RESEARCH ARTICLE

Corporate-startup partnering: Exploring attention dynamics and relational outcomes in asymmetric settings

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Abstract

Research Summary: Startups that partner concurrently with a large corporation must compete for the latter's attention. We extend the attention-based view from an intraorganizational to an interorganizational context, exploring how startups differ in the amount of attention they receive, their actions to attract and sustain attention, and the impact of attention dynamics on the relational outcome of the partnership. Our research uncovers two separate contests for attention involving corporate and divisional managers, highlighting the distributed nature of attention. Reflecting these, our findings reveal how startups' responsiveness to the respective cognitive schemas and corresponding stimuli of corporate and divisional managers is critical to understanding their distinct relational trajectories and disparate outcomes. Our focus on attention is complementary to the focus on trust that has hitherto dominated research on relational dynamics.

Managerial Summary: Startups partner with large corporations to access needed complementary resources. However, truly benefiting from such partnerships is challenging and requires them to attract as well as sustain the latter's attention. Our study reveals two contests for attention: one with corporate managers tasked with running a startup partnering initiative and the other with divisional managers in business units with whom actual commercial joint activity is forged. These two sets of managers have different priorities

(schemas) that result in differences in the nature and amount of attention they pay to startups' actions (stimuli). Startups seeking corporate partnerships would do well to recognize this heterogeneity within large corporations and accordingly manage the attention–attraction process through suitable partner-centric behaviors. On their part, large corporations need to be aware of and sensitive to the challenges such disparate schema of corporate and divisional managers pose for successful partnering outcomes as the relationship transitions from the early to later stages.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Large corporations and innovative startups increasingly engage in partnerships in a quest to remain competitive (Alvarez & Barney, 2001; Hallen et al., 2014; Prashantham & Birkinshaw, 2008; Shankar & Shepherd, 2019; Weiblen & Chesbrough, 2015). Recognizing the potential benefits and the clearly asymmetric nature of the relationship, corporations that heed the misgivings of their smaller partners—such as their vulnerability to possible malfeasance or difficulty securing access to the right individuals in the corporation (Alvarez & Barney, 2001; Doz, 1988; Katila et al., 2008; Vandaie & Zaheer, 2014)—may develop a sophisticated partner interface to assuage such concerns (Monteiro & Birkinshaw, 2017; Weiblen & Chesbrough, 2015).

However, exactly how new ventures realize value from such partnerships, that is, benefit from access to much-needed resources, remains unclear. Given the asymmetry involved, forming and leveraging a productive partnership is often challenging for the smaller partner. Indeed, many corporate-startup partnerships do not succeed (Prashantham, 2021). The challenge is magnified if the startup is part of a portfolio of such alliances centered on a focal firm, as increasingly occurs in the high-tech sector (Decreton et al., 2021; Shankar & Shepherd, 2019). In a portfolio context, startups have to compete for the latter's resources (Cao, 2006; Clough et al., 2019; Ozcan, 2018) and first and foremost for its attention, since all resources will flow from this.

How startups attract and sustain a corporation's attention is an important yet underappreciated issue. Our purpose is therefore to explore how startups differ in terms of (i) the attention (given by and) received from the established firm; (ii) actions on their part to attract and sustain its attention; and (iii) the impact of attention dynamics on how the partnership unfolds. We are particularly interested in the alliance portfolio context where, given the finite amount of managerial attention available (Joseph & Ocasio, 2012) to various startup partners, the risk of resource congestion (Aggarwal, 2020) is particularly severe. While attention-based issues have been broached in strategy research in recent years (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Joseph & Wilson, 2018; Ocasio, 1997), the attention dynamics involved in a partnership context remain under-researched and have been eclipsed by a longstanding focus on trust in the alliance literature (e.g., Dyer & Singh, 1998; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994).

Given our objective, we investigate a case comprising an established firm and a number of startup partners in its portfolio that were part of a specific initiative, the ultimate outcome of interest being whether the partnership realized its objective of a joint go-to-market strategy. We collected data from both the startups and the established firm, thereby

attaining a more fine-grained understanding of the underlying attention dynamics. Our primary interest is to examine variance in outcomes. The longitudinal nature of the study enables us to identify how microlevel processes and the associated attention dynamics—both in an absolute and relative sense—shape the evolution of the partnership.

Overall, we found that some startups, dubbed "hares," got off to a fast start in terms of attracting attention from corporate managers running the startup partnering program, but subsequently became dissatisfied with the attention received from divisional managers in business units (BUs), eventually falling short of the original intent of developing a go-to-market strategy with support from the corporation. In contrast, other startups, dubbed "tortoises," after a relatively slow start in terms of attracting corporate headquarters' attention, were able to subsequently attract divisional managers' attention and ultimately attained the original goal. A third set of ventures, dubbed "nonstarters," failed to build momentum from start to finish and ultimately withdrew from the program.[1]

The transition from the corporate to the divisional manager's attention was significant in shaping the relational trajectory. By uncovering the responsiveness on the part of the tortoises to the divisional managers, we highlight that, unlike in startups, the key actors in the larger corporation operate at different levels and are characterized by a distinct mental schema and a corresponding sensitivity to stimuli. This was critical to understanding the variance in outcomes through an attention-based lens.

Our study makes two main contributions. First, it extends existing work on attention-based research in intraorganizational settings (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Joseph & Wilson, 2018; Ocasio, 2011; Vuori & Huy, 2016) by highlighting the complex nature of attention dynamics in asymmetric interorganizational settings. We uncover a discontinuous contest for attention: a high level of attention from one set of corporate managers does not necessarily translate into getting attention from another (divisional managers). Second, by highlighting the capacity to attract and sustain attention over time as an important influence on relational dynamics, our study complements existing research on alliances that tends to focus on the capacity for building and sustaining trust (Ariño & de la Torre, 1998; Doz, 1996; Faems et al., 2008). We show that attracting attention to "mundane" commercial aspects ultimately matters more than "cool" showcasing, which may explain why many startups fail to achieve a satisfactory outcome from partnering with large corporations.

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Alliances and relational dynamics

While incumbents and startups are often rivals, there is considerable scope for mutually beneficial cooperation based on complementary resources and capabilities (Alvarez & Barney, 2001; Buckley & Prashantham, 2016; Vandaie & Zaheer, 2014). Many startups see partnering with large firms as critical to their success by compensating for their lack of legitimacy and market reach, thereby alleviating the so-called liability of newness (Baum et al., 2000). Conversely, incumbents are attracted to the innovative capacity of startups, which they view as increasingly important to maintain their competitiveness (Hallen et al., 2014; Katila et al., 2008). Many large firms have introduced partnering initiatives to engage with startups, including corporate accelerators and innovation contests (Prashantham & Yip, 2017; Shankar & Shepherd, 2019; Weiblen & Chesbrough, 2015).

Whereas early work on alliances emphasized the importance of access to resources, thus focusing on issues such as partner characteristics, resource complementarity, and the optimal form of alliance to access them (Contractor & Lorange, 1988; Geringer, 1991), reaping the benefits entails more than merely accessing resources in that effective management of the partnership is required to realize the potential for value creation. Recognizing this, another stream of work (e.g., Ariño & de la Torre, 1998; Doz, 1996; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Faems et al., 2008; Larson, 1992) has highlighted the processes underlying the realization of value creation potential (Madhok & Tallman, 1998), albeit their focus on processes is largely limited to the types of resources of concern to the former stream.

Complementing the above efforts, we identify attention as a more fluid, malleable type of resource that must not only be tapped but managed for the partnership's potential to be realized. Though crucial, attention has been

underestimated as a resource to be harnessed and leveraged in the alliance and startup partnering literatures. Various studies (Lavie, 2007; Ozcan & Eisenhardt, 2009) have examined the evolution of alliance portfolios, presenting at best a somewhat casual argument that alliances which demand greater resource commitments tend to attract more managerial attention (Reuer & Zollo, 2005). However, once accessed through alliances, unlike other resources that become available for a firm's use (Hamel, 1991), attention ebbs and flows (Ocasio et al., 2018). Just because attention is obtained at one point in time does not mean it will be sustained (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008). In sum, attentional resources are distinct from other types and need to be managed accordingly, especially since "access to resources" does not automatically mean benefitting from those resources unless accompanied by attention from the partner.

2.2 | Attention and its dynamics

Ocasio (1997, p. 189) defines attention as "the noticing, encoding, interpreting, and focusing of time and effort" by organizational decision-makers on issues—encompassing problems, opportunities, and threats—and answers in the form of the available alternatives for action. The allocation of attention shapes how decision-makers make sense of the environment and decide which course of action to take (Dutton & Jackson, 1987). The recognition of attention as a finite and scarce resource highlights the limited attentional capacity of human beings (Simon, 1947) and is manifested in various ways. Attention is selective on the part of individual decision-makers, tends to be unevenly distributed across different actors, and shows different patterns of evolution as events unfold (Cyert & March, 1963; Dutton, 1997; Joseph & Ocasio, 2012; Vuori & Huy, 2016). Consequently, sustaining their attention can help identify opportunities but is nontrivial to accomplish (Salvato, 2009).

To fully appreciate the dynamics of attention, it is important to understand how it is regulated. The attention-based view (ABV) of organizational action (Ocasio, 1997) identifies four factors underpinning its regulation: the rules of the game, the players, the structural position, and the resources. The rules of the game are critical in as far as they provide the underlying logic of action. The players (i.e., key decision-makers) matter because of their discretionary capacity to influence firm attention (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987), and thus provide "an entrepreneurial function in the allocation of attention in organizations" (Ocasio, 1997, p. 197). These four aspects collectively interact in shaping and regulating attention by allocating value and legitimacy to the various issues and answers facing decision-makers. Moreover, besides being selective, attention is context-dependent: what decision-makers focus on at any point in time is shaped by the context in which they are situated.

The ABV posits that the allocation of attention in an organization is a combination of both top-down and bottom-up processes (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Ocasio, 2011; Ocasio et al., 2018; Shepherd et al., 2017). Useful insight can be derived from Bouquet and Birkinshaw's (2008) study of attention dynamics across multiple units of a multinational organization in which they found that attention was unevenly distributed across the various units, and the level of attention from headquarters (the central unit) to a particular subsidiary (a peripheral unit) was critical to how the latter's role evolved. They identified three dimensions of attention: relative (limited attentional resources allocated in a competitive process), supportive (a gateway to opportunities), and visible (explicitly recognized and transmitted). They highlighted the role of structural factors ("weight" or importance) and relational factors ("voice" or persuasiveness) in gaining the central unit's attention, with voice—efforts to communicate attention-worthiness to the attention allocator—being the key differentiator in competing for attention, compensating for weight.

