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Conceptualizing competition and rivalry in a networking business market☆

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ABSTRACT

Competition is considered a driving force of markets, but how competing shapes the business network is not so clear. We contribute to the literature by exploring competing as a firm process. We analyze business competition literature according to a structural and social constructivist dichotomy. This highlights firm behavior and priority of goals as pointers of competitive processes. We apply the concept of goal priority for a firm's line of action to characterize competing, whether primarily towards the customer or first focusing on the activities of another firm. We explore the distinctions between non-competitive, competitive and rivalry firm activity using a case study of exporters and importers of fine wine to Denmark from South Australia. We find that change in the business network is provoked by competitive processes. We conclude with managerial implications and the opportunities for future research.

1. Introduction

The market as network concept offers an alternate understanding of economic coordination by firms and actors (Johanson & Mattsson, 1985). Competition between sellers and among buyers is central to the economic concept of the market. But Ford &Håkansson (2013) regard competition as mainly a background variable in the business network. Advancing theory about the market as network calls for a more nuanced conceptualization of competition. According to McNulty (1968, 639) there "is probably no concept in all of economics that is at once more fundamental and pervasive, yet less satisfactorily developed, than the concept of competition." The concept of competition shifts in meaning depending on the context. In the business-to-business literature the meaning extends on a scale from rivalry (Baum & Korn, 1996; Luo, 2007; Porac, Thomas, Wilson, Paton, & Kanfer, 1995) to coopetition (Bengtsson & Kock, 2014; Rusko, 2011). However, these concepts were developed within the context of inter-firm relations, whereas a broader context can open new insights. Our purpose in this paper is to explore competition within a temporal business network framework.

A search in two journals focusing purely on business-to-business marketing, the journal of Industrial Marketing Management and the Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, revealed only simple definitions based on two firms seeking the same customer or resource. Mostly the meaning of competition was assumed. A detailed understanding of competing in the business-to-business market is missing. Research has focused instead on cooperation, which many researchers consider more important than competition (Jarillo, 1988; Kothandaraman & Wilson, 2001). For example after 30 years of industrial market research Ford and Håkansson (2013, 1023) believe that competition provides "a very limited explanation for the process of network evolution and relationship development". Yet Dollinger and Golden (1992, 713) argue that "firms cooperate to compete". And in everyday business, competitive intensity is a reason for innovation (Tsai & Yang, 2013).

In the business-to-business literature competition is defined by a structural logic, where firms seek the same customer or goal (Macdonald & Ryall, 2004; Sa Vinhas & Anderson, 2005; Tidström, 2009), or competition is regarded as socially constructed (Porac et al., 1995). There is however, very little literature concerning a process perspective of competition. Exceptions are Easton and Araujo (1994) and Turnbull, Ford, and Cunningham (1996) where competing is an interactive process undertaken over time between firms. In this formulation competitiveness is concerned with the nature of management, and so according to Whipp, Rosenfeld, and Pettigrew (1989) there are two important dimensions: time and the level of competing. In business markets, structural competition is known to lead to change in the business network (Biggemann, Kowalkowski, Maley, & Brege, 2013; Tidström & Hagberg-Andersson, 2012). But what are the underlying competitive processes that lead to these network changes? Pettigrew (1997, 338) defines a process as, "a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in a context." Our

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broad research question is: what characterizes a firm's process of competing in business markets?

In this paper, we contribute to the literature by exploring the process of competition. We do this by scrutinizing the foci of a firm's activities. We do not discuss the complex case of coopetition. Nor do we attempt to juxtapose competition with cooperation. Neither do we set out to consider the cooperation processes required to compete. We pursue only an understanding of the competing process based on a single firm's activities. Our approach is to focus on this simple form and develop a process framework to understand competing. We see this as a single step, the first advance towards a framework for understanding competing as a process.

The paper is structured in the following manner. First we consider how competition is defined and applied in business markets according to structural and social constructivist applications. This leads to the development of a process framework for analyzing competition. In a third section we present a case study in which managers elaborate their understandings of competition. Next, we analyze the case study and present some tentative results. Finally, we present managerial implications and some areas for future research.

2. Perspectives of competition

The business literature concerning competition has its genesis in economics, social-psychology and anthropology. We see that the literature about business markets typically applies either a structural perspective on competition, or considers competition from a social constructivist view, or blends these two perspectives. Underlying each of these understandings of competition is the nature of the framework: structural versus social constructivist. We proceed to analyze competition in the business-to-business marketing literature from these perspectives.

2.1. Structural competition

Most business-to-business literature incorporating competition applies a definition based on contested goals (cf Andaleeb, 1995; Macdonald & Ryall, 2004; Tjosvold & Wong, 1994; Tsai & Yang, 2013). Also, the research on competitive intensity (Auh & Mengu, 2005; Tsai & Yang, 2013) assumes the idea of contested goals. This follows Deutsch (1949) who, in studying social exchange, defined competition as a context where goals are 'contritely interdependent'. This means that one actor achieving a goal forecloses another from gaining their objective. This definition results from a framework where two or more firms seek a single goal, which is positioned in time; for example the goal is a specific sale to a customer and two or more firms undertake activities towards achieving this target.

In the context of industrial markets Mason (1974) applied the structural concepts of horizontal and vertical inter-firm connections to conceptualize the level of competitive intensity. He theorized that competitive intensity was a mathematical aggregation of competition at each manufacturing stage in a vertical industry structure. The layers of industry structure provided the means to arrive at a measure, but this structure also moves the process of competition into the background.

