Time to look forward: advocating future orientation in business network research

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Abstract

Purpose – Future is rarely explicitly addressed or problematized in business network research. This study aims to examine the possibilities of developing a business actor's future orientation to network studies and imports ideas and concepts from futures research to support the development.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is conceptual and interdisciplinary. The authors critically analyze how extant studies grounded in the sensemaking view and process research approach integrate future time and how theoretical myopia hinders the adoption of a future orientation.

Findings – The prevailing future perspective is restricted to managers' perceptions and actions at present, ignoring the anticipation and exploration of alternative longer-term futures. Future time is generally conceived as embedded in managers' cognitive processes or is seen as part of the ongoing interaction, where the time horizon to the future is not noticed or is at best short.

Research limitations/implications – To enable a forward-looking perspective, researchers should move the focus from expectation building in business interaction to purposeful preparation of alternative future(s) and from the view of seeing future as enacted in the present to envisioning of both near-term and more distant futures.

Practical implications – This study addresses the growing need of business actors to anticipate future developments in the rapidly changing market conditions and to innovate and change business practices to save the planet for future generations.

Originality/value – This study elaborates on actors' future orientation to business markets and networks, proposes the integration of network research concepts with concepts from futures studies and poses new types of research questions for future research.

Keywords Future orientation, Network change, Process, Sensemaking, Business networks, Future research

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Of late, business-to-business (B2B) companies have been facing an increasingly complex and volatile business environment. Recent societal crises have disrupted various businesses (Blessley and Mudambi, 2022; Pedersen *et al.*, 2020; Runfola *et al.*, 2021), and socio-economic trends, such as digitalization and sustainability transitions, have forced changes in business relationships and networks (Makkonen *et al.*, 2022; Voola *et al.*, 2022). Companies are not only expected to anticipate change and act upon it but to lead the change by visioning and creating more sustainable markets (Nenonen *et al.*, 2021; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2021). Turbulent times and the heightened awareness of global problems have increased business actors' sensitivity to time (Kunisch *et al.*, 2021) and created a need for conscious futures thinking (Beckert, 2021).

The future is present in all business interactions but is generally taken for granted and seldom explicitly addressed in business marketing research. B2B companies must continuously anticipate future developments to prepare for change and develop resilience to sudden crises (Blessley and Mudambi, 2022), as well as exploit emerging business opportunities and proactively develop their businesses (Brege and Kindström, 2020). In the industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP) research of business networks, the construction of individual or shared expectations about the future is considered a core process of business interaction (Andersen *et al.*, 2017), and the visioning of network change essential for network management and strategizing (Abrahamsen

et al., 2023; Möller and Halinen, 2017). However, how companies and managers envision future change has received scant attention so far.

Although time and process are considered integral aspects of business interaction and network development (Ford and Håkansson, 2006; Halinen and Törnroos, 1995; Halinen *et al.*, 2012; Medlin, 2004, 2022), little scholarly attention has been paid to business actors' perceptions of the future. The forward-looking perspective has remained implicit, represented in concepts such as business network strategizing (Aaboen *et al.*, 2013), innovation management (Aarikka-Stenroos *et al.*, 2017) or network dynamics (Guercini and Runfola, 2012), and has rarely been the focus of empirical studies (Aaboen *et al.*, 2012; Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023; Harrison and Prenkert, 2009; Low and Johnston, 2009). Noting the recent turbulence in business markets and calls to adopt a forward-looking perspective (Andersen *et al.*, 2017; Naudé and Sutton-Brady, 2019), we argue for a need to develop an explicit future orientation in business network research. Hence, this paper examines the possibilities of developing a future orientation and imports ideas and concepts from futures research to support the development.

This study adopts a focal actor's viewpoint to the future, addressing companies' and their managers' future orientations to business markets and networks. Including both the cognition and action aspects, the concept of future orientation enables the study of how business actors envision the future; that is, how they perceive it from the vantage of the present while broadening their horizon beyond the nearest future (Andersson and Mattsson, 2010a), as well as how they enact this orientation in the business network setting. As our interest lies in the actor perspective, the future orientation assumed in system-level network studies falls beyond the scope of this study.

Our argument for developing an actor's future orientation advances through three phases. First, we discuss the future orientation construct adopted and review the related business network literature. Our findings show that future orientation has rarely been addressed, and when studied, it is generally seen as integrated in managerial sensemaking or ongoing network management and strategizing processes. The focus of previous research is firmly on the present, barely extending to near-term futures or more distant emerging futures.

Second, based on these findings, we examine the theoretical barriers to adopting a future orientation in business network research. A broadly shared understanding exists of the prevalence of ontological–theoretical assumptions and their role as either constraining or enabling theory development (Andersen *et al.*, 2020; Möller and Halinen, 2022; Peters *et al.*, 2013; Prenkert, 2017). We claim that theoretical myopia related to using the sensemaking view and the process approach in business network research has limited the study of future perspective primarily to managers' perceptions and actions at the ongoing present, ignoring anticipation and exploration of longer-term futures. As widely used theoretical lenses, we critically analyze the sensemaking and process views, albeit other options are also available (e.g. practice theory).

Finally, we offer suggestions for extending the temporal perspective of business network research by importing ideas and concepts from futures research. The concepts used in research require constant revision and reconstruction to open up new theoretical insights and avenues for inquiry (Tähtinen

and Havila, 2019; Welch *et al.*, 2016). We thus suggest integrating the selected network research concepts with those from futures research and discuss the need for new research questions to better capture business actors' future orientation.

