxury resort hotel industry. The research questions were pursued through document analysis and in depth interviews with the top level managers of the parent firms all of whom have active roles in the strategic management processes. The results of this study indicate that the foreign partner and domestic partner are initially interested in getting their partners’ valuable resources through strategic alliances. Database of local/global conditions, reservation systems, technological skills, high reputation, local/global brand name and experience were just some of the resources that were mentioned to achieve competitive advantage.

However, in recent years, IJVs in the hospitality industry offer a number of direct benefits to their members including: benefiting from a partner's legal connections; absorbing a key local competitor; gaining quick access to new markets, technology, knowledge, and customers. These advantages can be understood more readily by examining AR Hotel-RA hotel alliance that appears to be most prevalent in the Turkish hospitality industry.

The thematic analysis of the interview notes showed that key resources obtained through alliances may include knowledge sharing and marketing activities. Both knowledge based and property based resources appear to have provided and utilized by partners. Moreover, experiential resources which refer to resort experience of AR Hotel side and reputation and marketing experience of RA Hotel side were strongly emphasized. Additionally, respondents pointed out that their partnership was enabling them to reconsider resources to protect the technical core of the organization and develop assets to leverage core competencies. It was concluded that this IJV in the luxury resort industry, at least in this study, managed the knowledge sharing operations and marketing operations in a balanced way for a sustainable competitive advantage. This may be because the luxury resort industry is a knowledge intensive industry based on innovative services. Also, luxury resort hotels have become one of the dominant segments of the hospitality industry and their focus is centred primarily on the satisfaction of their customers, considering benefits such as increased brand name, decreased costs. Firms focus on these factors that can improve customer satisfaction for their competitive advantage in this sector (Yang and Chan, 2010; Ali et al., 2016). Porter and Fuller (1986) stated that the selection criteria of alliance members should be based on partners' ability in terms of scale technology, market assets and know-how that provide the alliance network a source of competitive advantage. Hence, this IJV tends to focus on a strong brand, knowledge of a network of laws, rules and regulations, customer preferences and technology skills. This requires a particular engagement in dynamic capabilities in order to enhance performance in this sector. Therefore, it should be studied in reference to such concepts as organizational structure and dynamic capabilities in further studies.

The limitation of this study concerns its generalizability due to the fact that luxury resort hotels are few in number and can only be examined in the form of case studies. The findings will only provide some cues to develop propositions regarding the IJVs and strategic alliance in relevant contexts. However, the evaluation of resources and capabilities in different stages of the IJVs life cycle. Thereby, a longitudinal study design is planned in order to clarify whether the resources and capabilities contribute to the competitive advantage. It is becoming increasingly evident that IJVs vary in the degree to which they can absorb resources from their foreign and local parents and in the degree to which they combine these resources efficiently to generate competitive advantage in the marketplace. Future research should concentrate on the factors that influence the success and failure of luxury resort alliances, while testing the propositions set forth in this study.

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