The idea of structure is also evident in the economics literature where competition is a by-product of micro-economic analysis (McNulty, 1968). In seeking to explain and understand price, economists raise a set of assumptions concerning the structure of a market (McNulty, 1968). The market configures competition as the buying and selling by actors in a period of time. McNulty (1968) observes that the process of competition is lost when the focus shifts to market structure. The reason for this is evident in a process approach (Pettigrew, 1997) because time, a main quality of process, is treated as a frozen period.

Easton and Araujo (1994) identified five 'stereotypical' forms of firm co-relation: "conflict, competition, co-existence, cooperation, and collusion" (Easton and Araujo, 1994, 72). These co-relations are found by applying different connections between actors in dyads. They defined competition as an indirect co-relation, where there is no direct interaction with the competitor, but does consider the actions of the other party. Easton and Araujo (1994) attribution of a context for competition is only as broad as the co-relation, while the nature of the wider context is left implied.

Bengtsson and Kock (1999), seeking a more dynamic context, call for a network analysis of competition. The authors consider an elongated time sequence in their analysis and apply Easton and Araujo (1994) co-relation categories, as well as adding the previously implied concept of coopetition. Their empirical data shows how re-positioning in a network, including by acquisition, successively moves a firm through all of the six co-relational categories (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). We draw the conclusion that present network structure, and by implication present market structure, are not sufficient to characterize the process of competing. Explicitly, with a longer time-frame and in a business network, a goal of the competitive process is also to gain a relative actor network position.

More recently, Ford and Håkansson (2013) present an argument for competition as a background variable in business relationship development and network evolution. Their argument is based on four archetypal relationships in a triad structure and indicates that cooperation is the main force creating network stability and evolution. Ford and Håkansson (2013) see competition as actor-specific and defined by identifying alternatives for network position, but only "where a coherent pattern of relationship development and commitment has not been established" (Ford and Håkansson, 2013: 1023). However, this argument is based on a stable network structure.

To summarize, what is noteworthy in the contested goal conceptualization of competition is the role of time in structuring the activities of actors towards the same and different objectives. Thus, goals, configured in time and based on processes for their achievement, can provide one element for understanding the process of competing (Ellegaard & Medlin, 2012). However, this understanding requires a dynamic context. When the structure is conceptualized as stable or relatively static the competitive process is lost. And when change is incremental the focus shifts to the process of cooperation. However, as longer time periods are considered, change comes into the foreground more and the underlying firm competitive processes are again evident. Thus, an alternate conceptualization is required for firm competitive processes, one that encompasses the forward and future seeking activities of firms inside a changing context.

2.2. Social constructivist contexts

Early work on competition following a social constructivist approach focused on culture, industry groups, and anthropological explanations. For example, Whipp et al. (1989) see time and culture as important elements of competition, while Cunningham (2008) and Cunningham and Culligan (1988) noted that tribal, anthropological and industry perspectives provide the bases for understanding competitive activity. Even the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1962) has contributed to the business literature on the topic of competition. Other researchers have considered cognitive behavioral approaches to understand competition, including managers' mental models of an industry (Porac & Thomas, 1990; Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989).

Following the cognitive stream and with a constructivist perspective, Porac et al. (1995, 222–223) identified the importance of managers' "local sensemaking" and the "open-endedness of industry models" in re-defining competition. These authors find competitors in "clique-like subgroups" based on managers sensemaking and mental-models (Weick, 1979; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2008). Porac et al. (1995) identified rivalry activity between firms of a similar size and operating with a similar market focus. Importantly, Porac et al. (1995, 224) note that focusing on the framework "makes competition appear to be an environmental constraint" and that an "entire theoretical vocabulary has evolved to reify these constraints". These ideas support our earlier contention concerning structural competitive forms.

In the cognitive literature Hodgkinson and Johnson (1994) found differences in understanding according to managerial role and function inside an organization, and according to individual managers' taxonomies. But Hodgkinson and Johnson (1994) also find a degree of shared understanding, as one would expect according to Weick's (1979) sensemaking concept. Hodgkinson and Johnson (1994) conclude that understanding competition is not found in taxonomies, but may be found in managers' beliefs (ontologies) concerning processes of cause and effect, and we would also add that these are evident in understandings of firm activities.

In the area of behavior, the anthropological work of Mead (2003, 1st edition 1937) is of interest because she focuses on motive, and cultural meaning. Her research was funded by the US Social Science Research Council and managed by the Committee on Personality and Culture. A sub-committee, the psychological committee, provided the definition of competition as "the act of seeking or endeavoring to gain what another is endeavoring to gain at the same time" (Mead 2003, 1st edition 1937, 8). There are two important implications here. First, competing is "the act … to gain" — and so there is a focus on activity and a goal. This is different to structural competition where position within a structure leads to firm actions. The contrast is an inside–out view, starting with the firm, compared to an outside in perspective based on structured context. Second, there is the future orientation of competing towards a goal. Here process comes more into focus than in structural competition.

Mead's (2003) understanding of competition developed when she was unable to find behaviors of non-competition in 13 previously collected cultural studies. Instead, the meaning of non-competition always depended on a culture's definition of competition (Mead, 2003). Accordingly, Mead (2003) concluded that competition is not a "natural" matter resulting from resource scarcity. This strongly suggests that structure alone does not imply competition. Further, according to Mead (2003), an individual goal can also be a collective goal. This double nature of a goal opens the way to an understanding of competition as a process.

As a result of these ideas and evidence Mead (2003) elaborated competition by differentiating between behavior and goal. Competition is defined by how an actor seeks a goal. More specifically, "competition was behavior oriented toward a goal in which the other competitors for that goal were secondary." (Mead, 2003, 17) The competitive focus is on the goal placed in the future and not the other actor. Mead (2003, 17) extended her analysis by distinguishing between rivalry and competition. Rivalry was defined as an activity directed at "worsting" the other party. When there is rivalry the worsting goal is the primary focus and the competitive goal is secondary. Mead (2003) also identified individualistic behavior where there was no relation between the actors. For individualistic behavior the actor pursues the same goal as other actors, but there is neither connection to nor consideration of the activities of another actor. This notion is worthy of inclusion as a standard for comparison of competition and rivalry. Table 1 summarizes Mead's (2003) definitions with firm examples.

