

**FOSTERING THEORY DEVELOPMENT IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT
THROUGH INVESTIGATING ABSENCE
–THE CASE OF STRATEGIC ALLIANCES–**

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ABSTRACT

Research in strategic management tends to frame its studies within established theoretical and methodological boundaries, thereby constraining the emergence of novel concepts. This article maintains that the strategic management field would benefit from abductive research and the examination of anomalies. We suggest absent phenomena as a type of anomaly that could be used to generate and evaluate ideas and hunches. The non-occurrence of expected events or phenomena and the appearance of unexpected ones are powerful yet under-researched triggers for identifying overlooked phenomena, generating new hypotheses, and fostering new theoretical insights in abductive reasoning. This article is situated within contemporary debates advocating phenomenon-based theorizing and addresses the epistemological challenges around presence and absence. The concept of absence is applied to international strategic alliances, a field rich with instances of absent or unexpected phenomena. We conclude that systematically examining absence can revitalize strategic management research by expanding its focus beyond existing paradigms and promoting genuine theory advancement.

Keywords:

Abductive reasoning, absence, anomaly, strategic alliances, strategic management, theorizing

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“The need for generating new management theories that address problems or anomalies encountered in rapidly changing organizational and social contexts has never been greater” (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021: 684).

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, leading management scholars have identified a growing discrepancy at the core of theory development in management research (Bhardwaj *et al.*, 2025b; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021). While editors and journal reviewers often require scholarly work to make a significant contribution to the creation or further development of theories and models (e.g., Hambrick, 2007), studies that draw on a single theory and aim to test and corroborate rather than challenge existing theoretical frameworks continue to dominate. Bhardwaj and colleagues (2025a: 164) highlight a tendency “to formulate problems to fit *existing* theoretical and methodological frameworks” (emphasis in original), which leads not only to the preference for mainstream and predefined, partially outdated phenomena but also to more intricate empirical tests of existing theories, often addressing ever finer-grained research gaps (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2024; Makadok *et al.*, 2018).

In response, critical voices have proposed actions to strengthen theory development, concept formation, model building, and hypothesis generation by devoting more attention to abduction, the creative early phase of theorizing, along with predominant deduction and induction (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2021; Kay and King, 2020; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021, 2024). Scholarly mandates for “*phenomenon-based theorizing*” (e.g., Fisher *et al.*, 2021) and the “*art of phenomena construction*” (e.g., Alvesson and Sandberg, 2024) place the abductive phase at the center of theoretical advancement. Consequently, concepts such as hunches, epiphanies, mysteries, and anomalies are recognized as key triggers for identifying and articulating new phenomena and generating novel theoretical insights (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2024; Hambrick, 2007; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021). Deviations from expected events or results should arouse the curiosity of

attentive researchers, prompting them to describe new phenomena or to seek alternative explanations. Despite this recognition, few contributions systematically address such anomalies or seek to integrate various approaches under common conceptual frameworks (e.g., Foorthuis, 2021).

This article positions absence, which is defined as the non-occurrence of a theoretically mandated event or the manifestation of an expectedly absent one, as a key anomaly in scientific inquiry. We contend that while presence corroborates, absence disrupts and serves as a catalyst for theoretical renewal in strategic management. By establishing absence as a foundational abductive starting point, we show how it prompts the re-specification of existing phenomena. This process provides the necessary friction for a rigorous cycle in which newly identified phenomena lead to the development of models, theories, and hypotheses through deduction, followed by empirical testing (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021). We show that investigating these gaps is not merely a niche exercise but a systematic path toward revitalizing management research at large.

We begin by considering absence in the current debate on the merits of abductive and phenomenologically driven research approaches aimed at overcoming the observed inertia in scientific innovation. We continue with a conceptual analysis of the scientific problem of absence, offering ontological and epistemological insights into presence and absence. Finally, we illustrate the value of focusing on absent phenomena in the context of international strategic alliances.

THE INERTIA TRAP OF (STRATEGIC) MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

For years, strategic management scholars (e.g., Volberda, 2004) and management scholars in general (Daft and Lewin, 1990; Locke *et al.*, 2008; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021) have been concerned with an innovation backlog in (strategic) management research resulting from what may be called an inertia trap or a normal science trap (Kuhn, 1970). Theories are often used for their own sake, and new problems and phenomena in practice receive little attention or are addressed with a

time lag (e.g., Pfeffer, 2009). Systemic mechanisms have long dominated deductive and inductive research in management, accompanied by notable biases in methodological approaches and outcomes. Thus, management research largely remains confined to existing thought patterns and research with few innovative, dynamic, and transformative approaches.

Transaction cost theory (TCT) is often applied in *deductive research*, particularly in the field of strategic alliances, to assess the comparative efficiency of organizational forms from market to hybrid to hierarchy (Coase 1937; Cuypers *et al.*, 2021; Williamson, 1991). In strategic management research, TCT is repeatedly employed to derive hypotheses that are then tested and predominantly corroborated using empirical data (Chang *et al.*, 2013; Poppo and Zenger, 1998; Walker and Weber, 1984). Applying general principles to specific problems corresponds to deductive research and is not *per se* objectionable. However, it can lead to at least two unfavorable consequences for the advancement of strategic management research. First, it encourages the formulation of low risk, i.e., adapted hypotheses, which partly explains the high corroboration rate of hypotheses (Fanelli, 2010; Locke, 2007). Further, as reproducibility studies have indicated, hypotheses previously reported as positively significant no longer hold upon re-testing (e.g., Bergh *et al.*, 2017). Second, increasingly specialized and explanatory minor causal relationships are tested. While these studies may yield statistically significant results, they often have limited explanatory relevance for the original, broader theory, explaining only small fragments of a larger whole (e.g., Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013).

Inductive research can lead to the origin of new theories based on pattern recognition in analyzed datasets, i.e., moving from the specific to the general, thereby enabling the discovery of new relationships (Eisenhardt *et al.*, 2016; Locke, 2007; Shrestha *et al.*, 2021). However, this inductive *empirical* research falls short of fostering genuine *conceptual* breakthroughs because a performative shift has occurred. Rather than allowing data to challenge existing boundaries, scholars retrofit

significant correlations into established frameworks favored by journal gatekeepers. The result is the ubiquitous and often reflexive use of the phrase ‘*in accordance with previous research, we draw upon [X] theory.*’ Such phrasing is frequently deployed as a safe, institutionalized signal of scholarliness to satisfy reviewers, rather than as a substantive foundation for theoretical advancement.

Various management scholars have called for reorientation because (a) deductive approaches typically remain tied to existing theories and rarely identify novel phenomena or offer new explanatory models, and (b) inductive approaches, although potentially initiating a process that might yield new insights from data, mostly rely on existing theories. The low innovation momentum in management research has been attributed to an imbalance favoring deductive and inductive methods at the expense of abductive research (Delbridge and Fiss, 2013; Fisher *et al.*, 2021). Thus, strategic management research struggles to respond to complex, unexpected new challenges and to creatively generate new theoretical assumptions, explanatory models, and hypotheses (e.g., Bhardwaj *et al.*, 2025b). Given that greater integration of abductive methods could liberate management research from the inertia trap, why have deductive and inductive approaches continued to dominate in recent years? Why has strategic management research, if at all, only reacted to new practical phenomena (e.g., shifts toward greater social and ecological goals; focus on grand challenges) instead of proactively identifying new phenomena, such as uncovering explanatory limits of existing theories?

The prevailing academic system creates and perpetuates the inertia trap through several intertwined pressures and norms. First, the “*publish or perish*” imperative creates intense pressure on scholars to produce a continuous stream of publications, particularly in elite journals (Adler and Harzing, 2009; De Rond and Miller, 2005; Miller *et al.*, 2011). This pressure incentivizes safe, incremental research over risky, innovative inquiry. The “*publish or perish*” mentality and the increased use of AI in the creation of scientific papers will likely exacerbate the trend toward existing

knowledge dominating in self-reinforcing loops. Second, leading management journals strongly encourage –rightly, we submit– the use of theories to frame research and provide a scientific approach. Further, they require an explicit reference to the work’s contribution to theory development (e.g., Hambrick, 2007). Thus, manuscripts that lack theoretical grounding and are described as lacking theory are often rejected (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017; Sutton and Staw, 1995), which is why authors seek suitable theories, especially those that increase the likelihood of acceptance. Third, editors and reviewers, many of whom have built their careers on specific theoretical frameworks, tend to resist novel or unfamiliar theories, favoring work that aligns with conventional paradigms (Charlton, 2008; Kuhn, 1970). Moreover, reviewers frequently favor their own prior research, perpetuating dominant perspectives and methodological approaches. Studies yielding primarily non-significant findings are at high risk of rejection, thereby suppressing the reporting of anomalies and discouraging exploration of uncharted phenomena where initial results may be inconclusive or surprising.

