Ranking Strategy: How Organisations Respond to the New Competitive Battlefields

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How Organisations Respond to the New Competitive Battlefields

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ABSTRACT

The thesis that rankings do more than just make visible an organisation's position viz-a-viz a competitor but stimulate new competitive rivalries has provoked much interest. Yet, to date, we lack an understanding of how such competitive rivalries unfold at the level of organisational strategy. Put simply, if competition is played out in rankings, how does this change the way organisations strategise? We answer this question through an ethnographic study of how information technology organisations engage with rankings. The strategic responses we observed include 'leapfrogging a rival', 'de-positioning a competitor', 'owning a market', and 'encouraging a break-out', which together are theorised as ranking strategy. This novel conceptualisation extends understanding of the organisational response to rankings by showing how common reactions like gaming are only the tip of the iceberg of a broader array of strategic responses. Our study also throws light on the different ways a ranking can pattern competitive rivalries, including creating more episodic forms of rivalry.

Keywords: Ranking, valuation, strategy, practice, rivalry, competition

INTRODUCTION

It has been claimed we live in a "society of rankings" (Eposito and Stark, 2019) where organisations are required to respond increasing numbers of rankings, ratings and other reputational indices (Espeland and Sauder, 2016; Pollock et al., 2019). The organisational response has been widely studied: those from organisation and strategy have foregrounded strategies of 'conformance' (Martins, 2005), 'gaming' (Espeland and Sauder, 2007) and 'lobbying' (Wedlin, 2006). In recent years, the conversation has shifted from considering the issue of organisational change towards understanding how rankings create rivalry effects. Scholars are providing increasing empirical evidence of the way rankings form new 'competitive battlefields' (Kornberger and Carter, 2010) which includes how they intensify *existing* competitive relationships (Brankovic et al., 2018) and create *new* rivalries (Mehrpouya and Samiolo, 2016). It is even conjectured that competitive rivalries could be *shifting* from those between products and services to those enacted in rankings (Karpik, 2010; Kornberger, 2017).

If, as proponents argue, rivalry today is played out as much through rankings as any other means, then this requires reconsideration of competitive strategies. However, thus far, studies have thrown little light on the question of how the competitive rivalry effects stemming from ranking might unfold at the strategic level (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). Even though studies intimate that rankings engender significant shifts in strategy practice (e.g., Rindova et al., 2018), the literature remains somewhat narrowly focused on identifying 'gaming strategies', defined as "symbolic responses" located at the "margins of organisational practice" (Sauder and Espeland, 2009). But this means we know very little about more central and strategic responses (Kornberger, 2017; Rindova et al., 2018),

To explicate this question, we provide a rich empirical account of the way a group of information technology (IT) vendors engage with rankings. Based on ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews, we show how in their response they do not just try to improve their own ranked position but weaken that of a competitor. Their strategic practices include 'leapfrogging a rival', 'de-positioning a competitor', 'owning the market', and 'encouraging a break-out', which together make up what we theorise as 'ranking strategy', defined as a set of strategic practices that actors engage in to actively shape competitive rivalries.

The paper makes two contributions to the literature on rankings and a further contribution to the debate on strategy practices. First, it demonstrates that organisational responses like gaming (Sauder and Espeland, 2009; Sauder, 2008) are only one of several possible reactions as rankings become increasingly important for competitive positioning. Second, it provides new insights into why organisations become rivals in the first place (Porac et al., 1995) and how rankings pattern competitive rivalries in new ways (Durand and Paolella, 2013; Pontikes, 2019). Finally, in illuminating and theorising an emergent set of strategy practices (Vaara and Whittington, 2012), we shift the focus of the strategy practice literature from internal practices to strategies of engagement (Kornberger and Vaara, 2020).