From the corporation's perspective, it cannot be expected to give equal attention (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006) to every startup in its portfolio, and it stands to reason that it will allocate greater attention to partnerships that offer the greatest payoff. In this regard, Joseph and Wilson's (2018, p. 1793) observation in the context of a multi-divisional firm that "managers often differ in their perceptions of opportunities…[and] orientations to environmental stimuli" reflects the same sentiment as Bouquet and Birkinshaw's (2008) observations of differences between managers from multinational firms' headquarters and subsidiaries. Building on prior ABV research (Joseph & Ocasio, 2012; Nigam & Ocasio, 2010; Ocasio, 2011), Joseph and Wilson (2018) distinguish between *schema-based*

attentional processes predicated on managerial cognitive representations, and *stimulus-based* attentional processes based on situational demands. This distinction suggests a potential tension between the attentional processes of corporate and divisional managers who may have different attentional schema (Laamanen, 2019; Ocasio et al., 2018).

From the startups' perspective, with multiple new ventures having to compete for attention (Cao, 2006), diligence is essential to attract the corporation's attention. Moreover, attracting attention is only half the battle; attention must be *sustained* if value is to be realized. This is complicated by the fact that the amount and nature of attention allocated by different actors within the same corporation are not identical since, as noted, corporate and divisional managers may have different mental schemas that respond favorably or unfavorably to distinct stimuli (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Joseph & Wilson, 2018). Thus attention, once attracted, cannot simply be assumed but needs to be earned from different actors at various stages of the relationship, which in turn may require different approaches and strategies. How this plays out in an asymmetric context such as corporate-startup partnerships remains under-researched—hence our study.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Research site and sample

The research setting was an elite 12-month startup partnering initiative called BizPlus, led by "Gorilla," a globally renowned software corporation.[2] Gorilla's platform technologies could be used by independent software vendors (ISVs) as building blocks to develop their offerings. The precursor to the BizPlus initiative was Collaborate, a broader startup-related initiative that was indicative of Gorilla's recognition of startups' growing importance as partners. The purpose of Collaborate was to make free software tools available to software startups in their first 3 years of operation as an incentive for them to develop software offerings on Gorilla's platform technologies.

Thereafter, Gorilla introduced BizPlus as an elite partnering program, managed by a startup engagement team based on its Silicon Valley campus. The end goal was to undertake joint go-to-market strategies, market access being the intended win–win outcome. Basically, the BizPlus program sought to identify innovative startups that had aligned their technology with Gorilla's and were most likely to make a significant impact. The idea was to provide startup members with the opportunity to forge a relationship with Gorilla on a one-to-one basis, wherein they would be given access to a designated corporate account manager at headquarters. The BizPlus program manager emphatically stated: "There is no way in the world these startups could have talked to Gorilla without BizPlus." From over 10,000 startups in the Collaborate program in its first couple of years, a total of 100 were hand-picked by Gorilla for BizPlus, based on their quality and potential interest to its most important business units.

3.1.1 | Startups' objectives

The relative similarity in the startups' profiles and the fact that the BizPlus program was time-bound—each alliance would last 12 months—provided us with an ideal setting to compare the startups. Broadly speaking, the starting conditions were comparable, all the startups coming from the Collaborate partner program pool. They were all early-stage ventures of similar sizes and belonged to the same industry (i.e., software), albeit with varying foci in terms of application and industry verticals, yet all in a domain in which Gorilla was strong. They were all first-time partners within the more intimate setting of BizPlus and had chosen to build their products on Gorilla's platform technology.[3] Given how competitive it was to be accepted into the program—barely 1% succeeded—all the startups had a similarly high scope for seeking Gorilla's attention from the outset. Since a range of applications were represented by the portfolio of startups, there was little competitive overlap and, in theory, ample scope for them to succeed without doing so at the expense of others.

The business model of the startups was that of ISVs who used the technological building blocks of a large corporation—in this case Gorilla—to target enterprise customers, consistent with Gorilla's core strength. The ISVs varied in software application (e.g., customer relationship management, business intelligence, collaborative project management, etc.) and/or industry vertical (e.g., consumer goods, financial services, public sector, etc.). ISV sales were typically achieved through resellers and cloud-based marketplaces in the corporation's ecosystem. These were precisely the channels that startups found challenging to access because of their lack of track record. The attractiveness of the BizPlus partner program was that it offered the selected startups an unusual opportunity to accelerate their revenue growth via access to Gorilla's sales and marketing machine, which was typically only available to more mature ISVs and beyond the reach of startups.

3.1.2 | Corporation's perspective

The corporation had a long history of working closely with ISVs. The division of labor and rationale was simple. ISVs used the underlying platform technologies of Gorilla and each time its solution generated sales it would result in revenue for Gorilla through the bundling of its technology with that of the ISV—a win–win situation.[4] Gorilla claimed that for every dollar it made, its partner ecosystem made several more, including the ISVs. The innovation in BizPlus was to extend this sort of relationship to startups as opposed to established ISVs.

The BizPlus program manager, along with his team, was effectively the bridge between the startups and the key business units (BUs) within Gorilla, and clearly believed that all the alliances had a reasonable chance of achieving their objective—a joint go-to-market outcome (for the startup with Gorilla). The BizPlus team's role was to build rapport with the startups, arrive at the joint objective of a go-to-market strategy, and enable them to navigate Gorilla's vast network of business units by helping them make connections internally. The team comprised eight account managers in the BizPlus program who each handled a dozen startups and had identical mandates with respect to the scope of their engagement. All reported to and interacted directly and extensively with the BizPlus program manager, who was closely involved with all the startups that were studied and ultimately made decisions about resource allocations.

3.1.3 | Sample

We undertook theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and chose eight firms from the BizPlus cohort for the study (see Table 1). The program manager was the key link across the dyads we studied because he (1) was closely aware of them all, (2) discussed the most promising startups in the portfolio with the account managers, and (3) actively influenced the prioritizing of them. This does not imply any prejudgment of how the alliances would unfold since they had roughly equal weight with him at the outset. While these eight were not the only ones the program manager was familiar with, he and we felt that eight would present sufficient variety in terms of software application, industry vertical targeted, and geographic location (Europe and North America), while being tractable. Since each of the eight startups selected had a different account manager (this was a coincidence rather than a selection criterion), we were confronted with the issue of the impact of account manager heterogeneity. However, realizing what it would take to achieve a go-to-market strategy, we came to the view that it was the BizPlus program manager who was the vital link to unlocking Gorilla's resources and forming connections with the wider organization.[5] This is not to belittle the role of the account managers, who were allocated to startups based on each startup's platform technology and industry vertical and worked closely with the BizPlus program manager.

TABLE 1 Cases.

Pseudonym	Profile	Interviewees
Cheetah	Application: Project management software	CEO × 4
	Vertical: Technology; public sector	CTO × 1
	Location: London, UK	BizPlus program manager[a]
	No. of employees: 19	BizPlus account manager × 2
Greyhound	Application: Business process management	CEO × 4
	Vertical: Media; technology	Co-founder × 1
	Location: Boulder, Colorado, USA	Marketing manager × 1
	No. of employees: 15	BizPlus program manager[a]
		BizPlus account manager × 2
Stallion	Application: Entertainment	CEO × 4
	Vertical: Consumer goods; technology	CTO × 1
	Location: San Francisco, USA	BizPlus program manager[a]
	No. of employees: 14	BizPlus account manager × 2
Panda	Application: Business intelligence	CEO × 4
	Vertical: Consumer goods; retail	COO × 1
	Location: London, UK	BizPlus program manager[a]
	No. of employees: 12	BizPlus account manager × 2
Llama	Application: Business process management	CEO × 4
	Vertical: Technology; social sector	COO × 1
	Location: Tampa, Florida, USA	BizPlus program manager[a]
	No. of employees: 18	BizPlus account manager × 2
Koala	Application: Project management software	CEO × 4
	Vertical: Technology; media	Business development manager × 1
	Location: Paris, France	BizPlus program manager[a]
	No. of employees: 14	BizPlus account manager × 2
Alpha	Application: Business intelligence	CEO × 3
	Vertical: Financial services; consumer	COO × 1
	Location: New York, USA	BizPlus program manager[a]
	No. of employees: 12	BizPlus account manager ×2
Beta	Application: Business process management	CEO × 3
	Vertical: Media; technology	CTO × 1
	Location: Toronto, Canada	COO × 1
	No. of employees: 11	BizPlus program manager[a]
		BizPlus account manager × 2

[a]In total, the BizPlus program manager was interviewed five times and the various cases were discussed.

3.2 | Data sources

Data was collected through multiple sources (Denzin, 1978) including observation, archival documents, and semistructured interviews. The primary source of data collection was the interviews, which lasted between 30 and 120 min, each yielding between 10 and 15 pages of single-spaced transcribed text. Interviews commenced while the relationship was ongoing and involved both sides of the dyads. Each startup CEO was interviewed three times during the 12-month period (beginning, mid-point, and end) and again a few months later. In addition, one other top

manager from each startup was interviewed at least once. For Gorilla, the BizPlus program manager was interviewed five times—before the start of the 12-month period, three times during the 12-month period, and once more a few months later to obtain his final reflections. In addition, all of the account managers were interviewed at least twice, early on in the relationship and at the end. At a partner conference, five business unit managers of Gorilla were interviewed as well.[6] In total, over 60 interviews were conducted with the case-firms' entrepreneurs and other top managers, Gorilla managers, as well as industry experts.

To limit bias (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), in addition to the use of multiple informants, our interview data were augmented with observational and archival data. The first author attended a summit to which all the startups were invited early on in their engagement with Gorilla, which provided a good opportunity to conduct interviews. The same coauthor observed a partner conference at which some of the BizPlus ventures were invited to have a booth to gain visibility among potential distributors, who were also aligned with Gorilla and could assist with their go-to-market strategy. Additionally, we examined extensive archival data on an ongoing basis, mainly in the form of media coverage. This included YouTube videos and other social media messages posted by the startups, the corporation (Gorilla), as well as independent media outlets. We collected over 150 additional materials, including online media reports about the actors in the partnerships and artifacts from meetings such as flipcharts, PowerPoint presentations, and agendas.

3.3 | Data analysis

As is typical of case-study research, the analysis began during the interview stage as we started to make sense of the insights offered by the informants. Following established protocols, a case history was built for each partnership on an ongoing basis. Once all the data had been collected, cases were analyzed individually. Subsequently, systematic cross-case comparisons were conducted. Other steps were taken to ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the data, including the use of a theory-led interview guide, development of a retrievable case study database, verification by respondents of case-study write-ups, and "member checks" with key informants in the form of follow-up conversations. There was strong consistency between our accounts and their views.