Together, these systemic conditions –among possibly others– foster a research environment that privileges deductive and confirmatory studies grounded in existing theories, thus perpetuating the inertia trap in management research. In this context, abductive and phenomenon-based theorizing emerge as a crucial yet frequently underappreciated third approach to scientific inquiry, beginning with anomalies and unexplained observations as catalysts for iterative theory development.

ABDUCTIVE RESEARCH AS A THIRD MODE OF INQUIRY: ENGAGING WITH ANOMALIES

In strategic management research and across the social sciences as a whole, deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches differ fundamentally in their logic and the direction of theorizing (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). The question of which approach is most suitable for promoting knowledge generation, science, and the respective discipline, including hypothesis formation and theory development, has been a

controversially debated topic and has often been subsumed under the philosophy of science since antiquity (e.g., Locke, 2007). There should be a consensus among management researchers that each has its merits and should be applied in a balanced manner within a scientific domain.

Deductive research starts with existing general principles or theories to explain and predict certain outcomes. It applies logical reasoning to derive specific hypotheses about phenomena and uses data to examine theoretical predictions and rules. In particular, deductive research aims to achieve logical validity and clarity in resolving contradictions identified in prior literature (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021; Shepherd and Sutcliffe, 2011). It is essential to note that deductive research applies existing theories as analytical tools to make sense of and interpret quantitative and qualitative data, but does not 'test' the theory nor lead to new theories. The advantages of using a logically guided search grid and a sharper eye for related details and causal relationships are offset by significant disadvantages: One, the development of what may be called *tunnel vision*, whereby other interpretations and aspects of the data are hidden or overlooked. Second, a theory-driven selection of the data sets used does not do justice to the phenomenon under investigation. Third, there is a failure to test the validity of the theory for the context under investigation. When a scientific system or individual researchers are uncritical of a theory and only have eyes for data that support their preconceived opinion (*hypothesis corroboration*) and not for deviations, "... all they do is repeat or add a minor nuance to their preferred theory" (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 2).

Inductive research has gained momentum in strategic management research in recent decades, thanks to digitalization, the availability of (big) data, and advancements in artificial intelligence. Inductive research starts with detailed, specific observations or data without formally applying preconceived theoretical frameworks. Researchers who take an inductive approach use and analyze existing or self-generated data to identify both obvious and hidden patterns, thereby inviting the

development of new categories or conclusions based on data. Through systematic coding and concept formation, this approach allows broader generalizations and theories to emerge from empirical facts. Understanding of known phenomena can be initiated, hypotheses can be generated, and predictions can be improved. However, no laws or valid theories can be conclusively derived, as even when important conditions are met, there is always a risk of obtaining contradictory results with other data (Bendassolli, 2013; Chalmers, 1999: 43ff.). Knowledge accumulates with an acknowledgment of uncertainty and a focus on empirical testing (Clarke, 2005; Dey, 1993; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021).

Abductive research addresses the limitations of inductive and deductive research in identifying and capturing new phenomena, problems, concepts, hypotheses, and explanations. While inductive and deductive research approaches tend to follow linear logic, either from the general to the specific or from the particular to the general, abductive research should be understood as a cyclical and iterative process. Data are analyzed to examine the extent to which they corroborate established theories and to determine whether modifications are necessary or whether new hypotheses, explanations, and theories are needed (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014; Thornberg, 2012). The process of abduction addresses a long-standing tension in management theory between rationalism, which emphasizes theory-driven deduction as the path to knowledge, and empiricism, which privileges observation and induction without prior theoretical allegiance (Hambrick, 2007; Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017). In essence, while deduction relies on confirming what must be true under established theory and induction on building theory from observation, abduction uses surprises and anomalies as the starting point to iteratively generate new theory through informed, creative inference, bridging the gap between existing knowledge and novel empirical insights.

Sætre and Van de Ven (2021, 2024) propose a guiding framework for a research approach that follows abductive reasoning, presented as a cyclical and iterative process of engaging with

anomalies or unexplained findings in data. According to this approach, abductive reasoning does not seek what *must* be true but rather creatively generates new hypotheses and insights that can explain previously puzzling observations and *might* be true. The cyclical process has been proposed to follow four steps: (1) observing the anomaly; (2) corroborating the anomaly through data; (3) generating hunches or creative explanations; and (4) critically evaluating the hunches to iteratively refine emerging theory (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021: 686ff.). Abductive reasoning prioritizes *plausibility* and creative sensemaking over strict, logical deduction or purely empirical induction by starting from observed anomalies, phenomena that current theories cannot adequately explain (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021; Tavory and Timmerman, 2014). This approach makes abduction compelling for addressing novel or complex management issues that do not fit neatly within existing theoretical frameworks or empirical generalizations, guiding scholars through a disciplined yet innovative sensemaking process for theory creation.

According to Fisher and colleagues (2021: 631), there is considerable overlap between the pursuit of an abductive research approach and the process of phenomena-based theorizing: "This type of theorizing may be distinguished from pure deductive and inductive theorizing. ... starts with the identification of a new or undertheorized phenomenon. ... [it] is closer to abduction, where a theorist moves from an unexplained anomaly toward a plausible explanation." When it comes to identifying anomalies, phenomenon-based theorizing offers an alternative approach to analyzing contradictory empirical findings or discovering unexpected correlations and patterns in datasets. This approach involves comparing existing management knowledge with real phenomena and recognizing that these cannot be explained, or can only be explained inadequately, using existing knowledge, logic, and theories. This allows the identification of anomalies that warrant systematic investigation.

Several authors have warned against understanding abduction as a silver bullet: “Today the term ‘abduction’ has become something of a catchword within social research ... The great success of abduction, in my opinion, may be traced back to two features: first, to its indefiniteness and, second, to the misjudgment of the achievements of abduction that derive from this” (Reichertz, 2019: 261). The author suggests that abduction should be regarded as a third type of data analysis, distinct from generalization and induction. Abduction draws attention to those aspects for which there is no, or no satisfactory, explanation based on existing hypotheses, theories, or the existing body of knowledge in general (ibid). Even if abductive inference is neither a mode of reasoning nor an exact method, but rather a general attitude toward existing knowledge, the discovery of an anomaly is always the starting point for researchers with traits similar to those of detectives.

Anomalies serve as the primary catalyst for the abductive process, triggering the researcher’s move from observation to theory. They disrupt the research process by representing unforeseen deviations from established norms, thereby surprising researchers. Consequently, prioritizing anomalies offers a potent pathway for revitalizing strategic management through an abductive approach and/or a phenomenon-driven research agenda. To the best of our knowledge, few studies have attempted to systematize anomalies (Foorthuis, 2021; Frankfurter and McGoun, 2001; Lightman and Gingerich, 1992), likely because the concept remains inconsistently defined and difficult to operationalize (Foorthuis, 2021; Frankfurter and McGoun, 2001).

EXPECTED BUT ABSENT, UNEXPECTED BUT PRESENT: ON THE NATURE OF ANOMALIES

While there is broad agreement that an anomaly refers to a deviation from a rule or from what is normally expected, this consensus dissolves upon closer scrutiny: How is the *rule* defined, what specifically constitutes the *expected* event or outcome, and at what threshold does deviation become truly *unexpected*? As Kuhn (1970: 65) noted, “anomaly appears only against the background provided

by the paradigm.” In other words, an anomaly is not an inherent property of data, but a relational one that is detectable only when it clashes with a specific set of prior expectations.