In brief, we see great potential in advancing the understanding of business actors' future orientation and using this perspective in future research to provide relevant knowledge for business practitioners. The future view does not only fit well with the prevailing ontological–theoretical assumptions of business network studies but also extends them to respond to the demands of rapidly changing business markets. Future orientation offers a significant opportunity for developing business network theory on network strategizing, network orchestration and network change in particular.

Forward-looking research in business networks

Business actor's future orientation

In business marketing research, markets and marketing are typically examined from a focal company perspective. How a company strategizes in business networks, how it develops or manages buyer–seller relationships or how it develops and commercializes innovations are among the core questions of business network studies (Backhaus *et al.*, 2011; Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013). Accordingly, we adopt a business actor's perspective on the future.

A business actor's temporal orientation affects resource adjustments in networks facing an economic crisis (Andersson and Mattsson, 2010a) and innovation of public procurement practices toward a fossil-free economy (Mattsson and Junker, 2023). Stressing the cognitive side of the term, Andersson and Mattsson (2010a) defined temporal orientation as actors' overall construction of time, including their different time horizons (how far into the future or the past actors are oriented), direction of viewing (the past, present or future) and the vantage point from which they consider their position (the past, present or future). We build on this notion, elaborating on the business actor's future orientation with respect to business markets and networks. In conventional vocabulary, the term orientation is used to refer to both an actor's "general or lasting direction of thought, inclination, or interest" and to "the act or process of orienting or of being oriented" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023).

For business actors, time is a relational and subjective dimension (Halinen and Törnroos, 1995). It is apprehended through events and the brackets of time – the past, present and future (Halinen *et al.*, 2012), underscoring the social construction of time (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013; Shipp and Jansen, 2021). Companies may connect strategic and tactical planning to objective calendar time and to long-and short-term temporal horizons (Malaska and Holstius, 2009), but ultimately subjective perceptions of time dictate what they consider possible and which temporal horizon they consider the most urgent (Andersson and Mattsson, 2010a).

A business actor's future orientation highlights the nature of the future as open and uncertain. In a study of business network strategizing, Abrahamsen *et al.* (2023) stressed the need to openly contemplate the future with respect to the company's business networks and strategic intentions. The future is often seen as undetermined; for instance, network insight that develop in interaction with other network actors forms a basis

for recognizing the opportunities open for each actor (Medlin and Törnroos, 2014; Mouzas *et al.*, 2008). While focused on backward-looking and contemporary shared understanding, network insight may also provide visions of future states (Andersen *et al.*, 2017). Openness to future opportunities also characterizes the management of innovation networks: incremental innovation representing a near-term future orientation and radical innovation involving distant and ambiguous futures (Möller and Svahn, 2006, 2009).

Finally, we presume that business actors' future orientations are inseparably linked to the present moment. Drawing on economic sociology, Medlin (2004) contended that actors experience the full complexity of time at the constantly passing present, relying on their interpretations of the past and their expectations and intentions regarding the future. Hence, the business actor is captive of the contingencies of the present moment from which they envision the future (Medlin, 2004). Next, we review how business network studies have approached a business actor's future orientation.

Future orientation in business network research

Time and process are integral parts of business interaction and network development (Andersson and Mattsson, 2010b; Ford and Håkansson, 2006). Business relationships advance based on the previous interactions between the buyer and seller and, simultaneously, in light of actors' expectations of future interactions (Håkansson, 1982, pp. 16–17; Håkansson *et al.*, 2009, p. 35). The process view has been emphasized (Ford and Håkansson, 2006) and identified in the adaptations and specialization occurring in emerging activity patterns, in paths that evolve through resource constellations, as well as in the co-evolution of actors seeking to solve their problems and finding opportunities through business interaction (Håkansson *et al.*, 2009, pp. 41–45). Hence, the future orientation has been addressed, to some extent, in connection with the core concepts of the business network view, primarily in studies of network strategizing and management. These are briefly reviewed next.

Interaction and business relationships

The interaction model acknowledges mutual expectations as an essential aspect of interactions and a constituent of the relationship atmosphere (Håkansson, 1982, p. 21). The model describes how different exchange "episodes, in conjunction with mutual expectations, build a business relationship" (Medlin, 2004, p. 186). In close relationships, knowledge exchange and the emerging trust and commitment create expectations between the parties, decreasing the perceived uncertainty (Halinen, 1997, pp. 269–270). However, as both parties form their own interpretations of past interactions and perceive each new episode as an occasion to reform expectations, it may be difficult to anticipate the future direction of relationship development or the alternatives that become available through interactions (Håkansson *et al.*, 2009, p. 37).

Andersen *et al.* (2017) elaborated on the idea of expectation building and suggested the concept of business network foresight, referring to the interaction processes in which managers' network pictures are merged and individual and shared expectations about the future are shaped. Discussing the

concept of the future in comparison with strategic foresight, Andersen *et al.* (2017) concluded that, from a business network perspective, "the future is seen as multiple and created among actors that engage strategically in networks and seek to influence each other through interactions" (p. 60). The question is whether this description – even if accurate – is unnecessarily limiting the adopted future perspective to ongoing interactions with closest partners.

The event perspective developed for the study of relationship dynamics features the role of events in marking transitions in relationships (Halinen, 1997, p. 272; Medlin, 2004), as well as embodying future temporality (Hedaa and Törnroos, 2008). Events may be future-loaded, carrying expectations, hopes and fears for what may happen in the future. However, the envisioning of future events and how they affect relationships and networks has not been investigated.