To conclude, in a social context the process of competing is composed of activities towards achieving a goal, by enhancing sales to customers and/or building a network position. Social sensemaking processes are required to apprehend and attribute competition (Porac et al., 1995). To attribute competition requires time for observing the direction of a firm's actions and evidence of seeking the same goal. But goals and structure alone do not provide a basis for determining competition (Mead, 2003). Rather understandings of the direction of a firm's activities, whether primarily towards the customer or towards hindering the other actor, are the key (see Table 1). In a network context this involves either diverting customers, and so changing the dynamic of the network, or usurping a position in the case of rivalry. In the next section we apply these ideas to set out a research framework.

3. Competitive process: a dynamic network context

To address the competitive process we follow Mead's (2003) distinctions and look to the priority of a firm's activities, whether towards a customer or another firm. We apply Lane and Maxfield's (1996) 'lines of action' concept, which we define as the processes and activities a firm pursues in attempting to achieve objectives. A firm's line of action relies on social constructions of time: past–present–future Halinen and Törnroos (1995). A firm's line of action is projected from past and present observations into future activities. In dynamic and somewhat chaotic futures, and in incremental futures, a line of action is open to less and more control respectively, or even only to influence (Lane & Maxfield, 1996). But importantly, over time the apprehension and social construction of competition are available through managerial sensemaking. Thus, as a firm seeks to compete for customers and maintain or gain network positions, 'lines of action' are apparent from past activity and are projected into specific futures. These projections of lines of action are social constructions and evident as types of competitive processes.

Fig. 1 displays the nature of the primary and secondary lines of action given the distinctions by Mead (2003). Switching the primary line of action moves the firm from competing (when 1 is primary and 2 is secondary) to rivalry (where 2 is primary and 1 is secondary). One can imagine between arrows 1 and 2, that alternate degrees of competing are apparent according to different foci such as product attributes, distribution channel, and added services (arrow 3). Table 2 merges Mead's (2003) definitions with the lines of action in Fig. 1. In distinguishing different forms of inter-firm activity, Fig. 1 and Table 2 imply that managers must understand: (1) the relative position of firms to each other in the network, (2) the potential network positions of firms, (3) how those positions are related to each other through lines of action, (4) whether firm action is directed mostly at the customer and/or attaining a network position or directed at the other actor, and (5) whether action directed towards the other party is to hinder.

Importantly there is a subtle addition required to understand the process nature implied in Fig. 1 and Table 2. The business network is elongated in time, with actor position shifting and adjusting relative to other actors in the on-going flow of time (Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2012). The firm's lines of action are apparent as processes: by way of "events, actions, and activities unfolding over time" (Pettigrew, 1997, 338). The asymmetry of time (Adam, 2000) shapes apprehension and interpretation of a firm's processes inside the dynamic network. For a competitive process the focus is towards a customer or

Table 1
Mead's categories applied to business firm actions.

Activity	Behavior (how)	Examples
Individualistic	Activities of other actors are not considered	Each firm produces and sells to the customer without considering the activities of the other firms. There is some focus on the customer and very little attention to the network position. There is no competition.
Rivalry	The actor focuses activities on worsting the other firm and only secondly on the customer.	A firm pursues activities to directly hinder and 'worst' another firm, ahead of achieving their own sales to the customer. There is an attempt to usurp network position.
Competitive	The actor focuses activity on the customer and only secondly on the other firm/s.	A firm pursues customer sales, ahead of hindering another firm. Only in a secondary way does the firm note the activities of the other firm. There is an attempt to divert the customers via a different network position.

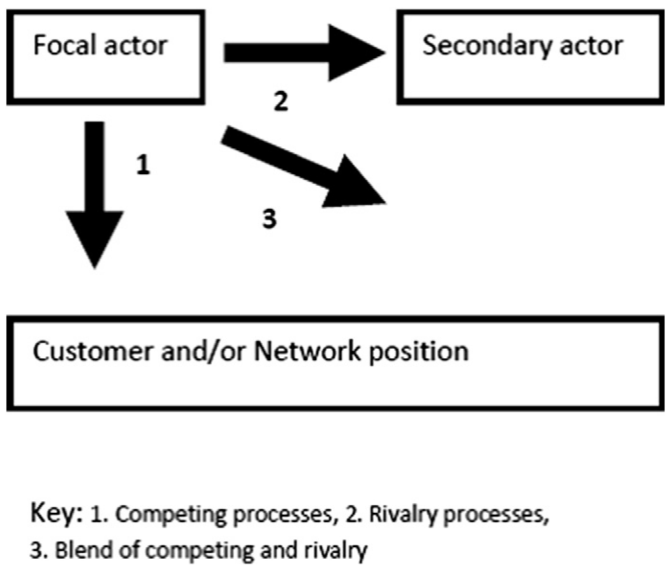

Fig. 1. Process as lines of action for competing and rivalry.

towards building or maintaining a network position. However, for rivalry the focus of the process is first to hinder the lines of action of a competitor. Thus, the rivalry process is not focused on a customer or building a network position, but rather, the focus is on the competitor and there is an attempt to usurp network position. The distinction is based on the priority of a line of action in time flow.

This future-oriented view of a firm's competitive process is in line with the etymology of competition, unlike its meaning in economics. From 14th century Late Latin 'competition', or the act of competing, means to 'seek together' (com- 'together', and petere 'to seek') (Wilkes & Krebs, 1985). In the words of Hedaa and Törnroos (2008), competing is forward loaded: firms act together to each seek their futures. We see this process meaning of competing as a more useful conceptualization for understanding change by firms in a network context.