Expectations typically stem from repeated observations of regularities or from assumed causal relationships, embedded in unconscious or conscious mental models and theories. Hypotheses formulated on this basis generate predictions (e.g., symptom → disease or sustainability strategy → legitimacy pressure) or the consequences of events (e.g., undersea earthquake → tsunami; private equity acquisition → firm valuation). Scholarly predictions regarding the existence or occurrence of specific phenomena are typically grounded in prior experience, established theoretical frameworks, and causal explanations derived from accumulated knowledge (Whetten, 1989). In strategic management, the paradigm asserting that internal factors dictate long-term performance has solidified into dominant theories like the Resource-Based View (RBV) and the Knowledge-Based View (KBV). They create a strong theoretical foundation for examining many strategy questions, such as why start-ups with unique and advantaged resources prosper. The field encounters a significant anomaly when empirical reality or anecdotal evidence violates this linear expectation. For instance, contrary to the resource–advantage logic, research shows that under certain boundary conditions, abundant financial resources can undermine start-up success rather than catalyze it (e.g., Hvide and Møen, 2010).

The previous arguments explain the relational foundations of anomalies. They do not specify the threshold at which deviation becomes sufficiently pronounced to warrant the label. Greater conceptual clarity can be achieved by examining deviation at its most radical expression: the absence of what is expected and the presence of what is not.

Towards a Conceptualization of Phenomenological Absence Constituting Anomalies

Phenomenological absence is the absence of a phenomenon when conditions support its existence. The well-known discovery of penicillin by Alexander Fleming was prompted by the

absence of bacterial growth in parts of the laboratory culture. Wallach (2019) shows that archaeologists frequently use inferences and reasoning from absence, often giving it a status similar to that of inferences from tangible evidence, such as the search for evidence for the earliest use of fire by early humans in Europe, where systematic analyses of all known caves did not provide evidence for the use of fire. As another example, scholars determine the dates of the Philistines' first settlements in Canaan from the absence of specific shreds of ware. There are also insightful examples from paleontology. Since the extinction of dinosaurs, mammals have dominated the planet. However, placental mammals have been absent in Australia, which helps determine when Australia drifted away from Antarctica. Finally, why is it that despite the presence of many wheel-like objects in the highly developed pre-Columbian American cultures, neither vehicular nor pottery wheels were used or discovered (Cheesman, 1969; Sax *et al.*, 2008)?

The conspicuous absence of what practical experience or theoretical logic would mandate, or conversely the presence of what they would predict to be absent, constitutes a fundamental anomaly, with each spanning both everyday perception and formal scientific inquiry. A comparison of theoretical expectations with empirical reality yields four possible constellations. Two of these can be characterized as normal cases: first, when experience- and theory-driven expectations or predictions that something will occur are corroborated (e.g., in empirical research); and second, when the prediction of non-existence is borne out, thereby likewise aligning with the current state of knowledge. The remaining two constellations represent anomalies: Anomaly Type I, in which something is expected to exist or occur but fails to materialize; and Anomaly Type II, in which something predicted not to exist or occur nevertheless becomes evident (see Figure 1).

Experience or theory-led expectation / prediction	Existence	Anomaly Type I <i>The expected event or outcome is notably missing.</i> <i>The "Missing Piece": Challenges the sufficiency of current supporting assumptions.</i>	Focus of traditional research = theory-based proof of existence.
	Absence	By-product of traditional research = non-existence conforming to theory	Anomaly Type II <i>The event occurs despite theoretical "prohibitions."</i> <i>The "Intrusion": Reveals hidden variables or new causal mechanisms previously ignored.</i>
		Absence	Existence
		Empirical Reality: Actual finding / perception	

Figure 1: Categorizing absence and presence in research as an anomaly

A phenomenon expected to be present based on prior experience or theoretical prediction, yet empirically absent, represents the dominant form of an absence anomaly (Type I), as the anticipated occurrence is not supported by the population or dataset under study. As an example, in the early 1990s, the United States became aware of a substantial increase in illegal immigration of Chinese nationals and held Chinese criminal organizations responsible. Investigating researchers did not find evidence of criminal organizations, intensified their search, and concluded that they had been searching for something that did not exist (Zhang and Chin, 2017). However, it is important to note that they cannot definitively conclude that the absence of evidence means criminal organizations do not exist.

It is also possible that the opposite case (Type 2) arises: based on practical and/or theory-driven observations and experience, a particular phenomenon or feature is expected to be absent but occurs and can be detected. An example is the discovery of a massive black hole in our galaxy that, according to current stellar evolution models, should not exist (Osborne, 2019).

Figure 1 illustrates four possible outcomes when hypothesis-driven expectations and predictions are contrasted with the empirical presence or absence of phenomena. The two cases that conform to theory-based hypotheses and predictions represent the dominant outcomes of inductive and deductive research. As such, they typically reinforce existing knowledge and are unlikely to provoke curiosity about new phenomena or alternative explanations. By contrast, the anomaly cases (Type I and Type II) introduce a tension between expectation and observation. Whether such tensions lead to theoretical advancement depends on how researchers respond. Anomalies may trigger a systematic search for an explanation or prompt adjustment behavior in which discrepant findings are dismissed as contradicting the prevailing paradigm (Kuhn, 1970).

Why is something expected to be present absent, or vice versa? For example, why might a specific form of a strategic alliance be absent despite theoretical and contextual conditions predicting its formation? Such anomalies require scrutiny, as they may stem from limitations of existing theoretical assumptions, boundary conditions, measurement approaches, or contextual contingencies embedded in the broader process of knowledge generation and accumulation. Following the four-stage model of abductive reasoning proposed by Sætre and Van de Ven (2021), identifying an anomaly should trigger a systematic review to determine whether the observed deviation indeed constitutes an anomaly, rather than a conceptual, methodological, or interpretative error. Only once this verification step is undertaken can the anomaly serve as a productive starting point for iterative theory development.

Absence as Anomaly: Conceptual and Methodological Preconditions

To investigate absence meaningfully, the methodological design and underlying dataset must allow for the valid identification of the non-occurrence of specific phenomena or characteristics. Moreover, researchers must be able and willing to recognize and interpret such absence as theoretically significant. Various methodological and statistical limitations may distort conclusions about the existence or nonexistence of objects, characteristics, and causal relationships. The problem of false positives has received considerable attention across many disciplines (Kim, 2019; Simmons *et al.*, 2016; Stahl and Pickles, 2018), and scholars widely acknowledge that although false positives are difficult to eliminate, they must be minimized to safeguard scientific integrity. Cognitive biases and limited experience may further lead scholars to “see” phenomena that conform to inadequate theories or overextended theories, particularly when databases or operationalizations restrict the range of observable alternatives.

Less frequently discussed are false negatives, i.e., falsely claiming not to have found evidence of a phenomenon: “False negatives are particularly concerning in research areas where demonstrating the absence of an effect is crucial ...” (Vadillo *et al.*, 2016: 87). In such cases, a phenomenon, object, or event may indeed exist but remain undetected, for instance because researchers lack sufficient domain expertise, rely on incomplete data sources, or employ methods incapable of adequately discriminating between presence and absence.

Once identified, the plausibility of inference from absence is contingent on two conditions: First, the phenomenon or subject of research must be clearly defined and distinct (e.g., the CSR focus of family firms; international joint ventures (IJVs) as a preferred choice of market entry). Second, prior experiences and corresponding theories must strongly predict the existence of such outcomes

under certain conditions (e.g., socioemotional wealth induces higher CSR investments; complementary partner resources favor IJV formation).

When the expected phenomenon is truly absent, and the absence is recognized, it may generate surprise because the departure from expectations constitutes an anomaly. Within the framework of abductive reasoning, such surprise often serves as the initial step in recognizing an anomaly that may subsequently be validated (Haig, 2005; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021; Van Maanen *et al.*, 2007). The second step, corroboration of absence as a theoretically relevant anomaly, requires a more deliberate research design (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). In this context, the researcher must articulate an explicit expectation or hypothesis regarding the non-occurrence of a given phenomenon *a priori*. For instance, one may hypothesize that under specific contextual conditions, an organization will refrain from pursuing mergers and acquisitions. Such a hypothesis of absence necessitates systematic empirical testing to establish its validity and to advance theoretical understanding beyond conventional expectation-driven models of presence.

Presence Bias in Strategic Management Research

Human cognition and knowledge accumulation are overwhelmingly governed by an ontological bias toward presence, i.e., the existence of tangible and intangible objects. We perceive and interpret existing phenomena against the backdrop of prior experiences, which subsequently dictate our decisions and behaviors (e.g., Hellriegel *et al.*, 1986). Mirroring this cognitive tendency, the social sciences have predominantly focused on the extant: that which is present, observable, and readily measurable (e.g., Meier *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, it is often counterintuitive and intellectually demanding to recognize absence as a substantive datum. Yet it is precisely this challenge that makes the study of non-events such a fertile ground for knowledge generation.