The questions put to informants were of an open-ended nature in order to elicit an account of the partnership as it unfolded. The issue of interest was: With minimal variance at the outset, did variance occur after commencement, and if so, why? We gauged the level of attention received by startups by looking for convergence in two sets of cues: perceptions of the startup informants as expressed in their observations (e.g., "We felt we were getting traction" or "We were not one of their favorites") and evidence of "special" support (or lack thereof) from Gorilla that was not common to all BizPlus participants (e.g., being featured in a Gorilla-produced promotional video or given visibility at an industry event). Another broad characteristic we looked for as our analysis unfolded was whether the startup's actions were oriented towards a priority for Gorilla rather than for itself, with respect to common objectives such as market opportunities, promotional activity, and community building. By definition, such actions would entail redeploying time and effort away from the startup's other activities or priorities.

Our approach to the analysis of the qualitative data represents iterative theory development as we cycled back and forth between theory and the data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Langley, 1999; Orton, 1997) and as interview transcripts and notes were coded. To illustrate how we iterated between theory and data, when we realized that Joseph and Wilson's (2018) conceptual distinction between the nature of corporate and divisional managers' attention could be relevant to our analysis, we went back to our interview transcripts and coded for this. Based on our assessments of the correspondence between the data and theory, higher-order codes were aggregated from our initial codes until we arrived at broad constructs; that is, we proceeded from open coding to axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The concepts that emerged from the data were organized and ordered through a process of aggregation and abstraction:

we developed theoretical ideas, went back to the literature, then returned to our ideas and refined them in a cyclical fashion. Techniques such as constant comparison helped to not only refine our interpretation but increase confidence in our analysis. While recognizing that our interpretation is simply one of many possible perspectives, we sought to retain analytical focus in terms of theory.

While multiple case studies provide the basis for variance theorizing, different outcomes among the ventures studied were observed through the unfolding of their respective partnerships with the corporation. To that extent, our approach combines elements of variance and process theorizing, although the accent is on the former. Such an approach is not unlike studies such as Hallen and Eisenhardt (2012), and is consistent with that taken by Ozcan and Eisenhardt (2009) in which the latter describes: "We began with five firms with matched characteristics at a particular point in time, and then we observed what happened over time. Some died, some did well, and some were in the middle" (Gehman et al., 2018: 288). Here, as advocated by Eisenhardt, a processual aspect was inevitable given that "the analysis begins with a longitudinal history of each case or maybe cases within cases. We then do cross-case pattern recognition" (Gehman et al., 2018: 288). To re-state the essential point, in studying the process, our focus was on variance across the eight firms.

4 | THE PARTNER PROGRAM AND CASES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

4.1 | Overview of the BizPlus partner program

As mentioned, the program was time-bound, the principal benefit being go-to-market activity. The BizPlus program manager envisaged the 12-month partnering journey to entail two broad stages (with no precise midpoint): (1) an initial period of *technology enablement* primarily involving the startup engagement team (the BizPlus account managers under a common program manager) who would work with technical teams, and (2) a subsequent period of *commercial engagement* to develop and execute a go-to-market plan through links forged with business units. He observed:

> "My sense is that it will take some time for the account manager to get to know the technical needs of the startup and support [the startup] through enhancements in tools made available, testing services, cloud credits, what not...and then we will be able get into the more commercial stuff by linking them to business units, and the goal will be to get some meaningful go-to-market strategy done, or at least get it off the ground, by the end of the program."

Most startups made the transition from the first to the second stage approximately midway through the 12 months (see Table 2). Furthermore, there were a couple of clear markers about halfway through each 6-month period: a BizPlus summit for participating startups and Gorilla's worldwide partner conference (WPC). The first author observed both events.

Whereas the first stage was focused on confirming the startup's potential as a Gorilla partner by the BizPlus team, in the second stage the focus shifted to helping realize this potential through, in the words of the program manager, "not just interfacing, but also navigating Gorilla...a huge problem for startups...the account managers have at least one thorough call per month with their startups—including saying no to proposals rather than leaving them hanging". He emphasized how vital this shift was to working with BUs. For their part, the startups participating in BizPlus seemed to expect such boundary-spanning navigation. As one entrepreneur stated, an important role of the BizPlus team was "helping us build connections to the commercial teams since ultimately it is they we need to do business with...to help us move from startup to proper business".

TABLE 2 Timeline of the BizPlus program.

	First stage (6 months)		Second stage (6 months)	
	3 months	3 months	3 months	3 months
Hares	Signals that got attention; got showcased at the Summit	In effect, "fast tracked" in terms of tech enablement	Aggressively pitching to BUs; got unexpectedly cool response	Failed to make progress towards go-to-market goals
Tortoises	Absence of signals; a bit anonymous at the Summit	Steady but unspectacular progress in tech enablement	Reached out to BUs; sought to understand their (BUs') interests	Made tangible progress towards go-to-market goals
Nonstarters	Absence of signals; a bit intimidated at the Summit	Very little engagement	Inactive or unable to engage with BUs	Dropped out
	BizPlus Startup Summit (halfway through the first stage)		Worldwide Partner Conference (halfway through the second stage)	

Note: This is an approximation of the pattern for most BizPlus startup participants.

However, despite support from a BizPlus account manager being available to each of the 100 startups, some managed to gain more traction within Gorilla early in the relationship than others. This was unsurprising to the program manager, who observed:

> *At the outset, no one's necessarily dancing with the gorilla...what's interesting is how these people [the startups] come in and out of the ecosystem, how they move up the pecking order, to the point where they might dance with the gorilla...the level of professional maturity is variable; you know, some will get it, some won't...there's only a few that ultimately dance with the gorilla.*

Importantly, however, even though the above might be considered only normal, which of the startups ultimately became the "dancers" could not be predicted a priori by the program manager or his team of account managers at the outset.

4.2 | Overview of the cases: Hares, tortoises, and nonstarters

Three of the eight cases—dubbed "hares"—got off to a quick start in terms of attracting the BizPlus managers' attention but did not achieve satisfactory outcomes. Three—dubbed "tortoises"—got off to a slow start in that they did not have much traction with the BizPlus managers at the beginning but eventually achieved satisfactory outcomes (albeit with varying degrees of success). Two were "nonstarters" who had slow starts but never recovered and voluntarily left before the 12-month period ended.[7] Thus, slow starts had successful and unsuccessful outcomes. Most of our analysis focuses on the three hares and three tortoises.

5 | ATTENTION DYNAMICS IN ASYMMETRIC COLLABORATIVE SETTINGS

Since the attentional resources of the corporation were distributed across the various startup members of the BizPlus program, and since the shifting allocation of its attention shaped the evolution and outcome of its interactions with

TABLE 3　Illustrative quotes: Differences in corporate and divisional managers' schema.

Corporate manager quotes	Divisional manager quotes[a]	Contrasting emphases
"We want [to partner with] high potential startups that are aligned with us [Gorilla] both strategically and tactically…we want to create success stories" (Program manager)	"The solution needs to be aligned, meaning complementary, not competing with something we have… then startups can access our sales cycle and get what they really want – sales" (Business Software BU manager)	Both were interested in alignment, but the former emphasized "success stories" and the latter sales outcomes
"We want to see startup companies do interesting things on our platform technologies…when startups succeed with us then we will be able to attract more and more high-quality startup partners" (Greyhound_AM)	"The key thing is that the partner needs to focus on – ideally specialize in – the vertical that our division is selling to on the technology we are responsible for" (Cloud platform BU manager)	The former emphasized "interesting things" (again stories, while the latter's focus was on "selling")
"It is important for the startup to understand the opportunity, the white space it has. All the while I am asking myself: Does this startup have potential? Will it be around for two years at least? Is it aligned with Gorilla?" (Cheetah_AM)	"We are looking for solutions that make sense to our customers…When we see a startup with a product built on our technology that's getting popular but needs to scale up – that's our sweet spot, right there" (Offline retail BU manager)	The former emphasized opportunity over the next couple of years, while the latter had a greater sense of urgency (finding customer solutions)
"We are looking for the most innovative startups using our tools who will become our major partners down the road" (Koala_AM)	"Sometimes there is pressure from corp to engage with a certain partner…but we have got to be pragmatic – if the value proposition is right then we are happy to co-sell with you" (Online marketplace BU manager)	The former had a longer timeline ("down the road") while the latter sought to be "pragmatic" (co-selling more immediately)
"This is about expanding our partner system to explicitly include startups that will feel like valued and productive members of the ecosystem…and will add fresh ideas to help us stay at the cutting edge" (Beta_AM)	"We expect partners to change direction if needed and be better aligned with us…then we may have some joint sales wins and help the partner to go much faster than they would've on their own" (Emerging business BU manager)	The former's emphasis was on a longer-term strategy of ecosystem building; the latter sought quicker joint sales
An illustrative quote – schema-consistent stimuli from hares: "We were the poster child for BizPlus… it was clear they liked what they saw in our traction with VCs…and [our] use of their technology stack…we got a lot of visibility at events like the Summit" (Cheetah CEO)	An illustrative quote – schema-consistent stimuli from tortoises: "We went out of our way to deliver a version of our solution that was compatible with Gorilla's new cloud initiative…this was their new important agenda and gave it a go to try to get a win-win [outcome]" (Koala CEO)	Overall, the emphasis vis-à-vis corporate managers was on having good stories to tell while for the divisional managers it was on driving short-term sales. While not incompatible, the emphasis was different

[a]Five divisional managers were interviewed during the partner conference. They had been invited to network with BizPlus startup members by the Program Manager as their BUs were potential allies in terms of go-to-market commercial engagement. These managers understood the BizPlus initiative and, as we learned from the Program Manager, became familiar with some of the key actors in the sample we studied.

them, it was important that the startups gained attention—from corporate (BizPlus) managers initially, and divisional (BU) managers subsequently. Our interviews indicated a broad convergence between both sets of managers regarding the desirability of overall alignment on the part of the startup with Gorilla's strategy, yet we detected a noticeable

difference: whereas the corporate managers were focused on the schema of finding "good stories" of interesting startup partners, which in turn would help attract high-quality startups in the future (external audience) and establish the utility and legitimacy of engaging with startups (internal audience), the divisional managers focused on what startups could add to their sales agenda in the here and now.[8] Table 3 provides quotes that illustrate this difference.