In the next section we set out a research method to address more specifically our research question.

4. Method

A question about how is best studied with a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 1994). A case study is also a suitable approach for exploring and developing a conceptual framework (Eisenhardt, 1989). The fine wine trade is an industry where firms are connected by an identifiable production process from grape to table. There is one production event each year. The firms' focus is on the annual cycle and being ready for the next cycle. Planning and activity proceed from and are based on the quantity and quality of the grape harvest. Each actor must deplete stock, ready for the next vintage. Additionally, there are many grape growers, wine makers, and distributors, and so the empirical setting is one where the actors are related to each other in an industry structure. Also, the actors' lines of action are evident in time. The future is quite structured as revealed by stock depletion plans, although poor or outstanding harvests and global disruption may call for changes.

Our chosen geographic boundaries are the distribution of fine wine from South Australia to the main markets of the UK, Europe and the USA. Thus the producers are wineries in South Australia and the customers are different types of importers, mainly specialized wine dealers or distributors. Where we required greater detail of the final distribution processes to the restaurant or retailer, we focused our interviews in Denmark. The wine distribution channels in Denmark are extremely complex and dense. At one point in time there was one Danish importer/distributor per 1000 final customers; and Australia alone has over 2500 wine producers.

Given our chosen empirical setting a number of interactions present the possibility of competition based on lines of action. There is the potential for competition, from the wine producers to the specialist importers/distributors and on to the restaurants/retailers. These two layers of action were included, so allowing study of the competing for network position as well as for customers. Other possibilities, such as competition for resources from the vignerons, are open to study, but we excluded these options for the present study.

Over a period of three years, 2010 to 2012, we immersed ourselves in the fine wine industry by conducting 33 in-depth interviews in total, 17 with managers of wineries and 16 with wine importers. The approach gives access to the manager's experience (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). The interviews of between 40 and 90 min were recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis. The interviews were open-ended and asked managers to describe their business model, the other actors and the industry structure, the timing of product flow, and finally their understanding of competition, including stories and examples. The sequence of questions was later found to be enlightening.

The interview data was independently coded by two researchers for text blocks matching the constructs: 'competitive', 'rivalry' and 'individualistic' firm activities and on how a firm was focused on customers and/or network position. This approach follows the open and axial approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008), where researchers enter the field with categories in mind (Heath & Cowley, 2004). However, we discovered that many managers had not identified specific competition, whereas other respondents understood competition as a part of their business model. Thus, we generated a code for managers' awareness of competition. Firms were classified as having low awareness when respondents only applied the competition concept in response to the specific question near the end of the interview. This question also uncovered the respondents who believed their firm did not compete, or who had quite different perspectives of competition. When respondents based more than one of their early answers on their understanding of competition, for example to questions such as the industry structure or the business model, we categorized the firm as having high competitive awareness. Where competition was mentioned in answering only one early section of the interview we categorized the firm as having medium awareness. There was a distinct difference in the complexity of understanding portrayed across the high and medium levels of awareness categories.

When the independent coding was ambiguous the researchers arrived at a joint decision. These discussions highlighted the distinctions between firm competition and the more complex forms of coordinated multi-firm competition found in our data. An abductive research process (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) led us to consider how to separate

Table 2
Lines of action and attributed firm action.

Activity	Primary line of action	Firm action
Individualistic	Neither arrow 1, 2 or 3	There is neither direct or indirect action towards other actors. There is a focus only on the goal. There is no competitive action.
Rivalry	Arrow 2	There is an indirect action, via other actors, with actions designed to first hinder another party. The focus on the customer is secondary, and rather, there is an attempt to usurp a network position.
Competing	Arrow 1	There is an indirect action, with actions designed to increase customer sales and/or gain network position at the expense ultimately of another firm or firms. An important way to achieve sales is to build network positions.

and distinguish the firm competition process from these more complex forms of interaction.

5. Empirical study and results

The empirical study is of managers' understanding of competition activities in fine wine distribution from South Australia as well as that of the managers of specialist wine importer/distributors in Denmark. We present the information in two sets: producers and importer/distributors. The data does not represent matched producer–importer dyads. Acronyms are used to disguise firm names.

5.1. Producers

Of the 17 fine wine producers, 16 relied on their own grape harvest to make fine wines. Many of these producers also purchased or sold grapes to improve their final product mix. One producer relied totally on purchasing grapes, and two producers were vertically integrated with their own international wine export businesses dealing in the wines of other Australian producers. Table 3 summarizes the count of competition awareness levels and the nature of line of action activities by producers. Appendix A provides examples of activity evidence.

Of the 17 managers representing producers, we found that only one firm was competing in a rivalrous manner to gain customers. This producer was selling large volumes of bottled wine solely to supermarkets and was facing intense price and quality requirements from the customers (Appendix A, AP-1). One supermarket was providing the producer with examples of competitors' wine, and asking for a better price and similar quality wine in the next year. For each supermarket, the producer's relationship with the buyer was direct and focused on maintaining sales by making a better offer relative to competitors. Before meeting with a buyer the manager researched all competitor activities in a market. He checked product quality and prices in relevant and competing supermarkets, and being aware of production costs, distribution costs and promotion costs, was well armed to negotiate. He was ready to suggest suitable changes to a buyer, or accept buyer suggestions to adapt his products. This producer's activity was future directed. However, the producer also had a very strong focus on competitors' production and marketing activities. One can say that this producer was first focusing on the competitors and then changing his own activities so as to be a prime supplier by taking over a network position. Applying the lines of action in Fig. 1 this producer was following primarily 2 and secondarily 3. The alternate interpretation is that the competitive processes of the supermarket buyers caused them to create a context between many connected suppliers, in which each supplier had to behave in a rivalrous manner. In these cases a coherent network pattern is shaped by the dominance of each supermarket's competitive processes. Further, in the instance of the specific producer there was a commitment process to the other party, not only to a contract, but also in trying to offer new solutions or adapt to the buyer's competitive needs. There was also a type of commitment by the supermarket, so long as the producer continued to perform and so improve the competitive process.