There are numerous examples of a predominant focus on existing phenomena in developing and testing management and organization theories. For instance, the literature on resistance to organizational change largely assumes that proposed changes elicit defensive reactions from affected stakeholders (Ford *et al.*, 2008; Sanson and Courpasson, 2022). Accordingly, individuals and groups resisting change have become the primary subjects of organizational research. Studies typically seek to identify and analyze the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of resistance to refine and advance theory. By contrast, less attention has been paid to situations where organizational change unfolds smoothly in the absence of open or covert resistance, or even in the presence of broad or unanimous support (e.g., Dent and Goldberg, 1999). As a result, theories of change may be disproportionately shaped by instances of resistance, while the absence of resistance remains underexplored.

A similar pattern can be observed in research on firms' internationalization processes. The dominant focus has been on companies that expand across borders in different ways, leading to influential theoretical frameworks such as the Uppsala Model (Vahlne and Johanson, 2017) and Dunning's OLI Paradigm (Dunning, 2001). These theories are derived from the examination of firms that internationalize. However, research questions can also be framed around absence. Cross-border investment studies typically overlook firms that, despite strong competitive positions in their home markets, deliberately choose not to internationalize. For example, for many years, Anheuser-Busch (now part of AB InBev) maintained only a minimal international presence, even though it possessed leading brands and sophisticated marketing capabilities in the United States. As some senior executives reportedly argued, "... beer is such a regional business that American beer is for American customers" (Hays, 1999). Examining such cases more systematically could illuminate the factors and conditions that lead firms to remain absent from international markets, thereby complementing and potentially qualifying established theories on international expansion.

The same reasoning applies to mergers and acquisitions (M&A), one of the most extensively studied domains in strategic management. While there is a substantial body of research on M&A activity and performance, including numerous studies of acquisition failure, far less attention has been devoted to acquisitions that never took place or to companies that abstained from M&As even when capable and advised to do so. As Gomes-Casseres (2016) highlights, examining M&A deals that were contemplated but ultimately abandoned can yield valuable insights for managers considering future acquisitions. Exploring such instances of non-occurrence may reveal previously overlooked determinants, boundary conditions, or causal mechanisms, thereby challenging taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in prevailing paradigms.

These examples illustrate a broader pattern: with a few exceptions (e.g., Inkpen and Choudhury, 1995), strategic management research has focused on what is observable and enacted, while neglecting what is not pursued, not enacted, or intentionally avoided. To improve theory development, it is crucial to examine, understand, and explain not only phenomena that exist, but also those that are conspicuously absent. The following section will demonstrate how research focused on absences can enrich theory development and knowledge about the management of strategic alliances. For this purpose, we take a deeper look at several cases where strategic alliances are expected according to existing theory, but did not materialize, and show how such absences foster theory building. To highlight the epistemological potential of analyzing nonexistent alliances, we assume actual absences, i.e., there are no methodological or statistical errors.

ABSENCES OF STRATEGIC ALLIANCES AS AN EXAMPLE OF ABDUCTIVE REASONING

For the absence (presence) of a strategic alliance to qualify as an anomaly, its non-occurrence must first be empirically identifiable and theoretically interpretable. Researchers must be able to determine whether an alliance was expected under specific conditions and whether its

absence reflects a genuine deviation rather than data limitations or incomplete observation. Because alliance research typically relies on observable, existing collaborations, systematic information about alliances that were considered but not formed is rarely available. As a result, an absence may go unnoticed or be misclassified as irrelevant rather than an anomaly.

Applying the first condition for interpreting alliance absence as anomalous to the case of strategic alliances, we define strategic alliances as contractual or equity-based interorganizational collaborations that pool and share idiosyncratic and complementary resources to achieve partners' strategic interests more efficiently than through other organizational modes. There are various forms of strategic alliances, including equity joint ventures founded and/or operated by multiple organizations, strategic supply chain partnerships, technology-sharing arrangements, joint marketing programs, and portfolios of investment firms (Inkpen, 2001; Kale and Singh, 2009). For analytical clarity, we focus on equity-based alliances between two or more parent firms. Only if this organizational form is conceptually distinct from hierarchy (e.g., wholly owned subsidiaries) and market contracting can its absence be meaningfully evaluated.

The second condition concerns predictive theoretical expectations. Established theories in strategic management –most prominently TCT (Coase, 1937; Kogut, 1988; Williamson, 1975) and RBV (Barney, 1991; Das and Teng, 2000; Peteraf, 1993)– have long been used to explain and predict the existence of alliances. TCT suggests that at intermediate levels of asset specificity and uncertainty, hybrid organizational forms such as alliances are economically efficient (Hennart, 1988; Parkhe, 1993b). The RBV predicts alliance formation when firms seek access to valuable, rare, and complementary resources that cannot be efficiently developed internally or acquired through markets (Grant and Baden-Fuller, 2004; Luo and Park, 2001).

If, under such theoretically specified conditions, firms systematically refrain from forming alliances and instead choose hierarchy or market modes, this non-occurrence may be seen as an anomaly. Yet alliance research predominantly examines existing or dissolved alliances, analyzing performance, governance, and success factors within the observed population. Organizational alternatives that were theoretically plausible but were not chosen remain largely outside the scope of empirical scrutiny. Studies on partner selection, for instance, typically examine chosen partners rather than those deliberately rejected or unavailable (Hitt *et al.*, 2004; Shah and Swaminathan, 2008). Likewise, analyses of alliance performance rarely consider whether firms that opted for full ownership or market contracting—i.e., alliance absence—achieved superior outcomes.

From an abductive perspective, the systematic non-occurrence of alliances where strong theoretical expectations predict their formation generates surprise. Such absence may stem from managerial decisions that deliberately reject alliance formation despite seemingly favorable conditions, or from researchers' reliance on incomplete data and theory-bound assumptions that obscure relevant alternatives. In both cases, recognizing the absence of an alliance as theoretically significant encourages abductive inquiry: Why did the predicted hybrid form not materialize? Which boundary conditions, institutional constraints, or strategic considerations have been overlooked? Addressing such questions shifts the focus from confirming existing alliances to exploring their absence, thereby expanding the theoretical horizon of strategic alliance research.

Lasting Alliance Absence

Firms, i.e., their decision-makers, choose alliances as their preferred organizational form for many reasons, including: to access and acquire knowledge, to reduce and spread risk, to gain scale, to enter and explore new markets, to stage their investments (e.g., acquisition or divestiture), to share technology, to respond to a competitive action, to create real options, or to gain access to

complementary resources. In addition, alliances may be necessary in a world that must master grand societal challenges (e.g., Vitasek, 2020) and generate innovation and growth potential for collaborators (e.g., Özbek et al., 2022). However, despite theoretical and practical arguments, some firms will reject strategic alliances as their preferred organizational mode for rational reasons. While the formation of a strategic alliance is often publicly announced and consistently reflected in public and private databases, the absence of an alliance is rarely documented, which makes research on alliance absence challenging. Consequently, these absent, although theoretically expected, alliances elude analysis by management researchers who access databases of existing alliances. To the best of our knowledge, no published study has examined multiple decision-making processes and thus analyzed and discussed 'acceptance/presence' and 'rejection/absence' cases, including the reasons for each. The following examples of going it alone or internalization strategies from the energy sector illustrate how absence could be identified and examined to provide insights for practitioners and theory development.

Oil and gas industry: Dominated by strategic alliances. Since its inception more than 150 years ago, oil and gas firms have used alliances. In the upstream sector, where firms explore, develop projects, and produce oil and gas, alliances are the norm, and the industry has become very proficient at alliance management. Many upstream oil and gas alliances would rank among the most complex and capital-intensive collaborative ventures found anywhere in global industry such as (a) the Gorgon Project in Australia, one of the world's largest natural gas projects and a JV between Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, Osaka Gas, Tokyo Gas and JERA; (b) Kashagan, one of the world's largest oil fields and a JV between Eni, Total, ExxonMobil, Shell, CNPC, Inpex, and KazMunayGas (Kazakhstan national oil company); and (c) TNK-BP, a now terminated integrated oil company in Russia and a JV between BP and the investment consortium AAR.