5.1 | Attracting attention from corporate managers

5.1.1 | Showcaseability: The first rule of the game

Attention being a quasi-zero-sum game, the early period was crucial in that the startup's entrepreneur and top managers were getting to know the corporate program manager and his team of account managers. Our cases suggest that attracting attention from Gorilla was a critical issue for startups at the initial stage, with "showcaseability"— perceived promise stemming from endorsements from external parties (such as venture capitalists [VCs] or industry associations)—being the defining criterion. Despite the broadly uniform starting conditions of the participants following the demanding selection process, during the early months three of the startups in our sample—dubbed "Cheetah," "Greyhound," and "Stallion"—gained more attention from the corporate managers than the others, as seen in Table 4, indicating that attentional resources were scarce, finite, relative, and heterogeneously distributed.

5.1.2 | Hares

Cheetah provides a particularly good illustration of high levels of initial attention. It had managed to attract interest from a prestigious VC in San Francisco and shared this news with its account manager. The signal of VC interest resonated with Gorilla since it constituted an external endorsement of the startup's perceived promise. A visible manifestation of the attention from Gorilla was apparent from the time devoted to the entrepreneur not only by the program manager and his team but also a top executive. The attention showered on Cheetah was clearly visible at the BizPlus Summit,[9] an event bringing together all the startups about 3 months into the program. The founding entrepreneur was invited to make a presentation at the opening plenary session and featured prominently in the opening presentation by the program manager. The startup was also mentioned in media interviews by the corporation's account manager and a "microdocumentary" (brief video profile) was funded by BizPlus. Cheetah's CEO commented at the time:

> The [BizPlus] team was terrific in giving us a lot of support and visibility in the early days...we got a lot of exposure in the media, and they made it a point to highlight us...The main benefit for us was greater credibility with potential customers and investors... I guess it's in their [Gorilla's] interest to promote us...basically they are saying "These guys have our seal of approval, these guys have our support, we think they are great."

Greyhound, another hare, had successfully participated in a demo day that was part of a startup week organized by an angel investor. The positive reviews of its product demo, developed using Gorilla's technology, were a signal of its potential to be showcased as a producer of a utility-enhancing application. The account manager stated: "We thought it was a cool company and wanted to help them succeed big." The program manager's view was closely aligned with that of the account manager.[10] The attention translated into Greyhound being featured prominently at an industry event that was pertinent to the startup, with all expenses borne by Gorilla. Later, at the BizPlus Summit, Greyhound was mentioned in the program manager's opening presentation and, like Cheetah, featured in a video about the partner program on YouTube and other social media outlets. Greyhound's CEO observed:

TABLE 4 Indicative quotes: Attention vis-à-vis corporate managers.

	Level of showcaseability	Attention from corporate managers	Indicative quotes
Cheetah (Hare)	High BizPlus managers were impressed by interest from a Silicon Valley VC	High Gained a lot of visibility the at BizPlus Summit Rapid access to new software tools from Gorilla	CEO: "We felt he [the BizPlus manager] and his team were taking us seriously…they were promoting us at events and to VCs in the Bay area" PM: "We were enthusiastic about Cheetah…it was an excellent test case for our collaborative technologies…even my boss helped them out with connections in the Valley; this sort of thing really helps" AM: "When our UK colleague did an interview with a leading newspaper there about BizPlus, this was the partner she mentioned…it was seen as a rising star"
Greyhound (Hare)	High BizPlus managers were impressed by traction for demo at an event organized by a startup enabler	High Gained a lot of visibility at an industry event and the Summit Rapid access to new software tools from Gorilla	CEO: "We were excited at the support and mentoring from the BizPlus manager and the account manager" PM: "Greyhound made a good impression on me…its use of our technology was cool…it wasn't a Valley startup, but it thought and behaved like one. I saw possibilities [for traction in the market] …" AM: "I was very happy to mentor this team and wanted to help Greyhound achieve its potential"
Stallion (Hare)	High BizPlus managers were impressed by a mobile industry award won by Stallion	High Gained visibility at VC summit on sidelines of BizPlus Summit Given grant to accelerate product version 2.0	CEO: "We were given access to Gorilla's core technology and helped with refining our product to be compatible with their ecosystem" PM: "Stallion was an exciting prospect…the CEO and CTO exuded a lot of enthusiasm to work with us…we quickly brought them in front of VCs…there was promise there" AM: "I think they potentially filled a gap in the market…the entrepreneur was betting the farm on our ecosystem"
Panda (Tortoise)	Low No external endorsement (e.g., VC interest or industry award) that led to them standing out in any way	Low Felt initial couple of conversations with account manager were helpful and positive but no memorable moments Same access to cloud credits as other BizPlus participants	CEO: "We were really pleased to be in the BizPlus program, but we found it's not easy to stand out…" PM: "These guys have potential, clearly, otherwise they would not have made the program…but has Panda made a splash? Not quite…" AM: "I was keen to help them…but it wasn't one of the ones I could immediately see doing really well in the program, to be honest"

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	Level of showcaseability	Attention from corporate managers	Indicative quotes
Llama (Tortoise)	Low No external endorsement (e.g., VC interest or industry award) that led to them standing out in any way	Low Initial interactions pleasant but a bit anonymous at the Summit Steady but unspectacular progress in tech enablement	CEO: "We were already committed to the Gorilla platform, [with all our back end], so the BizPlus program seemed to fit well with us…but then there wasn't too much engagement" PM: "The entrepreneur is technically sound…[and] it's fair to say that they are clearly enthusiastic about being on our stack [i.e., using our platform technology]…but while they have got the technology side done, there's not much to show for the market side of things" AM: "I wasn't exactly worried for Llama but I could tell after the first three months that a bit of patience might be needed to build momentum [for a go-to-market strategy]…it's not happening yet"
Koala (Tortoise)	Low No external endorsement (e.g., VC interest or industry award) that led to them standing out in any way	Low Initial interactions pleasant but a bit anonymous at the Summit Steady but unspectacular progress in tech enablement	CEO: "We were excited to be part of BizPlus…as a European startup it was potentially a great opportunity for us to partner with Gorilla in the US market… but initially we were not one of the favored ones…" PM: "In the beginning we were not quite sure how to help them…the technology is fine, and they leverage our XYZ [name withheld] platform…so that's good, but this is not one of the standout European startups…" AM: "For me, the role model for these guys should be Cheetah…they have made a splash with our team in the US, and we have actively helped them get contacts in the Bay Area"
Alpha (Nonstarter)	Low Not much by way of signals; seemed a bit intimidated at the Summit	Very Low A little bit of engagement with some light testing of software with one of Gorilla's cloud team	CEO: "We were intimidated…" PM: "It seemed a like a big deal for them to be on the program…almost overwhelming perhaps" AM: "They are nice… recommended by the Canadian subsidiary…dealing with the US seems new to them"
Beta (Nonstarter)	Low Not much by way of signals; seemed a bit lost at the Summit	Very Low Very little engagement; no clear direction seemed to have emerged	CEO: "We are a bit nervous…" PM: "This could be interesting…but it's a new experience clearly…" AM: "Hmmm…it's been a quiet start…"

Abbreviations: AM, Account manager; CEO, Startup CEO; PM, Program manager; VC, venture capitalist.

> *Gorilla is trying really hard to work with startups. I have a lot of respect for these guys [the BizPlus team].*
> *…They have been very good to us. They provide much more than free software; they mentor us actively.*

Having won an award at a well-known mobile internet industry event, Stallion attracted corporate managers' attention. It was given visibility at the BizPlus Summit, specifically at a cocktail reception attended by VCs, as well as being featured in a video. Thereafter, the BizPlus program manager secured a small grant from an internal technical budget for product development to further develop the mobile version of Stallion's solution using more of Gorilla's technologies. He commented, "This startup caught our eye by being recognized at an industry event and we wanted to help accelerate their innovation processes…" Reflecting this, Stallion's CEO noted:

> *I must admit that Gorilla gave us a lot of tangible support in the beginning to refine our software product.*
> *We had the feeling we were in the right place at the right time…I am optimistic we can find ways to work*
> *with the business units, including automotive infotainment and gaming.*

5.1.3 | Tortoises

In contrast, while there was nothing particularly amiss in their relationship, some startups witnessed visibly low levels of attention from Gorilla's corporate managers in the early period. "Panda" and "Llama" had a steady but unspectacular start. There were no mishaps or missteps, just an absence of signals that would have reflected an obvious spark of interest from Gorilla. The two attended the BizPlus Summit in California as "regular" attendees, with no notable visibility. Panda's CEO commented: "We were really pleased to be in the BizPlus program, but we found it's not easy to stand out…" As for Llama, while noting that "not a lot has been happening during the first few months…", its CEO added, "I think you get out of things what you put in, so we're working on figuring out some opportunities we can make happen in the Gorilla ecosystem."

"Koala" was relatively anonymous at the BizPlus Summit, where the paucity of attention it received relative to the hares became more evident. Koala's CEO admitted to being disappointed:

> *We had to work hard to get noticed within BizPlus…initially we were not one of the favored ones…Our reg-*
> *ular interactions were fine…but we could tell that our contact at Gorilla didn't seem super excited…We*
> *were having a good working relationship, our technical team went over and talked to some people at*
> *Gorilla, so that was good…and we think our product is much stronger as a result…but otherwise it was dif-*
> *ficult to get them [Gorilla] to do anything to help us commercially or do business in the US…I felt I had no*
> *good reason to be at the BizPlus Summit.*

The program manager corroborated that Koala was not among those who stood out early on.

5.1.4 | Nonstarters

Finally, like Koala, Panda, and Llama, the remaining two startups in our study—"Alpha" and "Beta"—also had a low profile in the initial stages, including at the BizPlus Summit. Both nonstarters seemed a bit overwhelmed and out of their depth. Alpha's CTO commented, "Partnering with a large corporation like Gorilla is a new experience…it can be a bit intimidating even." The account manager had a similar perception: "They are nice guys but somewhat lacking in oomph." Beta's CEO admitted:

We are a bit nervous being part of this...don't get me wrong, Gorilla has been good to us and we're honored to be part of this, but these guys [Gorilla] are a bit pushy by nature and we're not used to dealing with that.