Table 3
Producer awareness of competition and direction of actions.

	Number of firms
Rivalry	1
Competitive	
Highly aware of competitors	7
Moderately aware of competitors	4
Low awareness of competitors	3
Different view of structure	2
Total	17

Of the remaining 16 firms, all were acting to gain customer sales. However, the managers of two firms asserted that they did not compete. Their reasoning was based on an understanding of context. One producer did not grow grapes and so, being always between a grower and a customer, saw that his firm was different to other firms (Appendix A, AP-2). Thus, this manager said that there was no competition, because the business model was unique. The other firm was represented by its agent, who believed that there was no competition in the wine industry. To his mind every wine could find a customer by a different distribution path. In both cases these firms relied on creating new connections to grape suppliers or/and distributors to create value, and so discussing competition was not a part of their business model. But each was focusing efforts on gaining customers in many new ways and so they met our competition definition.

The remaining 14 firms were following primarily a customer focus. Their focus on competitor firms varied markedly, as evidenced by the level of competitor awareness. Seven firms were highly aware of their competitors. These managers had detailed competitor information and understood their sales relative to competitors and by the differences in each distribution channel. Without prompting, these managers were able to discuss the nature of the competition, including that from other international producers and local Australian producers. This group of firms was focused strongly on selling to customers within a context that accounted for the actions of other firms (Appendix A, AP-3, AP-4). Applying the lines of action in Fig. 1 these producers were following primarily 1 and secondarily 3. The managers' explanations of their business model and how it was positioned within the industry structure were cognizant of competition in multiple ways.

Four producers were moderately aware of competitors. These firms were focused on selling to customers, and they only considered competition in general terms; for example, they considered the effects of exchange rate variation and competition from continental or regional wines (Appendix A, AP-5, AP-6). Applying Fig. 1 to these producers shows that they were following primarily line of action 1, and there was only some action on line 3. A further three firms were strongly focused on gaining customers, but saw little need to focus on competitors for different reasons. One was a young firm whose manager expressed the view that he was too busy making and selling wine to consider competitors. Another manager considered that their wine was so distinctive and there was no competition. The final manager also produced a distinctive wine. However, she was so focused on the wine that her behavior, following Mead's (2003) categorization, was almost individualistic. Still there was some seeking of customers and so the process of competition was evident.

The stand-out result of the analysis is the relatively high proportion of producers with low awareness of who are their specific competitors. This is counter to the received wisdom, which based on the number of producers and importer/distributors should be highly competitive.

5.2. Importers/distributors

Of the 16 importer firms, 12 were wine dealers who also had their own stores. Two of these sold through specialized national retail chains with different types of franchising agreements. Three companies were distributors, with two selling to a broad range of retail outlets and restaurants while the other specialized in the restaurant sector. We also chose to interview one purchasing director for a national retail chain selling fine wine. Except for the retail chain, all companies were small, as measured by employee numbers. Table 4 summarizes the count of competition awareness levels and the nature of competition activities by importers. Appendix B provides activity evidence.

Of the 16 managers only two firms were behaving in a rivalrous manner. These two firms' activities were aimed at taking customers away from competitor firms, for instance by matching messages to customers or directly comparing their products to competitor offerings

Table 4
Importer awareness of competition and direction of action.

	Number of firms
Rivalry	2
Competitive	
Highly aware of competitors	2
Moderately aware of competitors	3
Low awareness of competitors	9
Total	16

(Appendix B, DI-1, DI-2). Applying Fig. 1 these firms were primarily following line of action 2 and secondarily line 3.

The remaining 14 firms were acting primarily towards their customers. Of these, five firms were aware of and displayed different levels of interest in their competitors. These firms were following, in Fig. 1, primarily line of action 1 with some focus on line 3 (Appendix B, DI-3). The remaining nine firms displayed a low awareness of their competitors. However, these firms were completely directing their actions towards gaining customers, for instance by creating specific added value in their products to gain customer attention or by cooperating with producer firms. Thus, these nine firms were undertaking competitive activity directed towards their customers. Again it was intriguing that so many importers had a low awareness of specific competitors. The reasons ranged from "we are special, there is no need" to "we are too busy". One importer was competitive with activities directed at customers, but was almost completely ignoring competitors, seemingly almost to be individualistic in behavior (Appendix B, DI-4).

5.3. Firm competing for network position

Evident in our data is a distinction between firm level competing and a type of collaborative competing focused on gaining a network position. Our purpose here is not to elaborate this second form of competition; rather we clarify the situation so as to distinguish firm level competing for network position. We posed a number of questions in an abductive approach to separate these forms of competing. Is the actor seeking their own firm interests or is the actor seeking a mutual interest? Is the purpose cooperation or is the purpose to enhance competing? What is the nature of the goal/s? Following our abductive approach we see two levels of competing: firm level and also collaborative competing. Next we present examples where each is a possible interpretation. Our purpose is to refine the meaning of firm competitive activity.