Oil and gas alliances are prevalent and highly expected because: (1) projects are often too large for one company to finance or manage; (2) companies do not want to bear the project's sole risk; and (3) the resource owner is a national oil company (NOC) that does not have the technology and/or management capabilities to access its oil and gas. Alliances are almost always used to develop and exploit mega-projects¹ because few firms are willing to assume the financial risk of projects in an industry subject to frequent commodity price fluctuations. Once alliances for mega-projects are formed, the partners often face challenges such as technological uncertainty, logistical difficulties, NOCs, non-governmental partners with partially conflicting objectives, private firms from different countries, price volatility, long development times, and challenging environmental conditions, which can lead to significant cost overruns and lower returns. The seven partners of the Kashagan project, for instance, invested more than US\$50 billion before the project start-up, which was plagued by years of delays, partner disputes, technological challenges, and cost overruns in a harsh operating environment. Although Kashagan is at the upper end of complexity for upstream projects, many other complex international partnerships and consortia also regularly deal with political, technological, and environmental challenges. Our analysis revealed that most major upstream projects are alliances among the five oil and gas supermajors (BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, and Total), and that BP has no sole-ownership projects.

Lasting Absence – Going it alone. Given the prevalence of alliances in the upstream oil and gas sector, cases of alliance absence can shed light on previous assumptions, theories, and inconsistent findings. In our analysis, we observed several projects without strategic partners. One non-alliance project is the Kearl oil sands project in Alberta, Canada. Although alliances are

¹ There is no precise definition of a mega-project. Projects with a capital cost exceeding US\$ 1.5 billion are typically considered mega-projects, although those in the oil and gas sector are often much larger.

common in oil sands projects,² ExxonMobil owned 100% of the project through its 30% ownership and the remaining 70% via its majority stake in publicly traded Imperial Oil. Regulatory approval for the project was filed in 2005. The plan was to initially produce 100,000 barrels of oil per day with capital costs ranging from US\$5 to US\$8 billion. Phase one was completed in 2013, and phase two was completed in 2015. With the fall in oil prices in 2014, ExxonMobil decided to delay the development of phases three and four. In 2017, the company wrote down the value of its oil sands reserves. The Kearl project went significantly over budget, with phase one estimated to have cost 60% more than expected (Petroleum Economist, 2013). The total cost for phases one and two exceeded US\$20 billion (Kent *et al.*, 2017). Various reasons have been claimed for cost overruns. Due to protests from residents and conservation groups, Korean-made modules had to be disassembled into smaller pieces to facilitate their road transport through the United States. Further, ExxonMobil used a new and unproven technology (proprietary paraffinic froth treatment process) that was challenging to implement, and harsh weather conditions slowed construction.

ExxonMobil's decision to forgo an alliance provides an informative example of alliance absence. At the outset, several conditions made Kearl a candidate for partnership: the project required a multibillion-dollar capital investment; the project involved unproven technology and significant logistical challenges tied to the location and the nature of the equipment modules; there were environmentalist pressures against the project; and a high breakeven oil price was required because of oil sands production costs.³ Given the subsequent problems in the project,

² Total, for example, is involved in two Alberta oil sands projects, holding a 50% stake in one and 24.58% in the other. BP holds a 50% position in one oil sands project. Chevron holds a 20% stake in the project, and Shell holds a 10% stake in the same project.

³ The cost of producing oil from oil sands is higher than that of producing liquid oil from more traditional oil reserves. The oil sands process involves mining bitumen, which must be crushed, chemically cleaned, heated, and processed on-site. The resulting bitumen is then diluted with a blend of petroleum diluent and shipped via pipeline or rail.

ExxonMobil's decision to forgo an alliance in light of the above conditions would frequently be construed, ex post, by alliance scholars or industry experts as a management failure. Perhaps ExxonMobil's management was overly optimistic about its ability to manage and mitigate risks, possibly due to managerial hubris. Insufficient or faulty analyses may have led to unjustified undervaluation of the project's environmental and technological risks.

Using an unbiased absence approach based not on the ex post state of knowledge (t_1) but on a systematic analysis of the conditions at the time of the decision (t_0) yields a different interpretation. The Kearn case illustrates how ExxonMobil's top management behaved rationally by evaluating the project's costs and benefits relative to other organizational forms. Canada was largely free of geopolitical risks and, hence, different from many emerging-market oil and gas projects. The company possessed deep experience in other oil sands projects. Financial risk sharing was less of an issue for ExxonMobil than for other oil and gas companies because of its strong capital base. The project was expected to be very profitable, and top management may have been reluctant to share the expected profit. Finally, possible alliance partners may have tied their participation to conditions that were unacceptable or uneconomical. Overall, ExxonMobil's ex ante evaluation may have indicated that going alone was the superior alternative, i.e., a rational decision, which illustrates the virtues of investigating alliance absence.

The same approach can be applied to several Chevron projects in California. Kern County accounted for approximately 70% of California's oil production. The largest producing operation in Kern County was the Kern River Field, which was 99% owned and operated by Chevron. Chevron also had a 95% interest in the Midway Sunset Field, another Kern County operation. In contrast, Aera Energy, which produced approximately 25% of California's oil and gas, was a joint venture owned by Shell and ExxonMobil. The researcher interested in alliance absence could ask

why, in similar operating environments, Chevron chose to go it alone while two major competitors have formed an alliance. All three firms must contend with the same environmental and regulatory risks associated with operating in the California oil and gas sector. Chevron's decision to operate without exchange partners would be viewed as highly and unnecessarily risky, according to canonical strategic management textbooks. However, Chevron and its predecessor firms have been in California for more than a century and have opted to operate without an alliance in an industry and location where few major projects and operations are wholly owned. A closer investigation of the decision-making process leading to the foregoing of an alliance could reveal additional reasons and considerations not available to researchers who examine only existing alliances. The environmental risks in California are a compelling argument for joint venturing – if a major environmental event were to occur, few firms would want sole responsibility for cleanup and litigation. However, Chevron's long-term experience in California may have generated unique operating knowledge associated with environmental regulations that it is unwilling to share.

Another informative energy project that has begun operating without an alliance is Gazprom's 100%-owned Neft Shelf project in the Prirazlomnoye field in the offshore Arctic, one of the world's most technologically and environmentally challenging locations. Neft Shelf is the only project operating on the Russian Arctic shelf. First oil was produced in 2013. While Gazprom fully owns the project, its promotional material states that "Gazprom Neft understands the importance of implementing offshore projects in partnership with top players of the global oil and gas industry ... The Company is open to cooperation on both oil field development projects and the joint development of technologies and competences" (Gazprom Neft, 2019: 9). Initially, the German energy company Wintershall and the Russian company Rosneft considered investing in the project, but it appears that Gazprom has finally decided to proceed independently.

The absence of alliances in cases like Kearl and ExxonMobil may indicate a strategic choice by the project owner based on risk tolerance and expectations for project performance. Considering the high risks and capital costs associated with Arctic projects, Gazprom's decision not to form an alliance may reflect a lack of potential partners capable of contributing technological expertise, given the limited number of offshore Arctic projects. A different narrative involves the (un)willingness of foreign partners to work with Gazprom, especially as Russian firms are comparatively more short-term oriented (Hitt *et al.*, 2004). It is possible that the decision not to partner was not due to technological or environmental issues but rather to prior negative experiences with strategic partnerships involving Gazprom or other Russian companies closely tied to the Kremlin (Mankoff, 2009; Perovic *et al.*, 2009). Alternatively, non-Russian firms anticipated a hold-up and drain of technological knowledge, factoring this into their rationale, a fact that would not be observable in studies predominantly relying on secondary data. Another explanation could be that government-controlled Gazprom was not allowed to partner for strategic reasons of global politics and national interests. Scholars conducting qualitative research and interviewing top managers might generate insights into the rationale for the absence of alliances. At a minimum, a fine-grained investigation would help illuminate the complexity of the decision at time t_0 and reveal factors that the study of existing alliances cannot discover.

These cases illustrate the decision between forming a strategic alliance and going it alone. Since proceeding independently does not preclude the use of contractors, it aligns with the market model vis-à-vis a hybrid organizational solution (strategic alliance). Thus, the absence of alliances should also be evident, and their analysis instructive in the opposite case, where a hierarchical solution via merger and acquisition (M&A) is preferred over a hybrid organizational form.