5.2 | Attracting attention from divisional managers

5.2.1 | Commitment: The second rule of the game

To achieve the go-to-market objective, the startups had to transition from interacting purely with the BizPlus startup engagement team to engage more substantively with the relevant BUs. Our findings suggest that gaining attention from divisional (BU) managers entailed a different rule of the game, namely commitment to the partnership's objectives. Here, we found a reversal in the situation: the hares struggled to gain attention from the divisional managers, whereas the tortoises were successful. In the case of the tortoises, although (or perhaps because) they were disappointed by the absence of early signals of showcaseability, they pursued a different avenue to gain attention from Gorilla. Their actions were partner-oriented in that they targeted areas of activity that were tied to and synchronized with Gorilla's priorities, more specifically that of the divisional managers. As seen in Table 5 and below, examples of these actions included (1) adopting a new channel of the partner, (2) embracing a new platform technology variant, (3) finding and solving a pain-point of the partner, (4) supporting the partner's technology evangelization efforts, (5) volunteering to publicize the partner program, and (6) engaging in startup community-building activities. In contrast, the "hares" appear not to have (explicitly) aligned with Gorilla's agenda, in particular with respect to the priorities of the divisional managers.[11]

5.2.2 | Hares

Cheetah's CEO started reaching out aggressively to relevant BUs, anticipating a warm reception. While the major thrust of its objective of co-selling with Gorilla was seen as reasonable, its tone and actions came to be viewed by the BUs as overly self-absorbed. A notable example related to CODEX, Gorilla's new cloud-based offering and a top priority. When brought to the attention of the startup, who was told that it was well placed to be an early partner with respect to this major new initiative, Cheetah came across as being reluctant to cooperate. Not only did it decline to cooperate in the manner suggested, it indicated that it might introduce features that would in fact compete with some of those of CODEX. The notion that there might be some overlap between Gorilla's offering and that of the startups was no cause for alarm to Gorilla's corporate managers; at least three informants said they expected some level of "coopetition" in the ecosystem and saw that as healthy. However, in Cheetah's case, the startup was seen as overreaching itself, particularly given the strong support that it had received from Gorilla thus far, which in turn impacted Gorilla's stance. Cheetah's CTO perceived that Gorilla's product technology teams had begun to withhold information about their future plans:

Trying to interact with members of the product team was proving impossible...the startup team was always terrific but with the actual commercial and product teams it was very frustrating...you take three steps forward, two steps back.

Greyhound also found that it was not gaining the attention from the BUs that it had expected, based on its positive experience of the BizPlus program thus far. Greyhound's CEO was surprised at the cooler-than-anticipated reception and grumbled that Gorilla's BUs gave them no special treatment when approached about the prospect of collaborating. For example, when approaching the division focused on gaming, they were dealt with in a cursory manner: "We

TABLE 5 Indicative quotes: Attention vis-à-vis divisional managers.

	Level of commitment	Attention from divisional managers	Indicative quotes
Cheetah (Hare)	Low Pitched to BU teams, but testy interactions. Declined to support CODEX	Low Frustrated and interactions at the partner conference were frosty; did not have a go-to-market outcome	CEO: "It was hard going with the folks running ABC [the specific technology of Gorilla that we were using]…I felt we were not being treated with respect" PM: "They were our poster child…and I think they knew it too…but it's also clear they did not hit it off with the product team…and then things turned sour" AM: "These guys had a lot going for them…but it still takes some doing to get to a go-to-market plan and somehow they did not get down to it"
Greyhound (Hare)	Low Pitched to BU teams in particular the gaming division; unhappy with cool response	Low Cordial relations continued but ultimately frustrated and disappointed; did not have a go-to-market outcome	CEO: "The business managers we met did not seem excited to talk to us…The startup [BizPlus] team was great, but not so much the guys [we spoke to] later on…" PM: "We tried to help Greyhound, I can say with a clear conscience that we really did… we gave them a lot of visibility…but they did not go out of their way to engage within our ecosystem" AM: "Greyhound took a lot of my time…no regrets…I wish M [the CEO's name] well… he's a good guy who needs a lot of TLC [tender loving care]…when you are dealing with a big corporate it works like that only up to a point"
Stallion (Hare)	Low Pitched to multiple BU teams including automotive; but got a lukewarm response	Somewhat low Remained a fairly engaged participant but no envisaged go-to-market outcome outside narrow mobile telephony focus	CEO: "It was really disappointing…we did not get the sort of deep engagement I was expecting from some of the product teams" PM: "In the end, there was no clear hook that got any of our BUs working closely with them…we could not see it and maybe they did not show us" AM: "I would not say that nothing happened… but it was sort of modest…they kept waiting for something [big] to happen but it never did"
Panda (Tortoise)	High Sought to engage with BUs via community events; dialog with consumer goods BU began	Somewhat high Included in the independent software vendor program with specific go-to-market routes that could be readily tapped	CEO: "We eventually connected with sales managers who got us into their go-to-market activities…it created a pathway to expanding our client base" PM: "Panda was able to demonstrate that its offering was a good complement for our consumer division business…and this justified upgrading them to the regular ISV partner ecosystem which will help them access [our] sales cycle and leverage customer wins" AM: "Panda ended up in a good place…the CEO showed maturity and was able to be taken seriously"

TABLE 5 (Continued)

	Level of commitment	Attention from divisional managers	Indicative quotes
Llama (Tortoise)	High Reached out to BUs; sought to understand their interests. Found scope to engage with cloud BU	High Made tangible progress towards go-to-market goals by finalizing launch strategy in the US market with the retail BU	CEO: "We figured we could use this one-on-one relationship with BizPlus to create more interaction to include ourselves in Gorilla's field sales...it's useful when engaging with other Gorilla employees in other business units to say, 'Hey, we are part of this program'" PM: "The entrepreneur is a very bright guy, and...eventually after he kept plugging away at showing his commitment to our ecosystem, he was able to get our [retail] division interested to play ball..." AM: "He was thoroughly proactive from start to finish...as I would have expected...and it paid off"
Koala (Tortoise)	High Reached out to BUs; committed to CODEX initiative. Invited to join startup booth at partner conference	High Having been showcased at partner conference was able to sign up first resellers as its go-to-market strategy in United States	CEO: "I had to work hard to understand the agenda of the Gorilla execs in America. Once we saw an opportunity to contribute to the success of their online marketplace, we moved fast..." PM: "Once these guys caught sight of a way to make an impact, they gave it their all... once they delivered on the [cloud] marketplace, then we had a story to tell within our partner network...and US resellers got interested to partner with them" AM: "Compared to the slow start that Koala had, it is very satisfying for everyone involved that they are building a sales pipeline in the US...I hope they build on this and grow big"
Alpha (Nonstarter)	Negligible Feeble attempts at a couple of conversations with BUs; elicited virtually no interest to engage	Negligible Decided there was little point in continuing beyond the partner conference	PM: "We did not get it right with all our startups...I guess this was one of them. Maybe it was a bit premature...I guess I did not expect more from them"
Beta (Nonstarter)	Negligible Unable to engage with BUs. Voluntarily dropped out in the eighth month	Negligible Decided there was little point in continuing beyond the partner conference	PM: "With hindsight maybe Beta wasn't the best fit for our ecosystem and the way we can add value to startups...not savvy enough maybe...they could have kept going [in the BizPlus program] for a bit longer"

Note: Our assessment of the divisional managers' attention was largely based on the startups' perceptions and those of the PM/AMs.

Abbreviations: AM, Account manager; BU, business unit; CEO, Startup CEO; PM, Program manager.

finally got introduced to the gaming division. Their response? 'Here's a kit, go build a game.' They showed us no respect..." The CEO further complained that "they [Gorilla's BU] were viewing their interactions with businesses based upon their goals." Unlike the BizPlus team, the divisional managers he encountered did not demonstrate a keenness to engage, which the CEO attributed to a lack of agility: "Gorilla is an old-school company that is used to

doing billions and billions of dollars in sales...BizPlus is trying really hard, but we startups run at a much faster pace than big corporations like Gorilla do." The BizPlus manager acknowledged, "Sometimes, he [Greyhound's entrepreneur] can come across as 'high maintenance'...the BizPlus startups have to navigate this vast ocean [Gorilla] with care...we are here to help them to open the right doors, but ultimately they have to strike deals." In essence, the above indicates that at the heart of Greyhound's disappointment was the disconnect experienced between the positive attention from the corporate (BizPlus) managers and the lukewarm reception from the divisional (BU) managers.

Stallion's CEO expressed similar sentiments. While less vehemently negative, he was taken aback by the somewhat indifferent reaction of the BUs to his aggressive overtures. Despite a reasonable amount of attention early on, including being showcased at the BizPlus Summit, the startup's subsequent traction with divisional managers fell short of expectations. Having been confident of gaining access to divisions dealing with mobile telephony and in-car entertainment applications, there was a sense of no longer receiving special treatment when it engaged in additional interactions with various divisional managers: "It's been a bit disappointing... I viewed the BizPlus program as a gateway to cooperate with various BUs but despite our excitement to be on the program...I don't know why but we haven't been moving fast enough...they [a specific BU] haven't been very responsive... it felt like there was an internal disconnect – we were super jazzed to get into the BizPlus program, but apart from some collaboration with one division we were unable to connect elsewhere in Gorilla."

The one exception was in mobile telephony where there was some remaining traction as a carryover from a product development grant that the BizPlus manager had made available. "There is no doubt that the BizPlus team supported us...M [the BizPlus Program Manager] made the case for us to get resources to refine our product and make it even more compatible with Gorilla's smartphone division...We launched a new version [of our solution] which got good exposure through BizPlus and initial support from one division...that was cool". While Stallion remained an active participant in BizPlus, the scope of its activity was confined to mobile telephony. Though its participation was nontrivial, the general sentiment was one of being let down. The BizPlus manager commented that the startup "probably feels that they ended the program less strongly than they began...it got some value-added but not as much as it had hoped."

In short, what Cheetah, Greyhound, and Stallion had in common was a sense of receiving considerable attention from the BizPlus team early on, but struggling to sustain the momentum by gaining attention from Gorilla's divisional managers.

5.2.3 | Tortoises

Despite its earlier slow start, Panda attracted attention from a key manager running the BU for the consumer goods industry. Panda's CEO proactively attended Gorilla's partner ecosystem events—even being willing to make presentations outside his comfort zone: "Initially we were sort of waiting to be told what to do, but once I realized that it really was up to me to make something of this opportunity [to be in the BizPlus program], I started actively tapping into the partner event circuit to try and put ourselves out there..." At one event, the entrepreneur made a brief pitch presentation about its solution, describing how: "I met a guy called TC, who is the head of the Consumer Goods Group in Gorilla...So we did our pitch and he really loves what we're doing...Now we're partnering with a company that he really likes, so we've kind of gone full circle and are finally feeling like we have some traction with Gorilla, ultimately thanks to BizPlus." Overall, the startup's efforts to engage elicited corporate appreciation as well as opened up the possibility to broaden and sustain its dialog, ultimately resulting in it being nominated to become part of Gorilla's ISV program.