Of the seven wine producers highly aware of competitors, three had changed their importer in the recent past. The first example occurred when a producer changed to a larger importer with a broader distribution and more resources. The previous importer had no choice but to accept the loss of a producer. In the second example a producer took advantage of an offer to move from a small to a large German importer. The producer's Danish importer was previously responsible for sales into northern Germany. The Danish importer agreed to stop selling that Australian producer's wine into northern Germany. The producer agreed to fund a promotion by the Danish importer in the Baltic States as a means to make up for sale losses in Germany. In the third example the producer had two Danish importers and they informed the smaller importer that from now on sales would be through the larger importer. However, the producer still sold low volumes to the smaller importer. In each case the decision to change the relationship with the importer was made by the producer firm, and the purpose was to gain more sales. These network changes are consistent with a primary focus on competing.

6. Discussion

We begin this section by comparing our results to the business-to-business literature. Next we discuss the contexts and firm actions associated with rivalry competition and then the processes of competition exhibited by the majority of firms. We finish by clarifying the distinctions between firm competitive activity and collaborative competitive activity.

We found that Mead's (2003) categorizations of competition, rivalry and individualistic firm behavior are evident in our data. Regarding the process of competing, there was not a single firm in the case material that was not seeking to improve customer offerings and increase sales. All firms, except the three rivalrous firms, were undertaking activities focused firstly on their customers. Those firms with high competitive awareness exhibited also a high level of cognizance of activity in other firms' lines of action.

Regarding firms following rivalry processes we see that there is an attempt to usurp network position. In the case of selling to supermarkets, the rivalrous producer seeks to gain network position by meeting the competitive needs of the buyers. The rivalrous importers were making a similar commitment to meet the competitive needs of their buyers. In these cases a coherent network pattern is forming in which the commitment is not to the relationship as in Ford and Håkansson (2013), rather the commitment is first towards the customer and secondarily toward the other party. In a forward oriented rivalrous process the commitments are nested, first to the customer and secondarily to the other party. However, the goal is conversely nested, first towards usurping a network position and then towards the customer.

Discussing now the majority of firms, an important finding from this study is that about half of the firms exhibited low awareness of competitors (i.e. 14 of 33). The respondents do not observe and note competitor activities. Many reasons were given for this lack of competitive awareness. Some firms do not have the resources to focus on competitors. Some firms view their context in a manner that they say removes the need to observe competitors. It is evident that to generalize about how firms understand their competitive environment, or competitive processes, is a questionable research approach. Thus, we concur with the view of Porac et al. (1995), who suggest that "market structure is an endogenous product of managerial minds" (Porac et al., 1995, 224). However, this is not the same as saying that firms do not compete for network position. Rather, we conclude that managers with a network understanding will compete in different ways to those who comprehend only a market structure.

Over half of the firms in the study are aware of competitor activity (i.e. 19 of 33). The managers of these firms are observing competing firms' activities in different degrees of detail. The managers apply their own sensemaking framework to consider which firms and what product and marketing attributes to monitor. In being aware of competitors these managers gain to varying degrees early warning of changes and trends in the market place. We note the complexity of knowledge and the foresight of the managers with a high level of competitor awareness. These managers were able to describe competitor cases in detail, along with their associated actors. These managers were able to comment about the likely impact of activity and especially how to prepare and stay ahead of the competitors by focusing on their own specific customers.

Finally, we seek to distinguish firm versus collaborative competing, and so strengthen our conceptualization of competitive processes. Competitive activity involves necessarily also collaborative actions with suppliers and other actors, but the prime goal is not cooperation. Our distinction is evident in the case of the Australian producer providing the Danish importer with funds for promotion in the Baltic countries. The funds are provided in recompense for the Danish importer releasing the right to distribution in the northern German states. Meanwhile, the producer ceased collaboration with one importer in another region of Germany, and so was able to move to an importer with better and complete German coverage. Our analysis according to the primary goal, as evident by line of action, places this as an example of firm competition and very clearly not cooperation. When choosing collaboration rather than cooperation to characterize this example, we note that multiple goals exist and that the primary goal was improvement of competition. Thus, from our abductive approach we see processes of firm competition and collaborative competition as nested categories, with collaborative competition driven by firm competition. The process of firm competition has primacy over collaborative competition processes (Fig. 2). Given this formulation the processes of competing are driving rearrangement of the importer network (network change).

An important distinction implicit in the above discussion is between collaboration and cooperation. In cooperation the process is one of working together to the same end, whereas in collaboration the process is working with another to achieve one's own goals. The distinction is like Mead's (2003) idea that an individual goal can also be collective. In our analysis, sales to a final customer are collective, but are composed of nested individual goals (Fig. 2). This also suggests that commitments are nested in the case of collaboration, firstly towards the customer and secondarily towards other partners. Collaboration processes are nested in and driven by competitive processes focused on the collective goal of sales to customers.

But what if the final goal requires cooperative processes to arrive at a collective goal? Do these cooperative processes nest inside the firm process of competition? Or are cooperation processes so completely distinct that they do not relate to competing? Our analysis in a business market suggests that firms cooperate to compete, and so cooperation processes are nested in and driven by the process of competing; future oriented competitive processes are thus a main conditioner of cooperation in business. Furthermore, when competitive processes are understood as future oriented actions they are no longer background variables, rather they are firm processes that provoke network change.

7. Managerial implications

A managerial implication of the research conducted here is that firms can improve their customer sales growth by building a higher level of competitor awareness. In our case study many firms were so absorbed in their own operations that they lost the opportunity to gain new customers by innovating. For each of these firms there is the issue of lost information about future developments in the industry. These firms are missing or coming late to opportunities because of their lack of competitor awareness. This is the opposite situation to an issue highlighted by Mead (1962), where American firms were so engrossed in copying competitors that innovation was stifled. But equally a low level of competitor awareness also stifles overall innovation, because a firm must rely solely on their own resources to innovate and reach customers. However, a competitor aware firm can copy innovations and so more of their energy is available for adapting to their customer and context. Being aware of other firms is not only about the negative affects of competition.