Lasting Absence – Internalization. An acquisition is a viable strategic alternative to forming a strategic alliance. For instance, at a time when alliances between competitors were the norm in the automotive industry, Daimler-Benz acquired Chrysler in 1998, following a failed attempt to form a joint venture and under takeover pressure exerted by Kirk Kerkorian and Lee Iacocca (Vlasic and Stertz, 2000). Whether this transaction was truly a “merger of equals” or effectively a takeover by Daimler later became the subject of legal disputes (Badrtalei and Bates, 2007; Hakim, 2003). This dispute, however, does not alter the observation that the seemingly plausible alternative of forming a strategic alliance did not materialize.

Unlike the acquisition strategy employed by Daimler-Benz, the Renault-Nissan partnership was intentionally designed as a cross-shareholding alliance in which both companies retained their legal independence, separate boardrooms, and distinct national identities. Renault acquired 36.8% of Nissan in 1999 (increased to 43.4% in 2001), and Nissan acquired 15% of Renault in 2001. In addition, an IJV, Renault-Nissan BV (RNBV), based in Amsterdam, was founded to manage the alliance (Forex, n.d.). Without attention to absence, researchers adopting a narrow conceptualization of strategic alliances could miss the opportunity to compare organizational forms that emerged at roughly the same time. DaimlerChrysler would likely be compared with other M&A cases. In contrast, Renault-Nissan would be compared with other strategic alliances, although both cases addressed similar strategic challenges through different organizational choices and, importantly, with different outcomes.

Such a comparison is particularly revealing from a performance perspective. In light of mounting losses and limited prospects, Daimler sold the majority of Chrysler to Cerberus Capital in 2007, transferring an 80.1% stake while retaining a 19.9% minority stake (Daimler, 2007). This remaining stake was fully relinquished in 2009, resulting in substantial financial losses. By

contrast, the extended Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi alliance continues to exist today, despite several reorganizations and adjustments in cross-shareholding structures. Despite inevitable partner conflicts inherent in a large, complex global organization and changes in the ownership structure, the partnership has endured (Mikami *et al.*, 2022).

Comparing the two strategic choices raises critical research questions: Did Daimler-Benz and Chrysler make a rational *ex ante* decision not to form an alliance? Would an alliance have prevented some of the cross-cultural issues encountered by Daimler-Benz and Chrysler (Apfelthaler *et al.*, 2002)? Would an alliance have resulted in strategic and organizational outcomes comparable to those that occurred in the Renault Nissan alliance (Ikegami *et al.*, 2017)?

Against this background, the DaimlerChrysler case should not be read primarily as a performance anomaly, although the failure to realize expected synergy value is undoubtedly relevant. Rather, in the context of this article, the case serves as an illustration of an organizational-form absence anomaly. From an absence perspective, the abductive question is not only why the merger failed, but also why managers moved toward a majority divestiture and a renewed stand-alone operation rather than preserving selected complementarities through a looser equity participation or contractual strategic alliance, as Renault and Nissan did. This question shifts attention from acquisition performance to the absence of intermediate governance forms between full integration and strategic separation.

Transitional Alliance Absence

The cases discussed above conceptualize the absence of an alliance as a strategic choice effective over a defined period. Beyond such static observations, absence may also be understood as a transitional phenomenon, occurring either through later-than-expected formation or earlier-than-planned termination. In this sense, absence is not necessarily permanent but temporally

bounded, thereby inviting a more process-oriented perspective. This links absence research to the long-standing debate in alliance research about whether alliance outcomes are primarily shaped by initial conditions and structures or by processes of learning, reevaluation, and readjustment over time (Contractor, 2005; Doz, 1996; Salk, 2005).

Postponing alliance formation. An alliance may be absent at a given point in time even though it is considered strategically appropriate. Firms may delay formation due to a lack of suitable partners, negotiation breakdowns, risk aversion, or evolving assessments of “build, borrow, or buy.” Potential partners may be unavailable because they are engaged in competing alliances, bound by exclusive contracts, or constrained by other priorities. Such delays are particularly relevant for firms facing hold-up risks or high uncertainty. Economically ideal partners may not be available or willing to join a strategic alliance as they are members of a competing alliance, have exclusive contracts, or have other business priorities. Therefore, a company may wait until a suitable partner is available. This delay is particularly pertinent for small companies and startups, which may lack experience with prior alliances and may be wary of selecting the wrong partner due to the looming threat of ending up in a hold-up position.

For researchers, identifying cases in which a strategic alliance was seriously considered but postponed is promising but difficult. Studies of partner selection are typically based on ex post data on realized alliances rather than treating the temporary absence of an alliance as the starting point of analysis. As a result, research often captures the alliance once it exists, but not the preceding period in which alliance formation may have been considered, deferred, or abandoned. This temporal perspective also resonates with real options theory, which explicitly addresses the value of keeping strategic alternatives open under external and internal uncertainty, including

decisions to stage, defer, switch, or abandon alliance-related organizational modes (Cuypers and Martin, 2010; McCarter *et al.*, 2011; Reuer and Tong, 2005).

The transitional period of alliance absence could be of particular interest to researchers with a strategy process orientation. The ExxonMobil and DaimlerChrysler cases suggest that choices of organizational form –going it alone, acquiring another firm, divesting, or forming an alliance– should not be treated merely as static outcomes, but as evolving decision trajectories. For example, a process-oriented analysis could ask whether ExxonMobil later opened the Kernal project to other firms or why Daimler and Chrysler’s managers moved toward a majority divestiture and strategic separation rather than converting selected complementarities into a looser equity stake or contractual strategic alliance. Such questions shift attention from whether an alliance was present at a given point in time to how and why alliance absence emerged, persisted, or was replaced by another organizational form (Doz, 1996; Salk, 2005).

Premature and unplanned termination. A formerly existing alliance could be absent at the time of the research investigation. If the researcher expected to find an alliance but found none due to an unplanned termination, the absence could be interpreted as a transitional phase. The absent alliance could either transition to a new alliance in the future or decide not to form one due to a negative prior experience. Such cases are addressed by most studies on exit, termination, and longevity (Nemeth and Nippa, 2013; Parkhe, 1991; Rahman and Korn, 2014) as well as the less prominent literature on mode change (Puck *et al.*, 2009).

This perspective suggests that absence research can complement existing research on alliance processes. Whereas much prior work has examined how alliances evolve once formed, transitional absence directs attention to the periods before formation, between governance modes, or after termination. This approach extends the structure/process debate by asking not only how

alliance structures affect subsequent processes, but also how temporal processes shape the very presence or absence of alliance structures. Such research is methodologically demanding, as it requires longitudinal designs, archival reconstruction, and often multiple case studies, but it may reveal decision dynamics that remain invisible in static, presence-oriented research.

We have illustrated the possibilities for generating knowledge from the counterintuitive identification and analysis of absent strategic alliances. Investigating absent alliances that were considered but not formed reveals previously unknown patterns and leads to a better understanding of already observed phenomena. The actual absence of strategic alliances and their analysis will depend on the researcher's level of knowledge and methods, as highlighted in many articles on the process of abduction (e.g., Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021). The following section addresses this issue, conveying not only acceptance of a new conceptual perspective but also the necessity of employing adapted scientific methods of analysis.

BLIND SPOTS AND THE EVIDENCE–ABSENCE DISTINCTION IN ALLIANCE RESEARCH

Scholars may overlook the absence of certain types of strategic alliances and, therefore, ignore them in their analysis. What generates researchers' blind spots in their observation of alliance absence? How do researchers prevent scientific error by concluding 'absence of evidence' rather than 'evidence of absence' (Alderson, 2004; Brown and Key, 2019)?

One reason for the absence of data is poor definitions or categorizations of alliances by researchers. Researchers may search for the 'wrong' strategic alliances or may use datasets with different types of strategic alliances. Strategic alliance research embraces the investigation of various organizational forms, including (1) equity-based JVs formed for efficient market entry or combining complementary resources (e.g., the NUMMI JV between Toyota and General Motors, Thyssenkrupp Steel Europe, Jingu, and Ansteel); (2) contract-based consortia of competing

companies established for the purpose of sharing technology or enforcing a market standard (e.g., Wireless Power Consortium); (3) long-term supply agreements in supplier-customer relationships (e.g., Apple and Foxconn; GM and Lear); or (4) corporate block holdings (e.g., Novartis and Roche) and cross holdings (e.g., Rocket Internet and United Internet). For example, a dataset might include bilateral and multipartite JVs, some of which involve the cross-border establishment of a jointly operated organization and others involve unilateral or reciprocal equity participation (Nippa and Reuer, 2019). Inadequate definition and operationalization of the alliances examined make it challenging to compare results and draw generalizable conclusions. Thus, the absence of a particular category that might have been expected will be difficult to discern and is likely to be missed. To identify absent strategic alliances and generate useful information for theory development and practitioner implications, discriminatory characteristics must be clearly defined.

