**Principal Topic**

Booking.com, eBay, or Uber are all multi-sided platforms (MSPs) as they facilitate transactions between two or more distinct customer groups. Due to the indirect network effects that arise in markets with MSPs, such markets gravitate towards monopoly outcomes (van Alstyne et al., 2015) and display high barriers to entry once a MSP has successfully been established (Eisenmann et al., 2006). These outcomes render MSPs attractive entrepreneurial opportunities. Even though start-ups are clearly prevalent in the field of MSPs, it has not yet been examined why or under which conditions start-ups are better placed than incumbents to pursue MSPs. This study aims to address this gap in three ways: Firstly, we identify contextual factors that put start-ups structurally in a better or worse position than incumbents. Secondly, we identify factors and mechanisms that influence the strength of the impact that these contextual factors have on the relative competitive positioning. Finally, we derive steps players can take to improve their relative competitive positioning.

**Method**

Employing multi-method case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989) we examine settings in which new MSPs have come into existence. In each case we analyze archival data from internal and external sources as well as semi-structured interviews with key decision makers at both start-ups and two types of incumbents: Manufacturing companies and resellers.

**Results and Implications**

This study examines the conditions under which start-ups are structurally better placed than incumbents to pursue a MSP as well as the steps players can take to improve their relative competitive positioning in such contexts. The study thereby contributes to the nascent literature on platform emergence (Gawer, 2014) as well as to the literature on entrepreneurial opportunities. Furthermore, by shedding light on the business model conflicts that arise when incumbents pursue a non-multi-sided business model and a business model involving a MSP concurrently, this study adds granular findings to the discussion on business model conflicts (Markides, 2015). The practical significance of this research consists in guiding entrepreneurs towards business opportunities that are particularly attractive not only because of the high barriers to entry that result once a MSP has been successfully established (Eisenmann, 2006), but also because they are as start-ups structurally better placed than incumbents to exploit these opportunities.

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