Network strategizing

The idea of network visioning, as the identification of possible networks and network connections or the creation of plausible picture of network evolution, has long intrigued network researchers (Axelsson, 1992; Möller and Halinen, 1999). Axelsson (1992) underlined the value of network visions in opening up the perceived business environment, facilitating change processes and making the company realize "which actors might be mobilized, for what, and when" (p. 204). From the sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995), visioning has been identified as an integral part of business network strategizing, as a "cognitive process related to the formation of network pictures and the sketching of options for strategic action" (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023, p. 2; Harrison and Prenkert, 2009; Laari-Salmela *et al.*, 2015). Researchers have examined business managers' visioning related to change in business networks or ecosystems (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023; Laari-Salmela *et al.*, 2015; Penttilä *et al.*, 2020) or, alternatively, the effects of envisioned business environmental change on a company's network position or strategizing (Harrison and Prenkert, 2009; Low and Johnston, 2009).

However, few empirical studies have investigated a business actor's perspective on the future. Low and Johnston (2009) scrutinized how companies prepare themselves for emerging and converging technologies and identified network positioning paths from the vantage point of the present, whereas Harrison and Prenkert (2009) distinguished among various strategizing trajectories with respect to network connections following a meat processing company's strategy process. Both studies investigated how individual managers interpret change in the current business environment; however, they paid little attention to the future time horizon. Abrahamsen *et al.* (2023) underlined the temporal horizon and open approach to the future, giving visioning a specific meaning in the context of business network strategizing. Through a study of managers' future orientation, they showed how managers, even in relatively stable environments, have difficulties anticipating future network changes in a 5–7-year horizon. In an exceptional empirical study, Aaboen *et al.* (2012) examined start-up companies' strategizing in interplay with their ideas of future networks. Following a firm's networking longitudinally, the authors found that the desired end state changed over time, redirecting the strategizing.

Managing innovation networks

Since the introduction of the network visioning concept (Möller and Halinen, 1999), Möller and colleagues have examined the possibilities and conditions for constructing intentionally designed business and innovation networks, which include relevant theoretical perspectives concerning future orientations (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2022; Möller, 2010; Möller and Svahn, 2006, 2009). We treat this approach separately from the business network strategizing literature, as it departs from the core ontological assumptions of the IMP approach, with a focus on intentional network management (Möller and Halinen, 2017) and draws extensively from the resource-, capability- and knowledge-based views and the value-system perspective.

In this stream, future innovation and networking opportunities are continuously constructed based on managers' sensemaking of the business context (Möller, 2010). The processes of sensemaking construct the actors' cognitive frame, encompassing their network pictures and theory, visioning capability and priorities regarding what they select for elaboration (Möller, 2010). The actors are seen as not only making sense of their network environment and its potential future evolution (Friesl *et al.*, 2018) but also actively mobilizing and orchestrating innovation networks and the emergence of new business fields (Aarikka-Stenroos *et al.*, 2017; Möller and Svahn, 2009). When visioning capability is combined with explorative risk taking, the actor can consciously select a risky path and pursue it through agenda construction and network mobilization.

The interest in understanding the character, construction and orchestrating possibilities of different types of innovation networks constitutes the base of the future orientation of this approach. Various organizational and individual capabilities are considered necessary for visioning and sensemaking (Möller, 2010; Möller and Svahn, 2009). Essentially, it is a question of the issues business actors face in contexts differing in their pace and complexity of change, as well as of the cognitive capacities the actors are postulated to master (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2022). With a focus on the management and orchestration as activities, this research offers limited empirical evidence of the future orientation of network orchestrators.

Thus, our knowledge of how business actors envision the future is limited overall; the future is rarely explicitly addressed or problematized. While scholars have studied visioning as part of network strategizing processes and elaborated on the capabilities required to face the complexity of change, a business actor's forward-looking orientation from the present point in time toward the uncertain longer-term future has mostly remained unexplored.

One potential reason for this neglect is the extensive use of a few selected theoretical lenses in research, which has silently led to theoretical myopia. Over the past decade, business network research has leaned on the organizational sensemaking view (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015) and the process research tradition (Langley *et al.*, 2013) while seeking an understanding of network change and emergence or network strategizing and management. To understand how these approaches have impeded the adoption of a future orientation, we analyze the nature of this myopia.

Theoretical myopia as a barrier to future orientation

The selected theoretical approach or research lens determines the ontological assumptions we adhere to and, consequently, the type of knowledge we construct of business marketing phenomena (Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013; Peters *et al.*, 2013). However, selected research lenses necessarily highlight one aspect while ignoring the others (Ojansivu *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, we argue that the extensive use of sensemaking and organizational process approaches has unnecessarily restricted our view to managers' present perceptions and actions, ignoring an explicit future orientation.

Sensemaking view

The cognitive view of networks, examining how managers make sense of networks and construct and use network pictures (Henneberg *et al.*, 2006; Ramos and Ford, 2011), has dominated business network research during the past 15 years. In particular, there have been studies on how managers' mental images of the surrounding business network influence network management and strategizing (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2016; Laari-Salmela *et al.*, 2015; Mattsson *et al.*, 2015; Möller, 2010).

When making sense, managers "perceive, interpret, and construct meaning of the emerging business landscape" (Möller, 2010, p. 364), attempting to master the complexity of networks and their change. Sensemaking occurs in relation to a framework or mental model that directs interpretations and gives meaning to an experience (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). In business network research, the network picture (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2012) or network theory (Andersson and Mattsson, 2010a; Möller, 2010) have been identified as important mental models.