Second, by choosing a particular theory within an inductive or deductive approach, researchers effectively determine their slice of reality in the search for existing or non-existing strategic alliances. For example, scholars drawing on RBV may emphasize the need for financial or knowledge resources as reasons why a new high-tech venture or a mega-project in the resources industry would require an alliance. Had they adopted a different theoretical perspective, such as real options theory, they might instead have asked questions about strategic flexibility and the reasons firms deliberately refrain from forming alliances, i.e., why alliances were absent as opposed to the reasons why they should be formed. Although TCT offers a rational explanation for choosing hybrid organizational modes, it does not sufficiently differentiate among alliance types, correctly specify their transaction characteristics, map organizational dynamics, or provide clear direction for practitioners (Cuypers *et al.*, 2021; Judge and Dooley, 2006). Thus, the challenge is that there is neither a general theory of strategic alliances (genotype) nor a conceptual framework

that integrates the different forms (phenotypes) beyond categorizations (Kale and Singh, 2009). Instead, there is reliance on partial predictions derived from general organizational and management theories, each illuminating aspects of alliance formation and governance. While these theories generate expectations regarding when alliances should or should not occur, their explanatory scope remains bounded and rarely integrated across perspectives. As a result, absence may go unnoticed, not because predictive expectations are lacking but because they are theory-specific and fragmented. Despite the application of multiple theoretical lenses, Parkhe's (1993b) statement, made thirty years ago, about the serious gaps in alliance theory development remains. No consistent theory of strategic alliances descriptively explains the conditions under which a particular alliance type is chosen or prescriptively determines the comparatively better type.

Third, a study may overlook critical antecedents of an alliance. For example, in the context of international strategic alliances, the neglect of institutional factors, especially in studies that focus on determinants at the individual level (e.g., management experience) or the firm level (e.g., complementary skills or organizational learning), could be a blind spot. Researchers may not account for the fact that a specific market entry mode, such as a wholly owned foreign enterprise, has been prohibited or an IJV has been mandated by the government, as is often the case in various countries. A firm with a policy of using only wholly owned subsidiaries may withdraw from a market where an alliance is mandated, resulting in alliance absence. Had researchers adopted a more comprehensive approach that included institutional factors, they might have identified the absence or made it more likely to uncover the absence of organizational alternatives. The decision not to analyze counterfactuals reduces the ability to discern whether and to what extent a particular alliance is selected or avoided. The third challenge concerns the methodological and empirical approaches used in alliance research, which is dominated by cross-sectional, multivariate analysis

of large samples of archival data applied to test the explanatory power of organizational theories. These research studies are characterized by a high degree of methodological rigor and have generated many significant findings. However, lacking a generally accepted framework, they frequently produce non-generalizable insights. There are too few empirical studies that analyze longitudinal developments or reveal more complex cause-and-effect relationships. Additionally, there is a lack of reference to counterfactuals and comparisons with situations that have alternative characteristics but are invisible to the researcher because they do not exist (e.g., in databases used). Alliance scholars have noted for decades that the predominant use of archival data and large samples derived from databases with quantitative measures reduces the significance of results, especially regarding dynamic and difficult-to-quantify influencing factors (Parkhe, 1993a). Methods that may be valid for analyzing existing alliance track records are inadequate for identifying the absence of strategic alliances, firm decision-making processes, and the consequences of these decisions. By utilizing existing empirical methods and supplementing them with newer methods, such as text mining and less common data sources, such as alliance contracts, new avenues into the phenomenon of absence could be revealed.

The three reasons for missing absence can be linked to the first step of the abductive process (observation) and, perhaps more so, to the second step, corroboration of an anomaly. Corroboration requires empirically demonstrating that the phenomenon is an actual absence (or presence) and diagnosing its characteristics and context from multiple perspectives, using multiple methods (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021). The second step may be especially challenging as it faces skepticism and resistance from advocates of the prevailing paradigm and theories. Classic examples of this outcome are the denial that the Earth is not flat and that it revolves around the Sun.

ADVANCING STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH THROUGH ABSENCE AND ABDUCTIVE INQUIRY

Research that takes the absence of phenomena or characteristics as the starting point for theoretical and methodological reflection, or that actively searches for anomalies, can be directly connected to the four-step abductive process proposed by Sætre and Van de Ven (2021). Although the authors emphasize that abductive theory creation is a cyclical process that may recur and need not begin with step 1, anomalies remain essential to the abductive process. Without observing a deviation from a theoretically expected constellation, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to develop new hypotheses. The absence of predicted presence or the presence of predicted absence, as elaborated in this article, constitute central forms of anomaly.

Regarding the likelihood of observing an anomaly, Sætre and Van de Ven (2021) emphasize a profile of individual knowledge and researcher characteristics like experience, interdisciplinarity, cognitive flexibility, curiosity, and inquisitiveness. These characteristics apply to the field of strategic alliances as much as to any other research domain. Without sufficiently deep and broad knowledge of a phenomenon (e.g., through an interdisciplinary examination of M&A activities), researchers cannot formulate meaningful predictions about relationships and will not recognize absence as theoretically significant. For example, alliance researchers using transaction cost theory and its application may identify situations in which an expected IJV does not materialize. Similarly, researchers applying signaling theory to the relationship between explicitly formulated corporate strategies and firm success may notice when firms succeed without such strategies.

We maintain that discovering absence as an anomaly requires, above all, specialized knowledge in a particular domain. This knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition, because researchers must also treat observed absence as a possible anomaly rather than dismiss non-occurrence as irrelevant. This concerns not only the researchers' knowledge base but also their

curiosity and motivation. In any field of inquiry, there is a continuing need to scope out important questions and issues for theoretical and empirical study. For the scholar of alliances who subscribes to the view that the field has many unanswered questions, the absence of alliances should be of interest. Tesla's entry into China illustrates this point: It began car production in China in 2019 and was the first foreign car company in China not to form an IJV. A researcher prepared to notice absence may recognize that the non-formation of an IJV is not merely a missing observation, but a potentially theory-relevant deviation from a long-standing institutional and industry pattern.

There is likely a gradual transition to Step 2: confirming the anomaly, i.e., confirming absence. A conscientious researcher or research community must confirm that the absence is genuine and theoretically meaningful. This approach requires specifying what should have been present, establishing that the theory's relevant scope conditions are otherwise met, and ruling out data, measurement, or sampling limitations. In alliance research, this means examining whether an alliance was theoretically plausible under observed resource, transaction, institutional, and strategic conditions, and whether its non-formation can be corroborated through archival traces, managerial accounts, rejected proposals, regulatory filings, or comparison cases.

Sætre and Van de Ven (2021) emphasize that grounding a phenomenon requires both close engagement with the phenomenon and a broader perspective on its context, emphasizing the importance of doubt, captured in the question: "Am I really seeing this?" From the perspective of absence, the corresponding question is: "Am I really not seeing this?" In addition to the systematic ways of confirming anomalies discussed by Sætre and Van de Ven (2021), another starting point is to examine the theory underpinning the prediction. In social sciences, theory may be understood as "... a statement of relations among concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints" that includes "... the implicit values of the theorist and the often explicit restrictions regarding space

and time” (Bacharach, 1989: 496; 498). From this perspective, researchers can examine whether absence occurs only under particular boundary conditions. For example, do authoritarian states preclude specific forms of cooperation? Do institutional voids in developing countries hinder the transfer of green technologies? Do temporal changes alter the expected relevance of IJVs in China?

This logic also extends beyond alliances. Stakeholder research, for instance, often assumes that important stakeholders should be included in strategic decision-making processes. Identifying cases in which important stakeholders are systematically excluded and analyzing the economic, social, and environmental consequences of this absence could help confirm anomalies and may already generate first hunches. Similarly, scholars in the dynamic capabilities field could investigate absence-sensing as an organizational capability, while cognitive strategy research could examine absence-neglect and how attention to visible signals prevents the noticing of consequential absences. The transitions to Step 3, developing hunches, are equally fluid.

