Exploring Entrepreneurs’ Social Network Ties: Quantity Versus Quality

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ABSTRACT

We applied a new approach to the study of entrepreneurial networking groups—a social network perspective merged with team-member exchange (TMX) theory. This enabled us to take a unique look at how the quantity and the quality of entrepreneurs’ social network ties impact networking performance. Entrepreneurs ($N = 302$) in formal networking groups provided data about the quantity of their social ties (i.e., weekly interactions with group members), the quality of those relationships (i.e., team-member exchange), the actual number of members to whom they gave referrals, as well as from whom they received referrals. Our novel approach revealed a direct relationship between tie quantity and the two networking performance outcomes, while we observed no direct relationship between tie quality and the same outcomes. However, affective organizational commitment mediates this latter relationship between tie quality and networking performance. And, interestingly, we find that it is the quality of ties that more strongly predicts the mediator of affective commitment, not the quantity of ties. We discuss the theory-based as well as practical implications of our work and describe areas for future research based on these findings.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial networking; psychology; social ties; team-member exchange; referrals; affective commitment

Highlights:

- We applied a new approach to the study of entrepreneurial networking groups—a social network perspective merged with team-member exchange (TMX) theory.
- We explored how entrepreneurs’ quantity and quality of social ties influence networking performance (i.e., referrals given, referrals received).
- We found a direct relationship between tie quantity and the two networking performance outcomes.
- There was no direct relationship between tie quality and the two outcomes. However, quality of ties more strongly predicted the mediator of affective commitment, relative to quantity of ties, yielding an important indirect effect.
- We redirect the conversation regarding the psychology of networking, and discuss how quantity and quality of social ties influence entrepreneurs’ networking performance.
1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a social endeavor in which individuals interact with others to help start, grow, and sustain emerging ventures (Ruef, 2010). Not surprisingly, research focused on entrepreneurs’ social interactions is a central area of focus in the field. And, research findings—in both empirical work and theoretical musings—provide ample support for the premise that social network ties are beneficial for numerous entrepreneurship-related outcomes including opportunity discovery (Anderson, 2008), venture performance (e.g., Dubini & Aldrich, 1991; Vissa, 2012; Watson, 2007), as well as firm survival (Honig & Samuelsson, 2014).

For example, we know that social network tie quantity may maximize the availability of weak ties, invaluable for hard-to-anticipate opportunities, including innovations and new career employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1973; Krackhardt 1987; 1996). And, even though seminal works described how an individuals’ social tie utility does not depend entirely on the quality of relationships (Knoke & Yang, 2008; White & Watkins, 2000), we do know that tie quality is important in terms of social support as well as initial relationship formation (Kim, Longest, & Aldrich, 2013; Ruef, Aldrich, & Carter, 2003; Vissa, 2011).

Despite our growing base of knowledge related to social network ties, there are three questions which remain, unfortunately, relatively unexplored. First, as research has primarily focused on the in-bound benefits (i.e., benefits to entrepreneurs) of what social network ties can do, we know very little about what enables social ties to promote giving benefits (i.e., out-bound) versus receiving benefits. Second, we know very little about research models in which both quantity as well as quality are included. And, third, in models depicting both quantity and quality of ties, we have little insight into mediating mechanisms through which ties influence performance.
The present exploratory research addresses these three questions. Specifically, we (a) examine in-bound as well as out-bound outcomes for entrepreneurs, (b) include both quantity as well as quality of social network ties, and (c) model affective commitment as the mediating mechanism through which social network tie quantity and quality influence entrepreneurs’ networking performance. To address these three questions, our work integrates past research indicating that a social network perspective holds promise for predicting individuals’ performance (Borgatti & Foster, 2003) with work on how the quality of relational interactions between team members (i.e., team-member exchange) influences important reciprocal benefits among individuals in organizations (e.g., Ford & Seers, 2006, Seers, Petty, & Cashman, 1995).

2. Entrepreneurial Networking

An increasing number of entrepreneurs are engaging in formal, entrepreneurial networking groups with the goal of growing business revenue—members, for example, in Business Network International (BNI) groups pay an annual fee to be involved and attend weekly meetings where they ask for, and receive, referrals to new potential clients (Ho & Pollack, 2014). This entrepreneurial networking, defined as “…forging new social ties that lead to information and resources, and, ultimately, increased value creation for the venture,” represents a behavior (Pollack, Coy, Green, & Davis, 2015, p. 817) that is central to the entrepreneurship processes of identifying, exploring, and exploiting opportunities (Gielnik, Krämer, Kappel, & Frese, 2012; Rauch, Rosenbusch, Unger, & Frese, 2016).