In the original sensemaking view, the future perspective is restricted to the idea of enacted reality and future-perfect thinking (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). In enacted reality, cognition and action are kept together; managers see "the world by taking action and seeing what happens next" (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 84; Weick, 1995). Through their efforts to make sense of the situation, people enact the environment that they seek to understand (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). In contrast, in future-perfect thinking, sensemaking is facilitated by "placing the events in the past, even if they have not yet occurred" (Weick, 1995, p. 29). As a derivative from retrospection (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015), this thinking provides little space for the study of imagined futures or their influence on the present (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013). The time horizon for the future is limited to a very narrow epistemological view. Despite recent elaborations of prospective or future-oriented sensemaking (Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Konlechner *et al.*, 2018; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012), the core of the sensemaking view has remained the same (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020).

Obviously, business network scholars have applied the sensemaking view less rigorously than its premises suggest. After successful applications in numerous business settings, the sensemaking view began to live its own life. It has come to cover managers' understanding(s) of the current business context, forming a basis for future visioning, as shown in the literature review (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023; Möller and Svahn, 2009).

Futures researchers, in particular, have suggested that in complex and volatile business environments, sensemaking is not adequate for grasping the idea of an uncertain future (Sarpong *et al.*, 2013; Tapinos and Pyper, 2018), which instead should be manifested in multiple imagined alternative futures and extended to also cover unknown future possibilities (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023). Acknowledging the limitations of the Weickian view could open a more extended future perspective on business network research, especially as it is manifested in actors' views and orientations.

Process research approach

Another area of strong development has been the study of network processes, which has predominantly followed the organizational process research ideals (Bizzi and Langley, 2012; Halinen, 1998; Halinen *et al.*, 2012; Medlin, 2022). Empirical studies have tackled the processes of network change with respect to a specific future target, for instance, formation of new ventures (Aaboen *et al.*, 2013) or commercializing innovations (Medlin and Törnroos, 2015). Yet, the perspective on the future has remained limited.

Process research involves the study of how and why a significant temporally evolving phenomenon unfolds over time (Halinen and Mainela, 2013; Langley, 2009). Process has been defined based on different ontological emphases, for instance, the weak and strong process views (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), and described by drawing upon various process theories (lifecycle, evolution, teleology and dialectics) (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). A strong process view has gained ground, addressing the world in a constant state of becoming and considering things as reifications of processes (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Van de Ven and Poole, 2005). Recent development has directed attention even further to the ongoing present, stressing the situated activity and studying the reflection of future expectations and events as part of the present complexity (Hernes and Schultz, 2020). These different definitions of the process have extensively affected business network research and its perceptions of change. For instance, Ojansivu and Medlin (2018) examined the role of a specific future that business actors aim to achieve while enacting a shared contextual logic. Their examination was restricted to the strong process view and the incremental change perspective typically adopted in business network studies. Kaartemo *et al.* (2020) showed how process theories are used to explain present change and to shed light on different microfoundations of network change and stability, yet disregarding business actors' future orientation.

The methodological canons of organizational process research have also been followed (Bizzi and Langley, 2012; Halinen and Mainela, 2013). Process research on business networks has studied processes retrospectively or in real time, applying different methodologies to capture the ongoing process (longitudinal case studies, Aaboen *et al.*, 2012; event-analysis, Halinen *et al.*, 2013; narrative studies, Makkonen *et al.*, 2012). Hence, research has concentrated on the present time perspective, paying scant attention to an actor's future orientation. It is easy to share Augustine *et al.*'s (2019) conclusion on a uniform view of future time inherited from organizational process research. The literature has mostly assumed a continuity between the evolving present and the future and rarely distinguished among different categories or horizons of the future.

Recently, Ojansivu *et al.* (2020) investigated the underlying assumptions researchers make with respect to change in business relationships and showed that change is perceived from three fundamentally different angles. However, none of these angles adopts an explicit future orientation – not even the agency perspective, which, in principle, should highlight the change initiated by business actors based on their perceptions and social constructions and their capacity to envisage alternatives. A quote from Medlin's process research analysis crystallizes the established view: "What is special about the IMP approach is that actors interact in their enacted/enacting network context, which they create and change, as they proceed" (Medlin, 2022, p. 80). The focus on the emergent nature of relationships has in itself hindered the adoption of a future orientation. The future is seen as part of the present ongoing interaction process, where the time horizon to the future is not noticed or is, at best, short.

Suggestions for developing a future orientation

Our analysis of the existing literature and theoretical myopia has revealed the weaknesses of business network research with respect to its approach to the future, which leads to a question on the possibilities to develop an actor-induced future orientation to this research. Although deficient, the literature provides a fertile basis for the development. Actors' expectations concerning the future, as well as their collective and individual interests, are considered central to business interactions and network change. Visioning future network outcomes and potential paths to these outcomes have been identified as essential for strategizing, and research on managing innovation networks entails a strong disposition toward the future. To induce new ideas for developing a future orientation, we recommend the following three types of interdisciplinary efforts:

1 importing future-oriented ideas from futures research to enrich the future perspective;
2 importing concepts from futures research to support conceptual development; and
3 posing future-oriented questions to renew existing business network research.

Importing ideas from futures studies

The academic research field of futures studies (i.e. futures research) offers several ideas on future time that could be used in business network studies. While organization researchers mainly focus on elaborating the present and studying future time as connected to situated activity either at a shorter or longer present (Kim *et al.*, 2019; Hernes and Schultz, 2020), futures studies seek to comprehend the time to come, explicitly studying the uncertainty of the future. Futures research promotes the idea of alternative futures, seeks understanding of future contingencies, inspects actors' agency with respect to the future and endorses various temporal perspectives on the future.

