

Tertius Dolens: Interalter Conflict and Its Negative Impact on Broker Performance

Adam Tatarynowicz,^{a,*} Thomas Keil^b

^aNova School of Business and Economics, Strategy & Entrepreneurship, Carcavelos 2775-405, Portugal; ^bDepartment of Business Administration, University of Zurich, 8032 Zurich, Switzerland

*Corresponding author

Contact: adam.tatarynowicz@novasbe.pt,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2925-9214> (AT); thomas.keil@business.uzh.ch,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6124-0655> (TK)

Received: June 21, 2024

Revised: May 1, 2025; November 15, 2025; January 23, 2026

Accepted: February 8, 2026

Published Online in Articles in Advance: ■■■■ ■■, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2024.19168>

Copyright: © 2026 INFORMS

Abstract. Prior research on the relationship between network brokerage and firms' innovation performance has predominantly portrayed the brokering firm as a *tertius gaudens*, or “the benefiting third,” which gains informational and coordination advantages from its network position by bridging disconnected and relationally neutral partner firms. We extend this view by theorizing a disadvantaged brokering firm, or broker, which spans two uncooperative partners, or alters, engaged in active conflict with one another. Described as a *tertius dolens*, or “the suffering third,” this broker occupies a position in which interalter conflict transforms brokerage from a structural advantage into a liability by constraining knowledge exchange, increasing coordination costs, and damaging the broker's network reputation, thereby reducing innovation performance. We further argue that these adverse effects can be partly mitigated by structural conditions that restore balance to the broker's position, including access to conflict-free structural holes, higher network status, and multiplex relational commitments with the conflicting alters. Using longitudinal data on 2,735 publicly listed biopharmaceutical firms and their vertical alliances from 2000 to 2009, combined with U.S. patent infringement lawsuits to capture interorganizational conflict, we find strong empirical support for these arguments. Taken together, our findings refine brokerage theory by identifying conflict among a broker's alters as a hidden source of structural disadvantage and clarifying why brokers do not always realize the innovation benefits predicted by the *tertius gaudens* logic.

Supplemental Material: The online supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2024.19168>.

Keywords: *tertius dolens* brokerage • network disadvantage • interfirm conflict • innovation performance

Introduction

The concept of brokerage remains central in research examining the structural foundations of firm performance in interorganizational networks (e.g., Balachandran and Hernandez 2018, Kumar and Zaheer 2022, Shipilov et al. 2023). At its core, brokerage refers to an ego-network position in which the broker connects two alters who are not directly connected to one another through a positive tie (Gould and Fernandez 1989, Burt 1992, Stovel and Shaw 2012). By occupying such a position, the broker is thought to benefit from access to novel, nonredundant information; opportunities to coordinate knowledge flows; and the ability to mobilize complementary inputs across otherwise disconnected partners (Zaheer and Bell 2005, Shipilov and Li 2008, Davis and Eisenhardt 2011). These structural advantages are particularly valuable in knowledge-intensive industries, where innovation depends on the ability to recombine diverse and often tacit insights through close interorganizational collaboration (Burt

and Soda 2021). As the novelty, diversity, and complexity of knowledge requirements increase, especially in dynamic environments marked by intense competition and rapid technological change, the brokering firm's role in facilitating knowledge transfer and coordinating R&D efforts becomes critical. Prior research has thus linked brokerage to superior firm innovation outcomes across a range of technology-driven industries, including biotechnology and pharmaceuticals (Guler and Nerkar 2012, Kumar et al. 2022, Hernandez et al. 2025), fuel cells (Vasudeva et al. 2013), and semiconductors (Rosenkopf and Almeida 2003).

Much of the existing research builds on Simmel's (1950) classical notion of *tertius gaudens*, or “the benefiting third,” which portrays brokerage as a structurally advantageous network position that enables brokers to access diverse information and coordinate across disconnected alters. Yet, although Simmel himself acknowledged that interalter relations may involve competition or even hostility, subsequent interorganizational research