2.1 Quantity Versus Quality

Regarding the role of networking group interactions in enabling entrepreneurs’ access to new clients, as well as providing access for others to new clients, we assert that quality is a critical issue. We proceed, in the following sections, to make the arguments that (a) entrepreneurial
networking involves relationship building, and (b) relationship building is related to affective commitment which drives reciprocity in relationships.

2.2.1 Networking as Relationship Building

The process by which entrepreneurs extract information and resources from social ties is complicated. It is not, as many people think, as simple as paying annual dues, showing up at weekly BNI meetings (Ho & Pollack, 2014). Rather, one-to-one meetings with fellow networking group members are a critical step in the process. It is through these interactions that entrepreneurs build high quality relationships that then lead to referrals to potential clients—both in-bound as well as out-bound. In short, entrepreneurial networking is about building relationships—and, recent research that describes the nature of networking as building relationships holds promise as a way to advance the literature (e.g., Pollack et al., 2015; Ren, Shu, Bao, & Chen, 2016).

One perspective that explores the quality of relationship interactions among individuals is team-member exchange (TMX) theory (Seers, 1989). TMX is typically used to examine reciprocal exchange relationships of ideas, assistance, communication, and support between team members (Seers, 1989; Seers et al., 1995). The growing TMX literature identifies TMX as a predictor of satisfaction, performance, citizenship behaviors, and commitment (e.g., Banks et al., 2014). Extant research regarding the quantity of entrepreneurs’ social ties, and our novel theorizing about TMX and the quality of ties, lead to our first, exploratory, research question.

Research Question 1: How do quantity (number of social ties) as well as quality (TMX) of social ties relate to entrepreneurs’ performance in networking groups?

2.2.2 The Role of Affective Commitment
Ample evidence exists to support the prediction of a direct relationship between social tie quantity and networking performance. However, the relationship between social tie quality is more complicated. We posit, as described above, that networking is a relationship building process—accordingly, searching for a direct relationship between TMX quality with networking performance fails to capture the mechanism by which ties impact performance. We propose affective commitment as a mechanism by which ties contribute to improved networking performance (e.g., Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Affective commitment, in an organizational context, refers to a person’s emotional attachment, identification, and involvement within an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

At the most fundamental level, entrepreneurs who hope to have productive networking relationships must forge those relationships both individually and with the networking group (Malewicki, 2005). Here, greater quantity and quality of network ties should positively predict commitment. Put differently, the more time and effort entrepreneurs’ put into networking to build both quantity and quality of ties, the more they will be emotionally attached, identify, and feel involved with the networking group as a whole—this greater affective commitment (e.g., Pollack et al., 2015), in turn, should predict performance.

Commitment in relationships has been linked to pro-relational behavior such as forgiveness (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002) and well-being (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). In support of this premise, in an entrepreneurship context, Pollack et al. (2015) found that greater affective commitment to the networking group positively predicted individuals’ percentage of revenue generated from networking. Here, we extend this work and posit that commitment will be the mechanism through which the reciprocal benefits—both in-bound as well as out-bound—of networking flow. Put another way, the degree to which
entrepreneurs feel affectively committed to the networking group should increase performance, both in terms of referrals given (out-bound) as well as received (in-bound) (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). In sum, we propose that affective commitment (influenced by social ties and TMX) is a primary factor to consider when examining the effectiveness of entrepreneurs in networking groups. Our second, exploratory, research question focuses here:

Research Question 2: How are social network tie quantity, social network tie quality, and affective commitment to the networking group, related to the outcomes of referrals given and referrals received.

3. Materials and Methods

These data were collected as a part of a larger effort, the 2009 Survey of Entrepreneurial Networking Dynamics (SEND), which focused on the psychology of networking such as the effects of economic stress (Pollack, VanEpps, & Hayes, 2012) and regulatory focus (Pollack, Forster, Johnson, Coy, & Molden, 2015). Entrepreneurs (N = 302; women = 102), who were members of Business Networking International (BNI) in a large mid-Atlantic U.S. city, completed an online, self-report survey. The goal of BNI meetings, weekly, is for entrepreneurs to take turns describing their ideal customers and for other group members to provide referrals for their fellow group members. These entrepreneurs were of varying ages (M = 43.73, SD = 10.78) with an average tenure in their company between 5 and 6 years (M = 5.42, SD = 5.04). The average tenure of group members in BNI was roughly 2.5 years (M = 2.54, SD = 2.15). The number of employees per company was small (M = 20.30, SD = 41.67).