Futures research examines and builds images of possible, probable and preferable futures and delineates alternative paths to them (Ahvenharju *et al.*, 2018; Amara, 1981; Voros, 2003).

Instead of seeing the future as pre-determined and thus predictable, futures research underscores the role of human agency in creating the future (Cunha *et al.*, 2006; Godet and Roubelat, 1996). Humans have, to a certain extent and depending on the context, a free will to change the course of events, which means that various future contingencies, together with business actors' agency, create the actualized future (de Jouvenel, 1967; Malaska and Holstius, 2009). The future emerges in an interplay among three types of forces:

1 trends and megatrends effective in an operational context;
2 potential disruptions and discontinuities in trends; and
3 human intentions and actions.

An actor's future orientation is crucial for understanding human perceptions of potential change in the business environment as well as actors' intentions for action. This thinking fits well with the IMP view of intentional business actors incrementally changing their networks through business interactions, where trends and disruptions become mediated through network relationships (Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Halinen *et al.*, 1999; Möller and Svahn, 2009).

Within futures research, foresight studies have addressed the anticipatory activities that organizations undertake to inform decision-making and prepare for action (Rohrbeck *et al.*, 2015; Schwarz *et al.*, 2020). Hence, besides the cognitive perspective on how the future might be like, the actions taken to enact the future orientation are the focus. In business network research, however, future orientation related to how business actors in networks envision the future or prepare for future network change has remained primarily untapped. Both the perceptions of future change and the enactment of future orientation in IMP-driven business network studies have been overlooked.

Research has focused on understanding the network context, the direct and indirect connections and interdependencies between relationships, and the network horizon, defining how far beyond the direct counterparts in the network structure a business actor can see (Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Holmen and Pedersen, 2003). The emphasis has been on comprehending the structural complexity of a borderless business network and its evolution over time. Futures studies, instead, draw attention to the temporal horizon of envisioning, which we call here the future horizon. Simply put, the future horizon refers to either an objectively or subjectively defined temporal distance from the present to the envisioned future. The time span varies from short to medium and long terms depending on the actor's interest and what is appropriate for the focal phenomenon and underlying structural forces affecting it (Malaska and Holstius, 2009).

Espousing a subjective time perspective, the future horizon can be related to how distant or near a potential future event is from an actor's viewpoint (Augustine *et al.*, 2019). Due to global sustainability threats, the division between distant and near-term futures and how organizations perceive it have also been discussed in organization studies (Kunisch *et al.*, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2019). Turbulent times and crises have made people think about the future in a less linear manner and influenced their perceptions of what is near or what is distant. For instance, the views of how far in the future the target of carbon-neutral production or commercialization of a particular technology might be has changed dramatically. The type of

envisioning is qualitatively different when directed to the near-term future, where it is part of the practice of forming expectations and goals under uncertainty, to when oriented to the distant future, combined with the imagination of futures in ambiguous conditions (Augustine *et al.*, 2019).

Adopting a more extensive approach to envisioning network change might open new perspectives for researchers and practitioners alike. Futures studies require examining future change over a longer time span than "the here and now." It calls to address the future in more explicit terms, asking how far in the future one should actually try to "see" and reach in the business network or how the company wants the network to look in 5, 10, and 20 years' time. The future orientation urges managers to discuss company goals and paths to them in a constantly changing environment, eventually question the goals and consider what is required to achieve the desired future or to cope in a less favorable future.

Importing concepts from futures research

One option is to integrate counterpart concepts from futures studies and business network research to advance research on a business actor's future orientation. Theoretical interdisciplinary research integrates, combines or contrasts concepts from different disciplines to develop new concepts and even theories or simply to create a better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Huutoniemi *et al.*, 2010; Markovic *et al.*, 2021). Submitting the concepts into dialogue with each other serves two main functions:

1 creating better coverage of the future orientation, thus strengthening the validity of the concept with respect to the issues it seeks to describe; and
2 specifying the content and meaning of a future-oriented concept to better fit the context of business network studies.

From the business network perspective, the prominent domain of futures research concentrates on foresight processes – how individuals and organizations deal and cope with uncertainty of the future. We find four concepts particularly promising, offering temporal and contextual advancements to business network research: futures images, visioning, foresight capability and networked foresight (Table 1).

Futures images

Business network research has studied actors' sensemaking using network pictures, highlighting the dynamic nature of the initially static concept by promoting the idea of network picturing (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2016; Colville and Pye, 2010). Managers build network pictures "based on their experience from previous interactions with other actors, as well as based on expectations about the future" (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). However, considering network picturing as a dynamic sensemaking process is not enough to make it a future-oriented concept. For this purpose, we need to focus on managers' mental models that are *per se* related to the future. As an extension to network pictures, futures research suggests the study of *futures images* (Table 1).