As for Llama, although it gained little attention from the BizPlus managers at the outset, its CEO undertook voluntary efforts to be a good citizen of the ecosystem, which did not go unnoticed and helped put it firmly on the radar of its corporate account manager. A BizPlus account manager observed: "[He] has done videos and podcasts about Gorilla's cloud technologies. He speaks at a bunch of events. Working with him is easy. I do not

need to find places for him to fit in—he just does." For his part, the CEO expressed the view that it was up to him to leverage the BizPlus opportunity and widen his connections within Gorilla: "We looked at BizPlus as a key-pass that opens up more doors for more conversations to develop more relationships. We decided to see what areas we could spark interest in…We now have this one-on-one relationship opportunity, it's still completely up to us to utilize that and to build on that."

After exploring various avenues, Llama gained traction with the sales unit for Gorilla's cloud computing platform and managed to attract attention from the head of sales for the Americas in the BU focusing on that vertical. As the CEO described: "I was able to set up a meeting with the Director of Sales of the Americas for XYZ [Gorilla's core cloud computing technology]…And we sat down and let the folks in his sales group know about our solution and roadmap…and we came up with a kind of game plan on how to be included as a sales use case study."

Koala's CEO continued dialoguing with Gorilla's startup engagement team in the hope of finding a way to bounce back from its initially tepid start and get connected to Gorilla's channel team and partners in the United States. In one conversation, the account manager mentioned the CODEX project, which had a new online marketplace associated with it. Partnering on this initiative did not quite fit with Koala's immediate plans for its flagship product, for which it was seeking a go-to-market strategy in the US through BizPlus. However, unlike Cheetah's CEO, Koala's CEO saw an opportunity and made a calculated decision to divert resources to develop a version of its product that would be suitable for the CODEX marketplace. He was clear that this was more of a priority for Gorilla rather than for him, and that he was making a deliberate choice to serve the former's agenda rather than his own:

> I had to work hard to understand the agenda of the Gorilla execs in America. Once we saw an opportunity to contribute to the success of their online marketplace, we moved fast…For Gorilla, the goal was CODEX; for me, it was getting to America… If we want to be part of the huge locomotive, part of the rocket that Gorilla is firing—and Gorilla is firing the CODEX rocket right now—we had to act now…I'm not sure Gorilla would have been interested in us otherwise.

As the CEO observed, the resource diversion involved was nontrivial:

> To be honest, it was really a risky move to stop everything and invest resources in this solution because we were not sure how much revenue it would generate or whether it would do well.

Yet he showed a commitment to proceed, as was corroborated by the Koala's account manager at Gorilla:

> He [the Koala CEO] was very convincing. The team seemed technically very strong…And the timing worked out in terms of technical alignment with our fastest growing platform technology [on which Koala's product was built] and CODEX [the new online marketplace]…the gates were open, and he took the opportunity.

The program manager validated this:

> In the beginning we couldn't see exactly how to help these guys to be a big success…Once they got an opportunity they ran with the ball; we got to know them better through their work on the online marketplace…when we got them the opportunity to be showcased at WPC [worldwide partner conference] they were proactive.

In the event, Koala's offering in the CODEX marketplace had a successful debut, becoming one of the top five downloaded products. Aligning itself with Gorilla through CODEX paved the way for Koala to gain greater visibility from the partner program. The increase in attention received from Gorilla was palpable:

> *Finally we got a breakthrough when we started showing interest in CODEX…Ideally we would have done something like this next year but we did it because it was strategically important for Gorilla…and then our account manager in Gorilla also became more responsive…she could, like, identify what I need to do, whom I needed to contact, what I need to provide…she made sure we didn't miss a deadline (Koala CEO).*

In sum, the three tortoises pivoted to align their initiatives with the agendas of their divisional manager counterparts, even prioritizing this over their own, thereby attracting attention from divisional managers. This was in contrast to the three hares, whose attention from BizPlus managers did not automatically translate into attention from divisional (BU) managers.

5.2.4 | Nonstarters

As for the nonstarters, the account managers of both Alpha and Beta indicated that they had tried but failed to help these startups build momentum. For these startups, the writing was on the wall—they knew the partnership was unlikely to deliver the intended outcome. Beta's CEO noted: "Honestly, we are still trying to figure out our model and I don't think we'll be extending this partnership much [beyond the startup engagement team]." From Gorilla's perspective, there was a point beyond which devoting a lot of time to these startups was deemed unwarranted. The program manager said of one of the nonstarters:

> *I love them to bits, we all do. Great passion and energy. But they haven't nailed their positioning yet, they're still vacillating. They have a bunch of products with no focus—a solution looking for a problem. We have to focus our efforts on the startups we can have a legitimate claim to having helped succeed.*

5.3 | Successful versus nonsuccessful outcomes

In the first stage, we identified showcaseability as the first rule of the game. However, this simply signaled a recognition of potential. In the second stage, we identified demonstration of commitment as the second rule of the game. This was critical to realize the underlying potential and eventually distinguished successful from nonsuccessful outcomes for both the tortoises and hares, with the latter characterized by a diminished scope of opportunities over time and the case of the tortoises characterized by an expanded scope.

5.3.1 | Hares

For Cheetah, which was the most dramatic case, the initial enthusiasm gave way to hostility, the go-to-market strategy with Gorilla failed to crystallize, and friction with the business unit worsened over time. The startup felt that Gorilla's technology team members were unreceptive, while Gorilla managers felt that Cheetah's people behaved arrogantly. In the later stages of the BizPlus program, when Gorilla's annual WPC was held in Los Angeles,[12] for the startups this was a potential opportunity to hold decisive meetings and take a significant step towards finalizing or formalizing a go-to-market strategy. Being one of the early stars in the program, Cheetah did participate despite the earlier friction, but the reception was frosty. Its CTO commented:

> *The Gorilla people were unresponsive… meetings would be arranged, and people would not turn up. It didn't strike me that they wanted to work with a small business like us.*

Things came to a head, as the CTO admitted, when Cheetah announced that it would "go head-to-head with them [Gorilla] on CODEX," even though it continued to build its product on Gorilla's technology platform. It claimed that as an application (rather than a platform technology), it was superior to Gorilla. A cofounder commented, "While the guys in the technology group may be pissed off, we have now positioned Cheetah as a Gorilla competitor." The clearest manifestation of rivalry was a stunt carried out at one of Gorilla's technology conferences where Cheetah hired a marching band to gain publicity. Cheetah was suspended from BizPlus shortly afterwards—the only startup to suffer this fate. The BizPlus program manager commented:

> I can understand if they want to step out of our shadow and shine...Initially when they were being asser-
> tive, I thought "good for them"...but they crossed a line by becoming an explicit competitor. At that point
> I had no choice but to expel them from the program.

Like Cheetah's CEO, Greyhound's CEO was disappointed, even though his reaction was not articulated in as vehement a manner. Although cordial relations persisted between the key individuals on both sides, its interactions with Gorilla were gradually reduced and the partnership eventually became inactive. The CEO commented:

> If you have a small number of people, you can only work on specific tasks, and you're going to focus on the
> ones that have the best, you know, bang for the buck.

Gorilla managers privately commented that Greyhound had been given a lot by way of resources but did not appear very grateful. The program manager observed:

> With these guys we went the extra mile to help them...and I think they do recognize that, but the entrepre-
> neur isn't the easiest guy to work with and despite all our efforts, at the end of the day, they don't seem
> very grateful.

In the case of Stallion, there was disappointment vis-a-vis what had originally been envisaged. The CEO commented that the end result had been "nowhere near what we'd hoped," because they "didn't get traction with other units." Given little engagement with other BUs, the scope for joint activity was limited and the CEO began to focus his efforts primarily on relational maintenance with the startup engagement team.

5.3.2 | Tortoises

Panda's partner-centered actions, which entailed stepping out of its comfort zone, elicited sympathy from Gorilla. This led to an expansion of their dialog whereby, by virtue of becoming part of Gorilla's more advanced ISV partner program, the startup was able to access some (standard) go-to-market strategies such as joint marketing programs, and obtained a new client in this way. A Gorilla account manager affirmed that the startup "has been a willing participant in the community ecosystem...We appreciate their commitment...We have worked with them to help them look for customers. Down the road we want them to expand their potential for more sales engagement opportunities."

In the case of Llama, benefits accrued to the startup through serendipity engendered by partner-centered actions. The various voluntary initiatives and subsequent interaction with a sales director paid off. Specifically, it was able to cultivate ties with Gorilla's retail unit, which led to a collaborative go-to-market project to launch a new version of its offering in several US cities. The CEO announced, "We're looking at a launch where I present at their DC store, and then Houston, Atlanta, and we'll end it in California."

For Koala, which had the most obviously successful go-to-market outcome, partner-centered actions fostered solidarity between the partners. Its trajectory could not have been more different from Cheetah's. Having gained attention from Gorilla's US-based managers, Koala's CEO proactively displayed an interest in being promoted in the US market and a go-to-market strategy began to crystallize, the idea being for Gorilla to help Koala's CEO work with the channels team and meet prospective channel partners in the Gorilla ecosystem. This led to Gorilla selecting Koala as one of the startups to be showcased during its WPC. As Koala's CEO explained:

> After the CODEX solution launch, Gorilla really began to help us big time with our US market goals...they launched a partner recruitment program in the States and included us in it...Some of us BizPlus startups were given a booth at the WPC. A booth is very expensive, and they gave us this opportunity for free...this has helped us define our US strategy and recruit partners to represent us in the US market as distributors and resellers.

As a result of this intervention, Koala signed on its first US-based reseller. In the aftermath of this milestone, Koala's CEO commented, "Now that we got our first US distributor thanks to the support at WPC, I'm hoping to get some momentum in the US market and invest in an office there."

5.3.3 | Nonstarters

Both nonstarters voluntarily withdrew before the partnering program was concluded, and both expressed regret. Alpha's CEO stated: "Maybe we'd go about things differently if we did it all over again...try harder to get on their radar." Beta's CEO stated ruefully: "This was a disappointment...Better luck to us next time."

5.4 | Additional post hoc checks to consider alternative explanations

Before concluding this section, we consider three possible factors, unrelated to attention dynamics, which may be relevant to understanding the varying outcomes of the partnerships studied. First, could the variance in partnering outcomes be explained by startup-level variables, such as their industry focus? Upon reflection, we do not give any credence to this prospect. Given that Gorilla had formidable credentials in all of the industry verticals that were the focus of the selected startups, industry effects are less likely to have been at play. Indeed, as one of the screening criteria, Gorilla admitted only startups engaged in vertical sectors in which it was strong. Moreover, some of the startups in our study—such as Cheetah and Koala—targeted the collaboration space using the same core technology as Gorilla (albeit without directly overlapping), yet had different partnering outcomes.