3.1 Measures (see Appendix 1 for list of all items)

Social Ties were measured with the mean of a 3-item index (Pollack, Forster, Johnson, Coy, & Molden, 2015) that exhibited adequate reliability (α = .67). This measure is similar to
past assessments of out-degree centrality in ego networks (e.g., Krackhardt, 1987). The three items were: “With how many members of this group do you meet in person weekly about business-related matters? With how many members of this group do you talk on the phone weekly about business-related matters? To how many people from this group do you go weekly for advice about business-related matters?”

**Team-member exchange (TMX)** was measured using a twelve item scale (Ford & Seers, 2006; Seers et al., 1995) that exhibited good internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$). Items were anchored on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strong agree), and included matched items assessing quality of exchange relationships with team members and their reciprocal opposites such as “When other group members are busy, I often volunteer to help them out,” and “When I am busy, group members often volunteer to help me out.” The twelve items were grouped into three parcels, consistent with best practices in structural equation modeling (Williams, Vandenberg, & Edwards, 2009).

**Affective Organizational Commitment** was measured with an 8-item scale (Meyer & Allen, 1997) adapted to BNI group context ($\alpha = .84$). Sample items included: “I would be very happy to spend the rest of my time as a group member in this group,” and “I really feel as if this group’s problems are my own.” Participants responded on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strong agree). We used factorial parceling to group the eight items in two parcels (Williams et al., 2009).

**Networking Performance** was assessed with two questions: “How many different people from your BNI group passed you closed business (referrals) over the last 12 months?” ($M = 6.90$, $SD = 5.74$) and “How many different people from your BNI group did you pass closed business (referrals) over the last 12 months?” ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 4.65$).
Control Variables included entrepreneurial self-efficacy assessed with the Chen, Greene and Crick (1998) 15-item scale (α = .94), and social competence, assessed with the 17-item Baron and Markman (2003) measure (α = .84). Three parcels for each variable were created (Williams et al., 2009).

4. Results

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. We tested our primary research questions with structural equation modeling using Mplus 6.0 (Muthén, & Muthén, 2008) with the final, retained, path model presented in Figure 1 (and Table 2). We report the following results at the individual level. Following the Anderson and Gerbing (1988) recommended two step approach, we first examined the full model CFA which showed adequate fit ($\chi^2(67) = 81.08$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03, RMSEA 90% confidence interval (.00; .05), SRMR = .04) and all paths loaded significantly onto their respective factors and then tested the mediated models.

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We next examined both the fully mediated and partially mediated models. The fit of the partially mediated model had significantly improved fit ($\chi^2(101) = 151.16$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .04, RMSEA 90% confidence interval (.03; .05), SRMR = .05) relative to our fully-mediated model ($\chi^2_{\text{diff}} = 36.09, p < .001$). In this partially mediated model, quantity of social ties directly predicted networking performance ($\beta = .34, p < .001$ for referrals received; $\beta = .50, p < .001$ for referrals given). In contrast, TMX did not directly predict referrals received ($\beta = .04, p = .66$) or given ($\beta = .09, p = .29$). A final model without the direct paths between TMX and referrals

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1 Both the fully ($\chi^2(31) = 87.65$, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .08, RMSEA 90% confidence interval (.06; .10), SRMR = .06) and partially ($\chi^2(29) = 48.54$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .05, RMSEA 90% confidence interval (.02; .07), SRMR = .04) mediated models failed to show a group membership effect impacting model fit or parameter estimates with all but one significant (the effect of social ties on affective commitment became marginally significant, $p = .08$).
demonstrated good fit ($\chi^2(103) = 152.29$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .04, RMSEA 90% confidence interval (.03; .05), SRMR = .05) without significantly degrading the model ($\chi^2_{\text{diff}} = 1.13, p = .57$); thus, this model was retained (see Figure 1).

Individual standardized coefficients for this final partially mediated model are presented in Figure 1. The $R^2$ values for the endogenous variables, affective organizational commitment (.32, $p < .001$), referrals received (.19, $p < .001$) and referrals given (.16, $p < .001$), were significant. We conducted supplemental analyses to address endogeneity, and found that these did not significantly alter model fit. Further, we tested an alternative model with social ties and TMX predicting referrals, and referrals predicting affective commitment—reversing the directional assumptions resulted in a worse model overall.