Triggered by their perception of the future as uncertain and unknowable, people form futures images as mental models, hence "creating assumptions and assessments on what the

Table 1 Suggestions for conceptual integration

Future-oriented concept(s)	Related IMP concepts	Advancement offered
Futures images "Futures images refers to 'snapshots' of possible futures .. ..[and] represent probable, possible, or preferable futures based on individual beliefs, expectations, opinions, values, hopes, and fears and taking account of development and change" (Jokinen *et al.*, 2022, pp. 2–3) "Images of the future are mental models about the future . . . [they] are systemic by nature: they are formed from knowledge and flavoured with imagination" (Rubin, 2013, p. 40)	*Network picture* "Network pictures are managers' subjective mental representations of their relevant business environment" (Henneberg *et al.*, 2006, p. 408) and a basis for actor's perceptions, actions, and reactions (Ford *et al.*, 2003) *Network picturing* "Network picturing refers to the 'managerial process' i.e. the specifics about how managers use their understanding of the network to prepare, evaluate, and make strategizing decisions" (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2016, p. 108)	*Temporal* From managers' presently held perceptions of their business network to exploring alternative images of probable, possible or preferred network futures *Contextual* From network pictures held by individuals to images of network futures shared by a network of actors
Visioning "Visioning refers to a view of foresight as the creation of the future through action" (Cunha *et al.*, 2006, p. 948) Visioning refers to the process of developing "a vision as the more or less explicit claim or expression of a future that is idealised in order to mobilise present potential to move into the direction of this future" (Van der Helm, 2009, p. 100)	*Network visioning* Network visioning "is about creating a vision of the network and its potential evolution in order to identify strategic development opportunities; it involves both the actor's perception of the network and the attempts to identify the set of potential relationships" (Laari-Salmela *et al.*, 2015, p. 125) "A cognitive process where the manager takes an explorative . . . view of future changes related to the surrounding network and emerging strategic opportunities" (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023, p. 10)	*Temporal* Extending perspective to visioning by conceiving it as an organizational practice or process, which mobilizes action toward the desired future *Contextual* From an individual actor visioning future network change to collective, company-level visioning. Extends managers' visioning to take notice of relevant business environmental trends, change forces and events
Foresight capability Foresight is the "ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent and functional forward view and to use the insights arising in organizationally useful ways; for example: . . . to explore new markets" (Slaughter, 1997, p. 287) Foresight capability . . . facilitates individuals' and organizations' ability to sense changes, risks, and opportunities, enabling the firm to learn about its changing business environment (Rhisiart *et al.*, 2015)	*Network visioning capability* ". . . sense-making delineates a firm's visioning capability and shapes its capacity for agenda construction and network influencing and mobilization" (Möller, 2010, p. 366) The framing or visioning capability refers to "the ability to form an architectural understanding of the emerging field based on exposure and generative learning." (Möller and Svahn, 2009, p. 456). It refers to cognitive capacity . . . and involves mental flexibility to reframe when the need arises" (ibid. p. 454)	*Temporal* From learning at the early stages of innovation to continuous learning from various anticipatory activities and environmental change *Contextual* From visioning emergent innovation nets and development paths for radical innovation to anticipating change in all types of networks
Networked foresight Collaborative (networked) foresight refers to joint constructive foresight activities conducted in a group in an organizational setting (Jokinen *et al.*, 2022) Networked foresight is "conducted in innovation networks for the benefit of the network and its partners with active contributions from the partners" (Heger and Boman, 2015, p. 147)	*Network insight* "Developing network insight is a managerial challenge encompassing the amalgamation of dispersed pieces of atomized network pictures through heedful, multilateral interactions." (Mouzas *et al.*, 2008, pp. 167–168) *Network foresight* "The process of interacting on, and possibly amalgamating, managers' pictures of and expectations to future networks of relevance to the networks in which they are presently engaged" (Andersen *et al.*, 2017, p. 63)	*Temporal* From a business actor's present network pictures to collective intentional building of future network images *Contextual* From expectations built over time in business interaction to strategic network collaboration

Source: Authors' own work

future might be like" (Rubin, 2013, p. 40). Futures images are based on people's interpretations of current socio-economic phenomena, they entail creative and intuitive elements and influence people's decisions and behaviors (Jokinen *et al.*, 2022; Kaboli and Tapio, 2018). "Individual actors, groups, and institutions hold several concurrent images of the future" (Rubin, 2013, p. 40), implying that futures images may be conflicting, but also shared by organizations (Jokinen *et al.*, 2022). A company's strategic vision can be seen as a special case of a future image, created based on expected changes in the business environment and company internal ambitions for the future (van der Duin *et al.*, 2014).

The concept of futures images could open up an exploratory approach to the future by making explicit the multiple "imagined futures upon and within which action [in business networks] is undertaken" (Medlin, 2022, p. 76). For instance, revealing future network images held by actors in innovation networks might prove useful in orchestrating the network by uncovering possibly converging or diverging ideas and interests between actors.

Visioning

As noted earlier, network visioning is a relevant part of managers' sensemaking in the business network context, either as a strategizing activity or actor capability. As a sensemaking activity, visioning involves an actor's perception of the surrounding network, awareness of what is happening in the network and a strategic idea of what a company should do in the perceived network context (Laari-Salmela *et al.*, 2015). Abrahamsen *et al.* (2023) considered visioning as an individual-level process or a collective effort in which managers work together to envisage the future. Thus, network visioning links managers' sensemaking with strategic intentions, informing subsequent actions. Visioning has been seen as essential for the construction and management of innovation networks (Möller and Svahn, 2003, 2006), as well as the creation of new business fields (Möller and Svahn, 2009). These views, prevalent especially in the innovation network literature, imply a proactive and normative approach to leading network change by visioning. Here, visioning is tightly coupled with the actor's visioning capabilities and an active attempt to steer the network in a desired direction by setting an agenda for the network and using it to mobilize other actors (Möller and Svahn, 2009; Möller, 2010).