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

How rankings create rivalry effects

The argument that rankings facilitate and promote rivalries between organisations predates current discussions (Karpik, 2010; Kornberger and Carter, 2010; Mehrpouya and Samiolo, 2015; Kornberger, 2017). Early studies laid the foundation for a view of rankings as more than just 'signals' that brought attention to organisational actions, accomplishments, and future prospects (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990, p. 234). Because rankings provided "definitions of success" (Rindova and Fombrun, 1999, p.700) and facilitated "competitive benchmarking", it became evident that they could potentially go beyond signalling an organisational competitive position to encourage the organisation to compare itself to others. In particular, studies noted how rankings created "exemplars and role models" which could then inform "strategic planning" (Rindova and Formbrun, 1999, p.700). Though the potential of rankings to do more than simply *represent* competitive rivalries was recognised in early work, it is more recent studies that the consequences of bringing organisations into the same evaluative space have been foregrounded.

It has been argued that "comparability leads to competition" (Esposito and Stark 2019, p. 7). That is, what was supposed to be a "descriptive measure" that provided information about quality of a product or service, "tends to become an assessment that puts it in competition with other items" (Esposito and Stark 2019, p. 7). For example, in one of the first explicit formulations of how rankings create rivalry effects, Wedlin (2006, p.11) showed how the introduction of MBA rankings augmented *existing* competition between rival business schools (see also Sauder, 2008). Kornberger and Carter (2010, p. 236) took this further in their discussion of the *Anholt's City Brands Index* maintaining that rankings not only enhanced but created *new* forms of rivalry. For instance, they argued Sydney and London became rivals even though they had not previously thought of themselves as in competition with one another.

Recent empirical work has directly shifted attention from how competition appears as an unintended consequence of rankings to how rankings can be purposefully designed and introduced to create and operationalise competitive rivalries. For example, Mehrpouya and Samiolo (2016, p. 13) discuss how "inciting competition" between drug companies was the "programmatic ambition" of the *Access to Medicine Index*. Brankovic et al (2018, p. 9) theorise university rankings "as tools used by third parties to construct competition", which, through "repeated publication", "create a continually shifting environment for universities", that creates and maintain an 'audience' hungry for ranking products to understand the changing environment.

In short, studies provide growing support for the idea that rankings are implicated in the rivalising of organisations i.e. that they influence the scope and depth of the competitive dynamics between organisations (Mehrpouya and Samiolo, 2016; Esposito and Stark, 2019). This has led some to speculate whether rivalries arising as a consequence of rankings might equal (or even outstrip) those enacted in other ways, such as through the launching of new products, entering one another's markets, attempting to wrestle away customers, etc (see Kilduff 2019 for a review). For example, scholars argue that competition between organisations is *shifting* from the encounter and confrontation between products and services to a confrontation in and through rankings (Karpik, 2010; Kornberger, 2017). This raises an important question. If rankings engender rivalising effects, does it mean that organisations will deploy specific strategic practices in response (Rindova et al., 2018)?

How organisations respond to the rivalry effects enacted by rankings

Despite growing interest in the rivalry effects created by ranking, how organisations respond to these effects remains poorly understood. Studies have focused on the pressures *within* organisations but less *between* organisations (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996). For instance, prior work has shown how rankings are "engines of status anxiety" that "incentivize" ranked organisations to "focus their efforts on improving their relative position" (Sauder and Espeland 2009, p. 74). Although discussions of how an organisation might progress its position are varied, they commonly coalesce around a few key strategic moves. One common response discussed in the literature is *conformance* with the criteria imposed by the ranking. As Martins (2005, p. 715) showed, conformance is a widespread response because rankings "push organisations to change *in accordance* with the criteria used by the rankings".

Another usual response is that of *gaming* the ranking to maximize one's position (Corly and Gioia, 2000). Gaming responses are often depicted as "symbolic" and include efforts at "managing appearances" (Espeland and Sauder 2007, p. 29). Where in a conformance response we would normally expect the shifting of the organisation and its practices towards those imposed by the ranking, gaming strategy includes attempts to "improve ranking factors without improving the characteristics the factors are designed to measure" (Espeland and Sauder 2007, p. 29) and to "manipulate appearances in ways that leave internal practices intact" (Sauder and Espeland 2009, p. 77).