5. Discussion

We applied a new approach to the study of networking groups—a social network perspective merged with TMX theory. To our knowledge, the current study is the first to suggest combining these approaches to examine what factors can improve networking outcomes, thus invigorating the discussion of quality of social ties that began with Mitchell (1969). In answer to Research Question 1, we find a direct relationship between tie quantity and the two networking performance outcomes, but no direct relationship between tie quality and the same outcomes. In answer to Research Question 2, affective organizational commitment operates as a mediator between tie quality and networking performance (i.e., at least for referrals received), and we find that quality of ties more strongly predicts the mediator of affective commitment, relative to quantity of ties.

5.1 Theoretical Implications
First, the present findings hint at a novel model in which both quantity and quality of social network ties influence key outcomes (see Figure 1). This model advances the literature and identifies social tie quality as a key antecedent to entrepreneurial networking—which we uniquely represent as a relationship building process. In this model, which merges a social network perspective with TMX theory, we provide a needed redirection—greater attention to quality of ties—to the extant literature. We answer calls in the literature for more in-depth affective and cognitive models exploring entrepreneurship processes (e.g., Baron, 2000).

Second, the use of team-member exchange quality to evaluate the level of reciprocity, both psychological as well as practically (i.e., commitment, referrals) gained from networking interactions provides a useful addition to the literature. Specifically, the quality of TMX, at high or low levels, may significantly impact processes in entrepreneurial networking groups. Liden, Wayne and Sparrowe (2000) suggested that high-quality TMX may facilitate more advanced reciprocal exchanges. It is these high-quality TMX exchanges that future work can further explore in the entrepreneurial networking context.

Third, our exploratory work, regarding how the psychological process of affective commitment to the entrepreneur’s networking group leads to new clients, is the first to include both referrals received and given (by the entrepreneur). The present findings regarding the affective undercurrents of TMX and social ties extend prior work (Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008) and future research may uncover additional evidence of the importance of affective commitment as a mediating mechanism leading to both in-bound and out-bound benefits. Our work found that affective commitment mediated the relation between quality of ties and referrals received, but not referrals given. This is an area where future research can build on the present, exploratory findings. Overall, we need to expand research on how it is important to
focus not just on what is received, but also on what is given (i.e., Grant, 2013). In sum, we set
the stage for future research to explore (a) the affective nature of social network ties, as well as
(b) the personal rewards of ties and also the reciprocal nature of rewards from ties (those given
and those gained).

5.2 Practical Implications

This research on business networking can help entrepreneurs increase their chances for
success in accessing new clients. Nominally ‘being there’ appears not to be an effective
substitute for the psychological involvement and group identification of ‘relating’ to the group
and ‘feeling a part’ of it. Specifically, entrepreneurs who choose to engage in networking need to
focus on building relationships with fellow members that are reciprocal in terms of both affective
commitment and performance (i.e., referrals given, referrals received). And, on a more broad
level, this research provocatively suggests that engaging in networks is a process of relationship
building—and, in a world where social ties are traditionally tracked by quantity (e.g., Facebook,
LinkedIn) and not quality, the present work has promise to make social networks—whether
entrepreneurial, online, or social—more effective in facilitating the type of exchanges desired.
Rather than simply focusing on the number of ties, we need to consider the quality—the
reciprocal benefits—of social ties.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This sample of U.S. small business owners in networking groups has limited diversity.
Future research should examine potential cultural and personality differences (Lee & Tsang,
2001) in the influence of social ties and TMX across cultures and countries. Also, we encourage
future work in other entrepreneurial contexts such as university-based spin-offs (Rasmussen,
Mosey, & Wright, 2015) or institutional environments (Qureshi, Kistruck, & Bhatt, 2016).
Results from the present research could be bolstered by replications employing different methodologies, especially those solidifying causal conclusions and minimizing common method variance (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). Suggestions include gathering multi-source data (e.g., both the individual group members and BNI administrative staff) and assessing predictors and outcomes at multiple time points (i.e., temporally separating data collection; Jack, 2010; Jack, Dodd, & Anderson, 2008).

Future research could explore how group density and multiple assessments of centrality (e.g., degree, closeness, betweenness; Freeman, 1979) affect networking relationships within groups. Regarding TMX quality, in assessing the usefulness of teams accomplishing tasks, it is essential to ask: “What is the nature of the work being done?” There is some evidence to suggest that it is possible to separate TMX into contributions and receipts (i.e., Ford & Seers, 2006) and future research is encouraged to explore the relation between the full scale, in addition to TMX contributions and receipts, or potentially other dimensions (e.g., help, support communication).