Similarly, in foresight research, vision and visioning are seen as driving strategy formulation (Malaska and Holstius, 2009) and inspiring action that takes control of drivers of change and assists the company in coping with uncertainty caused by environmental dynamism (Vecchiato, 2012). Cunha *et al.* (2006) distinguished among various modes of foresight based on the adopted temporal focus (present or future) and the level and type of activity (macroscopic analysis or microscopic practice), and defined visioning as "a microscopic practice with a future orientation" referring to "the action of people in their daily organizational lives." (Cunha *et al.*, 2006, p. 950). While futures images explore alternative futures, visions refer to an idealized future and embody normative power to trigger change (Van der Helm, 2009).

As the notion of network visioning and the concept of visioning in futures research have various commonalities, possibilities for interdisciplinary conceptual integration are promising. The view of compelling visions as necessary for guiding action, the insights regarding the temporal horizon and emergence of visioning in business practice complement the business network view of visioning as a cognitive process or actor capability. The normative power of network vision as a trigger of change could further enhance our understanding of network visioning as a strategizing activity.

Foresight capability

Connected with the management of innovation networks, visioning has been proposed as an important capability for network actors and orchestrators (Möller, 2010; Möller and Svahn, 2009). Extending the sensemaking view, Möller (2010) considered visioning a "sensemaking capability that enables the company to develop a network theory of an emerging new business field" (p. 367). Building on this notion, Möller and Svahn (2009) later defined visioning as a framing capability related to the business landscape and a cognitive capacity to comprehend business field emergence.

The concept of visioning capability is closely related to the futures research concept of foresight capability (Rhisiart *et al.*, 2015), offering potential for their integration. Foresight capability gained in anticipatory activities forms an essential foundation for the company's dynamic capabilities (Rhisiart *et al.*, 2015; Schwarz *et al.*, 2020), enhancing its ability to sense and seize business opportunities in highly uncertain environments (Haarhaus and Liening, 2020). Foresight also enhances a firm's innovation capacity by supporting the exploration of new business fields and increasing the quantity and quality of innovation projects (Rohrbeck and Gemünden, 2011). Besides its evident value in framing highly turbulent markets and network change in the face of radical innovation, visioning capability is expected to be a key capability for companies operating in any type of business market (Abrahamsen *et al.*, 2023).

Networked foresight

In business network studies, network insight gained in interaction with other network actors has been considered essential for organizational learning, especially for innovation and the mobilization of other actors. Developing network insight refers to the amalgamation of actors' individual and dispersed network pictures (Mouzas *et al.*, 2008), whereas the advancement of network foresight denotes the merging of actors' network pictures and expectations related to future networks (Andersen *et al.*, 2017). Extending the idea of network insight toward network foresight, Andersen *et al.* (2017) underlined the possibility of creating "a forward looking shared understanding, explanation (or even) prediction of future states of actors in the business network" (p. 61).

Futures studies offer a suitable approach for the creation of network foresight, called either collaborative foresight (Jokinen *et al.*, 2022) or networked foresight (Heger and Boman, 2015). Collaborative foresight builds on the interactions between business partners and organizational actors, bringing different knowledge bases and various futures images, ideas and beliefs into dialogue with one another (Heger and Boman, 2015; Jokinen *et al.*, 2022; Van der Duin *et al.*, 2014). As a pragmatic approach, it focuses on "imagining and/or projecting futures at the operational level by planning for anticipated situations or looking for novel solutions" together with other organizations (Jokinen *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). The neighboring concept of networked foresight refers to foresight conducted in inter-firm networks to promote innovation (Heger and Boman, 2015; Van der Duin *et al.*, 2014).

Networked foresight has proved valuable, for instance, in exploring new business fields (Heger and Rohrbeck, 2012) and creating futures images for sustainable products (Jokinen *et al.*, 2022). It allows network parties to sense market opportunities and prepare for future action. It benefits the entire network in developing future insights or a shared vision of innovation

(Heger and Boman, 2015). Although interests between business network research and futures studies meet here, to our knowledge, these futures research concepts have not been used in network research. The benefits of networked foresight seem evident, for example, for companies seeking development of major innovations, transformation of business ecosystems or construction of sustainable markets, where joint plans and shared visions are necessary to mobilize action.

The proposed ideas and concepts create opportunities to pose new types of research questions that direct research to a temporally novel area (i.e. future). We discuss these questions next.

Posing new types of research questions

In the IMP community, future orientation has not been on the research agenda explicitly. Ontologically, business network research leans heavily on critical realism and constructivism, which have led scholars to pose positive questions of "what is" and "what this means" (Möller and Halinen, 2022). There has been little intellectual space for research that takes a business actor's perspective to the future, asking "what the future might be like" or "what the actor wants it to be like." When adopting a future orientation in research, the preferred future becomes an appropriate topic for inquiry, bringing actors' value considerations to the forefront (Inayatullah, 2002). A decade ago, market-shaping researchers brought up the issue of future markets (Kjellberg *et al.*, 2012); however, it remains a relatively neglected topic, despite the increasing pressure to adopt a proactive future orientation for the innovation and creation of sustainable markets (Nenonen *et al.*, 2021; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2021).

Adopting a business actor's perspective on the future, we have drawn attention to the question of how companies and managers envision future change in markets and networks. From network management and strategizing perspectives, questions related to actors' perceptions of potential futures and the ways in which future orientation is enacted in companies and networks are especially relevant. Using this categorization, we suggest potential research questions for future business network studies that use the proposed interdisciplinary ideas and concepts (Table 2).