While gaming is a more proactive concept than conformance for understanding how organisations mitigate the pressures brought about by rankings (Sauder and Espeland, 2009), it reveals less about the question of how a ranking might provide an organisation with a competitive opening, including how the organisation might capitalise on that opportunity (Rindova et al., 2018). Moreover, because gaming is a concept that turns attention towards symbolic responses it also suggests a decoupling between ranking regime and organisational practice. For instance, Sauder and Espeland's (2009) indicate a dilemma between internalising (conformance) and externalising (gaming). They highlight decoupling taking place via gaming strategies but also stress 'tight coupling' between ranking and those ranked, leading to internalising pressures and (Foucauldian) self-discipline within organisations, which shows organisations oscillating between two unreconcilable and extreme responses.

Indeed, recent studies suggested that conformance and gaming are only some of the possible strategies adopted (Brandter, 2017; Pollock et al., 2019). This marks the point of departure for our paper: if one accepts that rankings are increasingly central for competition then they are likely to provoke a whole set of nuanced, differentiated strategic responses (Rindova et al., 2018). Indeed, some researchers have begun to differentiate forms of "strategic agency" as the organisations' "capacity to cope with and influence" rankings (Kornberger, 2017, p. 1753). Other studies mention how a ranked organisation might embark upon a process of 'lobbying' (Wedlin, 2010, p. 205) or 'petitioning' (Chelli and Gendron, 2013, p. 200). Likewise, it has been argued that the increasing numbers of professionals such as public relations (PR) experts (Sauder and Fine 2008) have become involved in the process, suggesting that, as some argue, rankings are "prone to manipulation" (Rindova et al., 2017, p. 2191). Recent research suggests the need to develop a more fine-grained, systematic and empirically grounded understanding of the strategic practices that organisations use to engage with rankings. Thus, in this paper we ask - *What strategic actions are employed by organisations to improve their competitive position vis-à-vis a rival in a given ranking*?

SETTING AND METHODS

The Setting

The most important ranking in the IT sector is the 'Magic Quadrant' (Pollock and Williams, 2016). Produced by the industry analyst firm Gartner Inc., it has become the key 'battlefield' between vendors (Gyurko, 2009). This is because technology buyers foreground this ranking over all other information sources. It is common, for instance, for buyers to draw up their shortlists solely based on those vendors appearing on this ranking (ibid.). Made up of four quadrants, labelled Leaders, Visionaries, Challengers and Niche Players, those placed further to the right are seen to have more 'complete visions', whilst those placed towards the top an elevated 'ability to execute' on that vision. In his popular book *Up and to the Right*, Stiennon (2012) encourages vendors to do everything not just to get into the Magic Quadrant but to be placed in the top quadrant as "being one of the three or four vendors in the Leaders Quadrant almost guarantees your inclusion in product selection process".

Whilst as we will show competitive rivalries between vendors are increasingly played out on the Magic Quadrant, inclusion in the ranking is influenced by contradictory impulses. There is, firstly, a 'scarcity' (Brankovic et al., 2018) of potential ranking positions. It is a practice/convention in the IT area that all rankings should be graphical. Because rankings are constructed to be 'visually appealing', the rankers limit the numbers of vendors that can be included: no ranking can be 'overcrowded', as this would make it difficult for clients to read (Pollock and Campagnolo, 2015). Magic Quadrants therefore normally contain between 20-25 vendors, which means that a small fraction of the market of offerings only can be included. In particularly buoyant technology markets, where there might be hundreds of vendors vying for inclusion, the competition for entrance can be fierce (Pollock and D'Adderio, 2012).

Secondly, rankings in this area lack an 'ultimate quality' (Davies, 2016). There are now more than 250 versions of the Magic Quadrant, each capturing a different technology category or market. But this number and their make-up is changing all the time (Gyurko, 2009). In an attempt to keep-up with technology trends and client buying interests, Gartner constantly introduces new Magic Quadrants and retires older ones. In a study tracking their longevity, for instance, it was shown that the bulk of Magic Quadrants last less than 24 months after their initial introduction before they are either withdrawn or reconfigured (Pontikes and Kim, 2017). What this means is that if a vendor is excluded, it may find further opportunities to enter just a few months later in a new or updated version of the Magic Quadrant. Likewise, for those having successfully secured a ranked position, their placement might be temporary as their ranking could well be retired or adapted down the line.