As described in detail by Sætre and Van de Ven (2021) and supported by the literature they cite, Step 3 refers to the individual and collective attempt, triggered by the presence of confirmed anomalies, to generate and test explanations. Investigating cases of absence can lead scholars to contextual factors not visible at first glance, which may lead to different, even competing or divergent hunches. Developing alternative explanations, conjectures, and novel hypotheses as part of idea generation and evaluation requires “a process of disciplined imagination” (ibid.: 690), combined with critical thinking and persistence against tendencies toward inertia –not only within the scientific system. It may be easier, and often more compatible with prevailing publication routines, to ignore the absence of Sino-foreign IJVs in certain industries and to work with a partial sample to test existing theories than to search for alternative explanations and question established theoretical assumptions. Yet precisely for probing assumptions and theories, not only in relation

to IJVs (Nippa and Reuer, 2019), hunches derived from absence can serve as an important generator of ideas. Such hunches may point to alternative cause-and-effect relationships or to different configurations of explanatory conditions.

The ‘non-existence’ of configurational factors is explicitly addressed in configurational research through notation systems that distinguish between the presence and the explicit absence of conditions (Fiss, 2011). More recently, Campbell and Fiss (2026) emphasize that fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) can and should move beyond traditional abductive theorizing by supporting configurational-propositional and configurational-process forms of theory development. In any case, fsQCA, which has already been applied in strategic management research (e.g., Schücker et al., 2025), illustrates that research attentive to absence can contribute to theory development. From our perspective, many of these ideas, procedures, and methods can be used to evaluate the different hunches in step 4 to focus on those most relevant for advancing existing theories or proposing novel ones.

The cases discussed in this article illustrate how such hunches may emerge. Tesla’s absence of an IJV in China raises questions about whether the benefits of local partnership in the automotive industry were more limited or more temporary than established theory and prior practice suggested. The absence provides a unique context for better understanding the competitive risks, such as knowledge loss, borne by Tesla’s international competitors that have operated with Chinese JV partners. Evidence indicates that forming an IJV in the Chinese car industry was not the route to long-term sustainable advantage in the world’s largest car market. The case of the ExxonMobil Kernal project raises the question of whether the absence of an alliance may reflect proprietary project management capabilities that could be applied to other sole-operated projects and contribute to a competitive advantage. The Gazprom case may be interpreted as a harbinger

of the geopolitical developments now being characterized as disruptive in many strategic management research projects (Adarkwah *et al.*, 2024). These cases do not yet constitute a theory, but they illustrate how confirmed absence can generate alternative explanations and direct attention to overlooked boundary conditions.

When these individual hunches are integrated into the collective process described in detail by Sætre and Van de Ven (2021), opportunities arise to advance theories that better explain and predict the occurrence and configuration of strategic alliances. A critical discussion can address whether these factors are already encompassed within existing theories. For instance, risks such as opportunistic behavior or geopolitical threats are indeed incorporated within the theoretical frameworks of new institutional economics, including TCT and agency theory. In this case, one might hypothesize that the absence of a strategic alliance results from an insufficiently rational decision made by the managers involved. This hypothesis could be examined by analyzing whether alliances were formed in comparable situations and their relative success, or by investigating the actual decision-making processes. Both approaches remain relatively rare in strategic management research due to their resource intensity and limited acceptance in the peer-review process.

Collective abduction can also generate additional hunches through dialectical processes and creativity techniques (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021). Partially divergent perspectives can be evaluated, integrated, and further developed through synthesis (Step 4). This approach seeks to select the most plausible explanations and hunches regarding the absence of a strategic alliance, which can then be developed into hypotheses suitable for inductive empirical testing.

The broader relevance of absence research becomes more visible when absence is not limited to alliance formation but extended to other strategic management phenomena. Earlier in the article, we identified several such situations, including the absence of internationalization or

acquisitions. Additional examples include the absence of stakeholder participation in strategic decision-making, the absence of sensing routines for missing resources or data, or the absence of supplier partnerships in industries traditionally characterized by outsourcing and close cooperation with supplier tiers. For example, reports that new entrants in the electric-vehicle sector, such as Tesla and BYD, are more vertically integrated than legacy competitors such as General Motors (Bellon and White, 2022) suggest that researchers may need to revisit theoretical assumptions about vertical integration, outsourcing, and supplier partnerships in industries previously understood through a presence-oriented lens. These examples suggest that absence can serve as a portable abductive lens across strategic management domains whenever established theories predict a phenomenon that empirical reality does not display.

Practitioner Implications

Absence research serves practitioners in two ways. First, management research should aim to provide managers with rigorously developed knowledge that informs their decision-making. However, explaining deviations from theory-derived recommendations merely as the result of non-rational managerial decision-making is often insufficient. Absence research encourages scholars to search for explanations of anomalies and, in doing so, can improve the quality of decision-makers' recommendations. As illustrated in this article, such research may involve multiple case studies that reveal overlooked contextual conditions or identify equifinal configurations of factors that lead to comparable outcomes despite different organizational choices. For instance, comparing cases in which firms form alliances with cases in which they deliberately go it alone may help managers better understand when risk sharing, partner access, or resource pooling is valuable, and when internalization or market-based alternatives may be superior.

Second, absence research may also encourage decision-makers indirectly to examine their own blind spots. Managers may ask whether partners, stakeholders, capabilities, data, or governance options that experience or theory would lead them to expect are missing from their decision calculus. This question is particularly relevant as firms increasingly rely on analytics and AI-based decision tools, because such tools may reinforce attention to what is recorded while obscuring what is absent, unmeasured, or excluded. For example, a data-driven supplier evaluation may rank available partners while failing to reveal that an entirely different governance option, such as internal development, has not been considered. In this sense, absence research can help managers examine not only which strategic options are visible but also which plausible alternatives have not been considered, enacted, or measured.

Alliance Absence as a Legitimate Research Area

For alliance absence to become a legitimate research area, two reasonable questions must be addressed. How does a researcher investigate a phenomenon that could be elusive and hard to find? Our view is that the absence of an alliance is not as elusive as it may seem and can be detected. There are many business deals and transactions where an alliance could have been formed but was not. A second question is why alliance absence is important when there are fewer observable cases of absence than there are of presence? There are insights to be gained from a small sample or a single case. As Mintzberg (1979: 583) wrote, “What, for example, is wrong with samples of one? Why should researchers have to apologize for them? Should Piaget apologize for studying his own children, a physicist for splitting only one atom?” Research addressing the question of alliance absence can adopt a broad perspective that closely examines strategic intent, partnership objectives, industry structure, and decision-making processes to determine why alliances were not formed.

To develop a theory of alliance absence, researchers could adopt a phenomenon-based approach (Fisher *et al.*, 2021). Alliance absence is an under-theorized and real-world phenomenon that falls outside the scope of most existing theories. We know that alliance absence exists, but we lack a theory to explain why firms choose not to form alliances despite conditions identified in the alliance literature as antecedents to alliance formation, such as risk, need for local knowledge, and opportunities for learning. We have suggested that absence should be viewed from the perspective of rational choice and transition. These categories of absence could serve as a starting point towards what von Krogh and colleagues (2012) refer to as distinguishing the key phases of a phenomenon. We have included some examples of alliance absence and, while they cannot substitute for actual theorizing, they illustrate critical boundary conditions of the phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The central argument of this article is that strategic management research can be revitalized by systematically integrating abductive reasoning and the deliberate examination of anomalies – most notably, absent phenomena. We have defined absence as the non-occurrence of theoretically mandated events or the manifestation of what prevailing logic would exclude and positioned it as a foundational anomaly capable of triggering genuine theoretical reconsideration.

By foregrounding absence, we move beyond confirming established constructs to identifying overlooked patterns and alternative explanations. In doing so, absence becomes not a marginal curiosity, but a productive source of epistemic friction that compels the re-specification of phenomena and initiates the iterative cycle of abduction, deduction, and induction necessary for theory advancement. We hope that this perspective encourages authors, editors, and reviewers to attend more systematically to anomalies and counterfactuals, recognizing them as opportunities rather than inconveniences. Such a shift would not only enrich theoretical development in strategic

management but also improve the interpretation of empirical findings and foster more informed managerial and policy decisions.

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