From a business actor's perspective, it would be beneficial to pose research questions related to managers' futures thinking (i.e. the cognitive contents of future orientation and companies' actions and capabilities employed in orienting toward the future). These two approaches are deeply rooted in business network studies and existing sensemaking and process-driven research. In terms of cognition, the key questions are "how managers/companies think about the future" and "how their thinking in the form of futures images and visions emerges in networks." Regarding action and capability, the questions of "how managers and companies anticipate future change" and "how network actors together envision future change" are relevant (Table 2).

Choosing which types of research questions to pose depends on the context in which the foresight is conducted. According to the value-system continuum developed for managing strategic nets (Möller and Svahn, 2003, 2006) and applied in the orchestration of innovation networks (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2022), the nature of visioning can be assumed to differ in contexts of varying uncertainty. In networks of early emergence, characterized by great uncertainty and tacit knowledge, visioning, agenda construction and network mobilization are likely to differ compared to the construction of dominant design networks or application manufacturing networks with available technologies and known actors. Foresight studies have shown that the need for corporate foresight activities and their effectiveness depend on environmental complexity and volatility (Rohrbeck and Kum, 2018). Hence, it is not adequate to address future orientation as a generic construct but to examine the kinds of anticipatory activities and capabilities relevant in specific contexts and for different future-related goals.

Discussion

We have introduced the idea of developing a more explicit future orientation to business network research. Despite some promising theoretical and empirical studies, the future has remained an underdeveloped temporal category in research. Focusing on the business actor's view of the future and how it is constructed would open new perspectives on business interaction and network development. Our analysis and inputs from futures research highlight two directions for future business network research. First, it moves the focus from mere expectation building in business interactions to purposeful preparation of alternative future(s) and envisioning opportunities to change business markets and networks. Second, it shifts the focus from seeing the future as enacted in the present to envisioning more distant events and futures.

Our study calls for business network researchers to understand business actors' future orientation as relevant for anticipating network change as well as for constructing business opportunities. Given the increased instability in the business environment, we should question the reliability of past and present data in guiding future outcomes (Bansal, 2019). The business marketing field requires knowledge of futures, i.e. knowledge of how business actors envision and imagine possible, probable and desired futures (Beckert, 2021).

To develop the future orientation, we suggest adopting concepts from futures research and their integration with concepts from business network studies. The concepts of visioning and foresight capability fit well with the idea of the future as integrated in the complexity of the present (Hernes and Schultz, 2020), while the concepts of futures images and vision and networked foresight offer analytical tools to encounter the distant future as detached from the complexity of the present (Augustine *et al.*, 2019). Business network researchers may find it easier to adopt concepts that integrate the future perspective into the examination of the present, as they are ontologically closer to the prevailing sensemaking and process research approaches. Extension of the future horizon would, however, be beneficial for studying the influence of global threats and disruptive innovations on business networks. Future research should try to understand how network actors construct collaboration and common interests related to more distant futures and how disruptive crises and turns in industry trends alter managers' images and companies' visions of future networks. While the study of futures images or networked foresight knowledge cannot provide immediate normative guidance for managerial action, it would offer valuable pathways for considering the future.

Table 2 Future-oriented research questions for business network studies

	Actors' future perceptions		Enacting future perceptions in networks	
Cognitive contents of future orientation	How do managers and companies think about the future?	What types of futures do they perceive: potential, possible or desired? What kinds of alternative network futures does the company consider probable or possible in the medium or long term? How extended future horizon actors consider relevant for their business/the task at hand? What types of trajectories do they draft for network development? What trends and events do they perceive affect the trajectories? What factors influence their futures thinking? Are there any systematic differences between the actors and why?	How do actors' strategic visions or futures images emerge in networks? How does the network context affect visions or futures images?	How are visions formed in business interactions or networked foresight? How do visions/futures images change over time in visioning and networked foresight? How do individual managers' futures images or societal imaginaries affect visions? What types of futures images and whose images matter the most? How disruptive crises and turns in industry trends alter managers' images of future networks?
Action and capabilities to enact future orientation	How do managers and companies anticipate future market or network change?	What kinds of procedures and methods are in use for anticipating future network change? How do companies develop foresight capabilities? What factors influence actors' foresight capability development? Are there systematic differences between actors and why?	How do network actors together envision the future market or network change? How does the network context affect companies' anticipatory activities?	How do companies anticipate future change in business relationships? How do companies make use of networked foresight? How do they mobilize other actors for networked foresight? What types of futures images and whose images matter in network foresight? How does visioning differ in different market or network contexts? What types of foresight capabilities are needed in different contexts?

Source: Authors' own work

Further analysis of the appropriateness of the concepts for studying business marketing and networks is recommended before their application in empirical investigations. Our discussion can contribute to the constant reconstruction of concepts and the questioning of their underlying theoretical assumptions (Welch *et al.*, 2016). We acknowledge the need to carefully consider the conceptual boundaries, ontological backgrounds, and definitions of the concepts from futures studies before their use in network research (Tähtinen and Havila, 2019).

In contrast, business network research has traditionally applied abductive logics and qualitative methods for understanding network change, which improves its prospects for using ideas from futures research. With forward-looking research designs, by asking managers to reflect on the future at a longer time interval, new knowledge could be gained of how managers think about the future and how they enact their envisioning in company-and network-level activities in the short and long terms. Such research would allow firms to develop relevant capabilities for meeting sustainability demands and solving other socio-economic issues.

While firms set carbon neutrality targets at a 10–15-year horizon and actively pursue new digital innovations, business marketing research cannot remain silent on business actors' future orientation. Research should tackle problems that companies face beyond the present day, the next quarter or annual planning. Even amid drastic crises facing high uncertainty, firms are forced to anticipate events and opportunities that lay further in the future if they are to survive and prosper.

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