Evidently, firms with low competitor awareness will benefit from a formal process for the gathering of competitor intelligence. For example, Subramanian and Ishak (1998) found in a sample of 85 large US corporations a positive association between Return on Assets and the level of sophistication of the firm's competitor intelligence gathering. Given our competition framework inside a dynamic network, firms should be more active in understanding about forward lines of action. Managers should look to understand the wider business network and how other firms, and not necessarily only direct competitors, are collaborating and coordinating to compete more effectively. For many of the producer firms interviewed in this research, there was almost a passive acceptance of the advice given by importers on how to compete in the Danish market. Further, many Danish importers were not aware of the latest competitive moves by other firms, and seemed to rely instead on accepted ways of doing business. This suggests that firms can gain considerable impetus in markets by taking a network perspective and by more actively gathering intelligence on how firms are undertaking forward lines of action.

A similar argument applies to firms who see their context as constraining competition, either in reducing their opportunity for growth, or even in providing opportunities for growth. In each case to assume that a specific structural context is the main way to understand competition is a fallacy. Mead (2003) explains clearly that the structure of goals in a context is not enough to understand competition, and in the more complex and interdependent networked business environment this issue is amplified. A firm that stops collecting information, because its analysis places it in a context where it has no competitors, has blinded itself to the changing network. Equally, a firm that sees growth

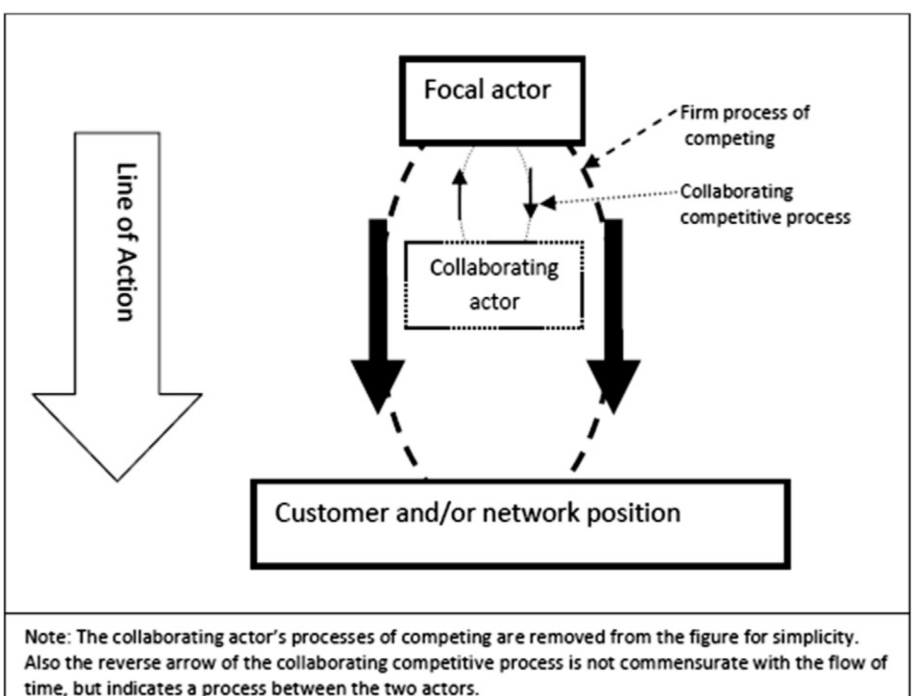

Fig. 2. Processes of firm competing and nested collaborative competing.

and opportunity in its current network position needs to be open to the many ways a network position can be changed, or usurped, by another firm because of changes made by yet other actors two or three business relationships away. For example, the offer by the German distributor to the producer resulted in competitive changes in the Baltic States.

Finally, managers need to be more aware of the multiple goals and the goal dynamics of different firms. Bengtsson and Kock's (1999) empirical cases imply changing goals and so display this changing competition perspective. The shifting of competitor goals should not come as a surprise to managers. Understanding the network as a shifting set of resources and activity owners offers foresight about changing configurations of goals and new competitor moves. Working out how to orchestrate relations with other firms and actors to achieve new network configurations also requires understanding of goals.

8. Conclusion and future research

The results of our analysis of the fine wine industry show that there is a distinct lack of awareness of competitor activities. One reason is the lack of a suitable framework to provide a coherent reason and method for observing other firms (why, which firms, what activities?). How to think about and frame competitor, collaboration and cooperation processes requires considerably more research. Our approach of focusing only on the process of firm competition has provided some insights. This firm perspective provides a different view from that observed by those taking a more structural view of a firm's position in the network. Future research of the way in which competition and cooperation shape each other is required. We expect that such research in a dynamic network context can lead to an improved framework for understanding market as network.

Our approach of considering the competitive process according to lines of action allows consideration of the time-priority of firm actions and places goals in a nested priority. Apart from goal priority an alternate research opportunity, worthy of consideration, is the priority and nesting of commitments. Further, the asymmetry of time (Adam, 2000), forever forward flowing, allows analysis of the process of competition according to an ordered array of goals and commitments within a context. Thus, the primacy of a firm's line of action is open to analysis and the process of competition is displayed. For example, collaboration is shown to be nested inside the firm process of competition when the goals are individual and also collective.

There is considerable research to be undertaken about how goals and activities are aligned and prioritized by actors in the different sets of firm competitive, collaborative and cooperative processes that are undertaken in network settings. Further, the distinctions drawn in this research may allow for disentangling the more complex concept of coopetition (Bengtsson & Kock, 2014), as paradox and understandings of time are closely related.

There are also a number of areas for research evident from within our lines of action framework. Firms can cooperate or collaborate to compete for resources, or in competitive terms, firms follow forward lines of action to access heterogeneous resources. In fact, the nature of competition for resources is likely to have a strong influence on network structure. Interesting research might look at how strongly competition for resources affects network re-structuring as one moves away from raw materials and towards final customers.