Second, could the variance in partnering outcomes be explained by a lack of motivation on the part of the startups? Given that all the startups admitted were within the first 3 years of operations—a period when revenue growth is highly valuable—it seems unlikely that they would simply be paying lip service to the BizPlus partnership. They were acutely aware of the benefits that ISVs routinely enjoyed through collaborating with Gorilla. For example, Gorilla told us it had found (and had shared with BizPlus startups) that ISVs working with it had the following effects: (1) increased speed of refining solutions by around 50%, (2) reduced implementation time with clients by ~75%, (3) increased initial deal sizes by up to 400%, and (4) 100% higher year-on-year growth in their first 3 years.[13]

Third, could the variance in partnering outcomes be explained by variance in Gorilla's account managers? Although it might have been ideal to control not only for the BizPlus manager but also the account manager, it was the former's involvement that was crucial; he helped us to identify eight startups that he was working with closely from start to finish. To mitigate potential concerns about account manager heterogeneity, we had follow-up discussions while presenting our findings to the BizPlus team. We found that each account manager experienced variance between hares, tortoises, and nonstarters—the three categories in our sample of eight—in their own mini-portfolios. To illustrate, compare the following quotes from one of the account managers:

> These guys made an impact...good technology, and investors were showing interest...I worked hard to get them budgets to increase their market visibility (Hare).

> It took a while for them to become noticed...But you could see they were committed to supporting our community events...eventually we found synergies with our product teams (Tortoise).

> We talked a lot about how they could migrate to the cloud and work with us. But they were slow in responding, and didn't seem surefooted about their own strategy (Nonstarter).

Since there is no indication that some account managers were effective while others were not, we are not overly concerned about BizPlus team heterogeneity being a plausible factor in our findings.

6 | TOWARDS A MODEL OF ATTENTION DYNAMICS

Unlike startups, large firms are not monolithic. Corporate and divisional managers often have different attentional priorities (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008), hence distinct attentional schema (Ocasio, 2011). We observed two discontinuous contests for attention, the first entailing the corporate managers running BizPlus, and the second entailing divisional managers in business units who were crucial to the go-to-market planning and execution. Notably, our cases suggest that winning the first contest does not guarantee success in the second, while not winning the first does not prevent success in the second. That is, the hares' failings in the second stage cost them the race, whereas the tortoises were able to get away with their failings in the first stage. Knowingly or unknowingly, they accomplished this through schema-consistent stimuli different from those that "pressed the right buttons" with corporate managers in the first contest. As for the nonstarters, stimuli consistent with either schema were lacking. Figure 1 presents a model that depicts the above attention dynamics. The essence of our findings is captured in Table 6.
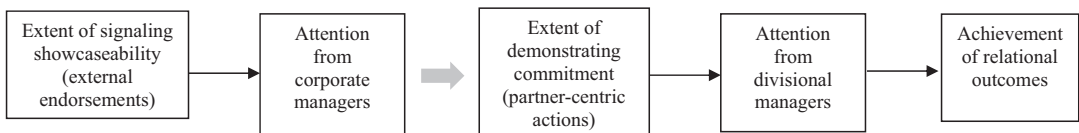

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model: Attention dynamics in corporate-startup partnering.
Note that the focal actor in this model is the startup. The corporate and divisional managers belong to the large corporation. Regular arrows reflect causality while the block arrow reflects temporal sequence.

TABLE 6 Summary of the two stages of the partnering process.

	First stage	Second stage
Main focus	Technology enablement	Commercial engagement
Managers involved	Corporate (HQ) managers running the BizPlus program	Divisional managers in various business units (BUs)
Rule of the game	Rule 1: Showcaseability	Rule 2: Commitment
Underlying schema—illustrative quote	"We are able to attract promising startups to work in our partner ecosystem"	"We are able to pull off quick, revenue-generating wins together with this partner"
Schema-consistent stimuli	Eye-catching accomplishments and signals of promise Demonstrating showcaseability; e.g., • Interest from VCs • Winning awards • Kudos for product demos	More mundane negotiation and interactions Demonstrating interest/ability in • Aligning with partner priorities • Pitching win–win possibilities • Engaging with BUs in events
Outcomes for startups	Hares: Got off to a fast start	Hares: Frustrated; disappointed that momentum did not continue
	Tortoises: Got off to a slow start	Tortoises: Finished/won the race
	Nonstarters: Little attention; never quite in the race	Nonstarters: Ended up exiting the partnering process

Abbreviation: VCs, venture capitalists.

The two stages correspond to the two rules of the game reflecting the respective schema of the corporate and divisional managers: showcaseability (Rule 1) and commitment (Rule 2). In a sense, each of the rules ended up representing two pathways: the Rule 1-oriented path led from the program manager to business unit managers but attention from the former did not translate to attention from the latter; the Rule 2-oriented path led to engaging with business unit managers, whose attention ultimately spilled over to the former. In the Rule 1-oriented pathway, as illustrated by Cheetah, Greyhound, and Stallion, the showcaseability rule initially brought about an alignment between the anticipated and obtained attentional resources (from corporate managers). Yet, by not being attuned to Gorilla's perspective of the relationship in the subsequent stage, the more self-absorbed behavior on their part violated the second rule. The consequent misalignment resulted in a reversal of trajectory characterized by a misalignment in their commitment, the withdrawal of attentional resources by Gorilla's divisional managers, and ultimately a failure to deliver the intended outcome (a joint go-to-market strategy). In the Rule 2-oriented pathway, despite or perhaps because of the initial misalignment, Koala, Llama, and Panda made a concerted effort to understand and align with Gorilla's objectives, which was reflected in their actions, which in turn reflected a common objective orientation that resulted in alignment. Basically, their initiatives abided by the second rule of the game and eventually attracted sustained attention from divisional managers. As for the nonstarters, they did not persevere and voluntarily withdrew from the program due to lack of any alignment.

The prevalence of the distinct rules, each one particularly salient to the corporate and divisional levels respectively and reflecting their corresponding schema, and the primacy of Rule 2 in the second stage, stems from the asymmetry in organizational structure between startups and large corporations. Whereas the key individuals in the startup—typically the entrepreneur and one or two co-founders or top managers—remain the same throughout the partnering process, there are multiple individuals—and corresponding mental schemas—involved on the corporation's side: corporate managers and divisional managers. The transition from the startup's engagement with corporate managers (first contest for attention based on a "showcaseability" rule) to engaging with business units (second contest for attention based on a "commitment" rule) was when the hares and tortoises diverged. The tortoises recognized the reality that the business units were less concerned about startup partners unless the startups were aligned with the business units' own agenda. The hares may have woken up to this fact, but perhaps too late.

As a result of the dynamics characterizing the two contests for attention, and akin to the fable of the tortoise and the hare, the new ventures that were first out of the blocks in terms of gaining the corporation's attention did not always win in the end, that is, in terms of achieving the market access outcome.[14]

7 | DISCUSSION

Our study has inductively explored how new ventures realize value from partnering with large corporations. In the case of BizPlus, an initiative involving corporate-startup partnerships in a portfolio context, we found attention dynamics to be an important factor in explaining the variance in relational outcomes across multiple concurrent alliances. Our study contributes to the ABV and alliance literatures in distinct ways.

7.1 | The complex nature of attention dynamics in asymmetric interorganizational settings

Our study extends the ABV from an intraorganizational to an interorganizational context by pointing to the critical and complex nature of attention dynamics in an asymmetric partnering setting. Our research uncovers a discontinuous contest for attention involving corporate and divisional managers, highlighting the distributed nature of attention. BizPlus was not monolithic; its corporate and divisional managers potentially had different attention schemas and were sensitive to correspondingly distinct stimuli. Our findings underline that it is critical for startups to appreciate, as well as respond to, this distinction as they interact with the managers involved in the pursuit of positive outcomes. Notably, we show how the extent of startups' responsiveness to the different attentional schema of corporate and divisional managers, via actions concordant with the distinct types of stimuli in their respective interactions with them, is critical to understanding their distinct attention trajectories and disparate outcomes. The attentional perspective thus highlights the crucial impact of structural asymmetries arising from the difference in organization size, an aspect that may empirically overlap with but is conceptually distinct from that of power asymmetry, which is typically emphasized in the literature (e.g., Alvarez & Barney, 2001; Katila et al., 2008).

The dynamics we uncovered can be summarized in the following sequence: (i) a baseline level of attention from corporate managers helps startups to enter the consideration set for potential collaboration; (ii) a surplus of attention from corporate managers heightens a startup's profile and its expectations within the partner ecosystem, but (iii) ultimately it is the high level of attention from divisional managers—which does not follow automatically from previously gained attention—that "does the trick", that is, achieves the potential of the partnership. Thus, we add nuance to prior work on attention by showing that there are different types of attention at play in large firms, and that successfully forging a way through these is a delicate and complex "dance" for external partners.

In particular, our study points to three aspects underlying attention dynamics. First, the *amount* of attention. Just as insufficient attention may be suboptimal (as per the ABV), too much attention—or, in our context, excess attention from corporate managers relative to attention from divisional managers—can also be problematic. Second, the *timing* of attention. Whereas Bouquet and Birkinshaw (2008) demonstrate the value of attracting attention, our work adds the insight that it is not just the extent of attention per se but also the timing of attracting attention that matters, in that attracting too much attention too soon can be a disadvantage rather than an advantage. Third, the *distributed nature* of attention. Our study highlights that gaining attention in a corporate setting is not a continuous affair in that there was a transition to be navigated: initially, corporate managers' attention was useful, but thereafter divisional managers' attention needed to kick in to fill the gap between intention and outcome.

As seen, large corporations are typically not "one" partner but have multiple constituencies. Over time, joint activity actually took place with one (or more) of the BUs—and not with the team with which the startup initially interfaced. Indeed, the high levels of initial attention the hares received from corporate managers resulted in their

remaining in a protracted Rule 1 (showcaseability) mode, which undermined the envisaged outcome because the corresponding actions were not suited to Rule 2 (commitment), ultimately leading to hostility or indifference vis-à-vis divisional managers.

In sum, we found the transition from the initial to subsequent stages of the partnership associated with a "handing over" from corporate to divisional managers to be a turning point. The corresponding shift in prominence and centrality of the managers' respective schema, and the apparent disconnect between the two, was instrumental in triggering disparate outcomes. We suspect that many companies experience such a disjuncture and that our insights would hold in multiple contemporary settings, including the many corporate accelerators that currently exist but do not have a strong track record (Decreton et al., 2021; Shankar & Shepherd, 2019; Weiblen & Chesbrough, 2015).