5.4 Conclusion

Time is a scarce economic resource and how entrepreneurs allocate time may impact financial success (Uzzi, 1997). Thus, networking group members have the opportunity to structure their time accordingly by increasing their within-group activity (i.e., tie quantity as well as quality) to influence networking performance. In sum, the present research offers a new approach to the study of networking groups—a social network perspective and TMX viewed through the lens of affective commitment—and provides ample basis for future theoretical and practical explorations.
REFERENCES


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*Note: N = 269; * p < .05; ** p < .01.*
Table 2. Indirect Effects in the Final Model

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*Note.*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. 95% Confidence interval upper (UL) and lower limits (LL) of indirect effects. $N = 302$.**
Figure 1. Results of Retained, Partially Mediated, Model

Notes: * $p < .05$  ** $p < .01$  *** $p < .01$. $N = 302$. Dotted lines indicate non-significant paths. Included control variables not shown (none are significant) were: Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy and Social Competence.
Appendix 1. Measures Used.

**Social Ties** (Pollack, Forster, Johnson, Coy, & Molden, 2015)
1. With how many members of this group do you meet in person weekly about business-related matters?
2. With how many members of this group do you talk on the phone weekly about business-related matters?
3. To how many people from this group do you go weekly for advice about business-related matters?

**Team-Member Exchange** (Ford & Seers, 2006)
1. When other members of my team are busy I often volunteer to help them out.
2. When I am busy, other members of my team often volunteer to help me out.
3. I frequently take actions that make things easier for other members of my team.
4. Other members of my team frequently take actions that make things easier for me.
5. I frequently recognize the efforts of other members of my team.
6. Other members of my team frequently recognize my efforts.
7. I communicate openly with other members of my team about what I expect from them.
8. Other members of my team communicate openly with me about what they expect from me.
9. I frequently provide support and encouragement to other members of my team.
10. Other members of my team frequently provide support and encouragement to me.
11. I frequently suggest ideas that other members of my team can use.
12. Other members of my team frequently suggest ideas that I can use.

**Affective Organizational Commitment** (Meyer & Allen, 1997)
1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my time as a BNI member in this group.
2. I enjoy discussing my BNI Group with people outside of it.
3. I really feel as if this BNI Group’s problems are my own.
4. I think I could easily become as attached to another BNI Group as I am to this one.
5. I do not feel like “part of the family” at my BNI Group.
6. I do not feel “emotionally attached” to this BNI Group.
7. This BNI Group has a great deal of meaning for me.
8. I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my BNI Group.

**Networking Performance**
1. How many different people from your BNI group passed you closed business (referrals) over the last 12 months?
2. How many different people from your BNI group did you pass closed business (referrals) over the last 12 months?

**Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy** (Chen, Greene, & Crick, 1998)
1. Develop new ideas.
2. Perform financial analysis.
3. Set and meet sales goals.
4. Conduct market analysis.
5. Develop new markets.
6. Develop new products and services.
7. Reduce risk and uncertainty.
8. Conduct strategic planning.
10. Establish and achieve goals and objectives.
11. Define organizational roles, responsibilities and policies.
12. Take calculated risks.
13. Develop new methods of production, marketing, and management.
14. Make decisions under risk and uncertainty.
15. Develop a financial system and internal controls.

**Social Competence** (Baron & Markman, 2003)
1. I’m a good judge of other people.
2. I can usually recognize others’ traits accurately by observing their behavior.
3. I can usually read others well — tell how they are feeling in a given situation.
4. I can tell why people have acted the way they have in most situations.
5. I generally know when it is the right time to ask someone for a favor.
6. I can easily adjust to being in just about any social situation.
7. I can be comfortable with all types of people — young or old, people from the same or different backgrounds as myself.
8. I can talk to anybody about almost anything.
9. People tell me that I’m sensitive and understanding.
10. I have no problems introducing myself to strangers.
11. People can always read my emotions even if I try to cover them up.
12. Whatever emotion I feel on the inside tends to show on the outside.
13. Other people can usually tell pretty much how I feel at a given time.
14. I am very sensitive to criticism from others.
15. I am often concerned about what others think of me.
16. I’m good at flattery and can use it to my own advantage when I wish.
17. I can really seem to like another person even if this is not so.