Another research issue in the framework is how to determine the primacy of focus on forward lines of action. The issue is that often actions are synchronous and also matters of degree. Thus, primacy and degree of forward lines of action require further research to clarify the middle ground (arrow 3 in Fig. 1). The present study suggests that there are some firms that are focused on customers and yet they are also highly aware of competitors. These firms tended to be older and better resourced, but not necessarily larger. Further research is required on the way the managers of these firms integrate competitor analysis into elaborating competition focused on forward lines of action.

Contrary to Ford and Håkansson (2013) we do not see competition as a background variable in the business network. Every cooperative and collaborative move is undertaken for competitive reasons when an inside–out perspective is applied to network change. Competition focuses and brings together parties as either collaborators, where goals are individual and also to some degree collective, or as cooperators where the goal is first collective. Further, when triads are considered and parties are connected across the network by chains and clusters of business relationships, more complex competitive and cooperative plays are underway so as to gain customers ahead of other strategic nets (Moller & Rajala, 2007; Parolini, 1999). The change to a different German importer and the agreement for the Australian producer to fund some promotion by the relinquishing Danish importer in the Baltic States exemplifies these issues. The Australian producer's new German importer with wider and stronger distribution provided increased access to customers, thereby increasing forward profits for the producer to underwrite the increased Baltic promotion costs. However each actor adjusted their relationships and re-shaped the network to advance their own process of competition.

Finally, we call for more research into the market as network concept. Firms compete, collaborate and cooperate to harness resources and so seek to shape their own single future among other firms. In a global networked business world with greater virtual mediated communication and commerce, the provision of a framework to understand the processes of competition, collaboration and cooperation is greatly needed.

Appendix A. Examples of producer competitive activity

Producer	Interpretation	Statement, secondary evidence, actions
AP-1 (Grower and wine producer, sales to supermarkets)	Very aware	“I do my own research, walking from supermarket to supermarket, saw how big their ranges were, did they have a foreign wine section, or new world wine section. So we were watching them, watching their wine programs, and then you would go in.”
	Rivalry	“It would be very aggressive, very aggressive. The Danes will say: In order to meet that price point I'm going to need to go down to that price.” This producer was provided with competitor samples to match or improve upon.
AP-2 (Wine producer, not a grower)	Not aware	“So, no, I'm not convinced there's any competitors in the market but at the same time I never think about it.” “Our business model is unique.”
	Still competitive	Selling wine through an international importer, and directly to a Danish importer.
AP-3 (Grower and wine producer)	Very aware	“I get quite a bit of market intelligence back from AX. He and I are still in communication all the time. He ran a retrospective tasting of one of my wines last year and sent me a whole list of feedback and talked about what the Danish market is doing.”
	Very competitive	When the Euro weakened — “Let's see if we can maintain this price point. I said okay I'll reduce my margin breaks if you reduce your margin breaks. So okay we'll do it because I want to keep the volumes going. I don't want to lose the presence in the market.”

(*continued*)

Producer	Interpretation	Statement, secondary evidence, actions
AP-4 (Large family grower and wine producer)	Very aware	"We look at export as a long-term proposition in building markets, and … you have a lot more competition, it's not just your Australian group. … in the current economic climate, you can buy fruit from growers under cost, so … for us it is uneconomic to compete in that sector of the market."
	Very competitive	"We're about to release a wine which will be priced at over $60 a bottle. It is a three year development project. … It's not a commercial proposition, it's purely brand marketing. Because we need credibility in those price points to grow our business there"
AP-5 (Grower and wine producer)	Moderately aware	On competitive analysis — "Very little to be honest. We were quite short on time. We rely on them [distributors] to provide that sort of information."
	Low competitive	"We don't tell them how to run their market, we're guided by them. They tell us if there are opportunities in areas of that market, and also about pricing. We've got a relatively fixed pricing structure, but we can move on that depending on what the markets depict."
AP-6 (Grower and wine producer)	Slightly aware	"There's no fancy cellar door. It's sales and tastings by appointment only, simply because it's just me and I can't be everywhere. And exports. … In almost every case, and I think possibly in every single case, they came to us and that's where you've just got to get lucky."
	Low competitive	"I mean, exporting is really tough for little businesses."

Appendix B. Examples of importer competitive activity

Importer	Interpretation	Statement, secondary evidence, actions
DI-1 (On-line store and importer)	Rivalry	This company has spent many millions on a new homepage set-up aimed directly at competing as rivals with ABC, the largest and oldest distributor. Placing advertisements in the newspaper long used by ABC. The advertisements seek to direct customers to their new homepage. The product offers match those by ABC in that newspaper.
DI-2 (Importer, sells to restaurant trade)	Rivalry	He tries hard to take over restaurants from the competition. He visits restaurants, refers specifically to the existing importer and argues that he can do much better. "Our wines are better than your current supplier, whose wines are in the local wine dealer." "We are fighting for the customers."
DI-3 (Importer)	Very Aware	He is very knowledgeable about the competition and what they are doing — and how much they sell of what types of wine.
	Very competitive	Describes the structural competition in the Danish wine market and by the producers.
DI-4 (Importer and store)	Aware	Very competitive in the sense that he is inventive with new concepts and importing from new wine regions. "I don't think a lot about who my competitors are." He was aware that three new stores had opened nearby, but he had lost no sales.This manager seemed to justify his position by saying that understanding competition is very difficult. "We are not very conscious about how the competitors compete — what they do to compete. But we know them and our customers also know them."
	Competition, but almost individualistic	"I don't do anything active in the competition — because I don't know their customers."

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