Ironically, winning the first contest was not only insufficient, but may have resulted in inadequate effort on the part of the hares to winning the second. The positive feedback they received may have had a reinforcing but ultimately counter-productive influence on subsequent attention choices whereby the hares failed to discern the different schema of the subsequent set of [divisional] managers compared with that of the BizPlus [corporate] managers. This may highlight a *paradox* of attention: while attracting attention is generally seen in a positive light (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008; Cao, 2006; Hallen et al., 2014), could it be that part of the difficulties faced by the three ventures that did not achieve positive outcomes was the fact that they *did* succeed in attracting the large corporation's attention early in the relationship-building process? In this vein, perhaps not winning the first contest for attention was a blessing in disguise for the tortoises, who were more motivated to make a concerted effort to gain the attention of divisional managers. This potential paradox is an intriguing prospect that future research could explore further.[15]

7.2 | Relational capabilities: Attention as a relational resource that must be managed

Our study also contributes to the literature on alliances and relational capabilities by highlighting the importance of attracting and sustaining attention from partners—specifically, the capacity to match the right stimuli with a particular schema. As the alliance literature repeatedly mentions (Ariño & de la Torre, 1998; Doz, 1996; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Faems et al., 2008; Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012), firms typically participate in alliances to access complementary partner resources. We extend this by identifying and analyzing the role of attention, seeing it as an underappreciated but fundamental resource in that all other resources emanate from it.

Like other relational resources that share the same qualities as normal resources, that is, rare, valuable, and inimitable (Dyer & Singh, 1998), we argue that the same applies to attention. Putting it within the VRIN framework of the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), attention is clearly valuable and is not available to all partners. Moreover, given that attention needs to be both earned and sustained through a process of partner-specific dyadic interactions, it would not be easy for others to imitate. Given the nature of the resource, it is patently nonsubstitutable. Thus, even though our outcome may have been different (i.e., go to market), there are direct implications for competitive advantage and, by extension, the capacity to attract sustained attention constitutes an important relational capability for startups seeking to partner with large corporations.

At the same time, attentional resources are different from other resources. First, they cannot be accessed through contractual means; they are not given but need to be earned. Moreover, just because they are potentially available to alliance partners does not imply that they are accessible. Second, unlike knowledge resources which, once internalized, remain with the partner firm (Hamel, 1991), attentional resources are more fluid in that they are characterized by ebb and flow. Thus, even if a firm is allocated attentional resources, this does not guarantee these would be similarly available in subsequent interactions. In short, attentional resources need to be managed.

As our study shows, attentional resources are critical to the outcome of a partnership. Our findings suggest that, in corporate-startup partnering, attracting attention for the more "mundane" aspects of commercial engagement trumps the more "cool" showcasing aspects. This provides a potential explanation for why many

startups fail to obtain satisfactory outcomes from interfaces such as corporate accelerators. A key insight is that while a broad opportunity may be identified at the outset, it not only takes time for a specific opportunity to crystallize but it is more likely to emerge with an approach that is adaptable as new kinds of information become available.[16]

In terms of the notions of weight versus voice (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008), the fact that all the startups had more or less equal weight at the start of the program made voice the critical factor in the competition for corporate attention. Rather than being loud, in our context voice became *louder* through listening for and paying attention to signals from the appropriate managers about their priorities in order to better match specific stimuli with the managers' schema. An inadequate relational capability of this nature—stemming from an apparent failure to recognize the discontinuous attentional contests—may help to explain why corporate-startup partnering can be ineffective even when promising startups are involved (Decreton et al., 2021; Prashantham & Birkinshaw, 2008).

Importantly, an attention-based lens provides an alternative perspective to trust, which is prominent in the literature on alliances and relational capabilities (e.g., Doz, 1996; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). Barney and Hansen (1994) posit that trust acts as a relational resource that firms leverage to successfully tap into opportunities that might not otherwise be available. In their study of a partnership between an entrepreneurial startup and an established firm, Faems et al. (2008) found a disconnect between corporate-level and unit-level managers who were characterized by a focus on goodwill-based and competence-based trust respectively. Whereas trust dynamics at the corporate level did not transfer to the unit level, the latter transferred to the former. With our focus on attentional rather than trust dynamics and our finding of misalignment between corporate level and BU level attention, our study both complements as well as reinforces their findings.

Along similar lines, we provide a complementary explanation of the scope for relationship recovery, beyond that of trust repair, that furthers current understanding of how firms suffering from attention deficit can take remedial steps to regenerate momentum of a partnership after faltering in the initial stages, and thus reverse the relational trajectory. This is likely to be relevant to a range of entrepreneurial networks (e.g., Semrau & Sigmund, 2012), not just corporate partnerships.

7.3 | Limitations, future research, and managerial implications

Our paper has limitations that indicate potential future research directions. First, apart from the standard issues related to generalizability in case-study research, future work could seek to further investigate the causal links associated with our contrasting observations regarding the hares and tortoises identified here. Second, we rely primarily on the perceptions of the startups and corporate (BizPlus) managers to gauge levels of attention. Ideally, talking to all the BU managers who engaged with each of the startups would have attained greater granularity regarding attention, but it was not feasible in practice. Third, we focus more on behavioral actions rather than the underlying cognition (e.g., hubris versus humility), yet it is plausible that the personality of the entrepreneur may be a factor in why a startup did not sustain attention from the corporation. Also, we do not explicitly take into account the skill or personality differences of the individual account managers involved, who may not all be equally endowed with the political skills required to navigate the corporation's internal networks. Although, as noted earlier, we do not see this as a major problem, this is an area that could be usefully examined. We also acknowledge that we did not delve deeply into the nonstarters. Future research could usefully examine factors—such as self-efficacy—that might explain why some slow starters recover and others do not.

Furthermore, other scenarios could plausibly occur, such as a startup losing traction after gaining it initially, and then turning things around. Unfortunately, we were unable to observe such cases, probably due to the limited length of the program. Also, given our time frame, performance outcomes in terms of ultimate product development were beyond the scope of the paper. Future research could examine such issues. Our findings also hint at the utility of

boundary-spanning within the large corporation by startup partner managers to ensure greater attentional integration between corporate and divisional managers, which could be a useful topic for future research.

Another fertile area for research concerns the interplay between attention and trust, two distinct concepts (as evidenced by their distinct literatures), each of which has its own impact on partnership dynamics. Our study, which is to our knowledge among the first to examine attention dynamics in interorganizational settings, indicates that attention deserves greater consideration than has been given so far, at least relative to trust. Although it is feasible that greater attention-based relations can enable partnership outcomes even without trust, the two are not necessarily independent. A future study exploring their interdependence, and how this shapes outcomes, would contribute towards a more nuanced, holistic understanding of partnering behavior.

Finally, we note that this research has valuable implications for practitioners. Startups seeking to extract value from partnering with large corporations need to thoughtfully manage the distinct attentional demands of corporate and divisional managers. For their part, corporations would do well to cultivate a startup partnering capability entailing effective boundary-spanning interfaces, recognizing that asymmetric interorganizational settings pose distinct challenges for their partners. As such, the empirical context of corporate-startup partnering represents fertile ground for future research and offers valuable insights to practitioners seeking to enhance collaborative innovation.

ENDNOTES

[1] This does not suggest that strong starters cannot prevail or that slow starters always do.

[2] Pseudonyms are used for all companies.

[3] This was effectively an entry requirement into the broader partner program since Gorilla was operating as a platform leader and the startups as (committed) complementors. This aspect clarifies why the measure of success used in the article—market access outcome with Gorilla—is meaningful, since Gorilla's and the partners' interests would be aligned. Also, this means that in the short term (i.e., the duration of the 12-month partnership), it would be unlikely that the startups would realistically have, or look for, alternative strategic partners.

[4] For every product license of the software vendor that is sold, a license for the underlying platform technology of the corporation will have to be sold.

[5] Since he was critical to helping startups access resources from within Gorilla, our priority was to "control" for awareness of the startup, at the outset, by the program manager. Though it is possible that differences in the extent of their other responsibilities and commitments might impact the total attention capacity of the account managers towards the startups under their charge, the high profile of the program and the close involvement of the program manager can be expected to minimize any impact of such variation across the managers. See also the "Additional post-hoc check" subsection that concludes our Findings section, which also addresses this issue.

[6] These divisional managers were from BUs such as business software, cloud platform, offline retail, online marketplace, and emerging business that were of potential interest to the BizPlus startups. They were thus familiar with the BizPlus initiative and potential allies for commercial engagement.

[7] A question may arise as to how this distribution of outcomes compares with that of the entire cohort of 100 startups. Roughly 25% did not make much progress, 25% started positively but did not succeed in the end, and 50% achieved decent results at a minimum. On the face of it, our spread of non-starters (25%), hares (37.5%), and tortoises (37.5%) does not exactly match that of the overall cohort. However, this was not our aim—since we could not have predicted the outcome of the firms we studied a priori; our emphasis all along was on theoretical (not representative) sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

[8] Consistent with Csaszar (2013), this distinction in schemas likely reflects a greater emphasis on exploration on the part of the corporate managers in this study as compared to the divisional managers' focus on exploitation.

[9] As noted, the first author attended this event.

[10] Although we quote the account manager, it was the program manager's buy-in that allowed this startup to gain attention.

[11] Our assessment of the divisional managers' attention was largely based on the startups' perceptions and those of the program manager and account managers who continued to closely follow the progress of the partnerships.

[12] As noted, the first author attended this event as well.

[13] While we have no way of verifying the veracity of these claims, what we are confident about is that the startup partners joined the program with the expectation that partnering with Gorilla through BizPlus would result in a considerable boost to their business development.

[14] Of course, these startups may have achieved success outside of the Gorilla partnership, but that is a possibility outside the scope of this study.

[15] We acknowledge that there are other plausible explanations for what we observed. For instance, the more aggressive approach adopted by the hares from the outset, enabled by external endorsements such as VC interest, might have found appeal with the corporate managers (who may, as business development executives, been more accustomed to that approach) whereas the very same aggression came across as arrogance to the divisional managers. Tortoises, whose approach was less aggressive and entailed less showcaseable signals, gained less traction initially, but their less aggressive stance, combined with a change in approach after taking stock, was possibly less abrasive and more appreciated by the operational managers.

[16] It should be noted that we are not claiming that the tortoises were somehow more virtuous than the hares. The tortoises, like the hares, were mindful of their self-interest; they just pursued their partnering goals differently.

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