Taken together, these factors have engendered in IT vendors the understanding that while the ranking environment is high stakes it is also extremely volatile and will require them to take steps to help manage their response. Indeed, by early 2000s, and led in particular by IBM, many of the larger IT vendors had begun to employ specialist expertise to help them track (and potentially respond to the problem of) rankings. Significant numbers of what are known as 'Analyst Relations' professionals or 'AR Pros' are now employed. Even smaller vendors without access to the budgets of the larger players make use of this expertise through hiring specialist consultancy from the various analyst relations agencies (Pollock et al., 2019).

Data collection

Our first source of data was ethnographic observations. We conducted approximately 300 hours of physical observation of meetings and participated in a further 50 related conference calls and webinars. The focus of our ethnography was meetings and events organised by AR Pros. Our fieldworker enrolled in an analyst relations member organisation – the Institute for Industry Analyst Relations – which brings together the community of AR Pros to meet for knowledge exchange and share best-practice through organising face-to-face meetings and private webinars. More generally, the ethnographic part of the fieldwork helped us develop an intimate understanding of the challenges vendor organisations face and the actions they took in responding to and working with rankers. Focusing on a member organisation provided a privileged form of access as it meant we were able to observe common approaches across different ranked organisations.

Our second data source was semi-structured interviews. We have carried out over 60 interviews with those constructing the rankings (analysts) and those from ranked organisations (AR Pros). We selected informants through theoretical sampling, starting with analysts where we carried out 39 interviews. We specifically sought out those analysts who authored rankings. We also carried out 22 interviews of AR Pros, which included those working within ranked organisations and staff in specialist analyst relations agencies. At these specialist agencies we interviewed those who led training courses or ran best-practice webinars on how to influence rankings. As is common in qualitative research, we followed an initial protocol that was developed as we came across new insights. On average, interviews lasted between 30-60 mins, and were all recorded and transcribed.

A final data source was access to the private archives of the Institute of Industry Analyst Relations where we could read documents and minutes of past meetings and listen to recordings of presentations and webinars stretching back several years.

Data analysis

The analysis followed the principles of inductive theory building (Charmaz, 2014). Strategy actions occurring around rankings were not identified as an area of inquiry until we had begun our fieldwork. Their pervasiveness in the conversations of those within ranked organisations, however, made them an important subject for analysis. From then on, the analytical process was iterative, comprising numerous rounds of coding and moving back and forth between emerging themes, pertinent literature, and our data.

Our initial analysis entailed several readings of the interview transcripts and field notes. From interviews with AR Pros, they stressed the need to build and foster interactions with analysts, especially to find out more about their rankings pipeline, whether their organisation would be 'covered', what their opinion of them might be, and how they might influence forthcoming assessments. This ignited our interest in understanding the actions these organisations took to influence analyst opinions. We then identified sections within the transcripts that contained mentions of specific actions taken, either tactics to improve a position or highlighting how they had turned an analyst's opinion of them around. We included quotes containing descriptions of specific methods for positively improving a position. When talking about rankings, our informants would often refer to modes of influencing such as improving a position, 'moving their dots', convincing a ranker to change its evaluation criteria, creating a new version of a ranking, creating a 'break out'.

At this point, we also noted that when discussing actions, many informants highlighted the importance of 'rivalry' and 'competition'. Informants talked about what their close rivals were doing – whether they had had any notable 'successes' on a ranking or were running any interesting events to which analysts were invited. Several referred to how rankings provided them with opportunities to outshine or to 'put the competitor in a bad light'. More specifically, they highlighted the possibility of 'leapfrogging a rival', of 'de-positioning a competitor' from its advantageous position, 'defending their dot' against the actions of a rival, 'owning a market', or 'killing off' rankings where their competitors were doing well. These field inspired labels prompted us to reanalyse our data more closely to better understand the role of rivalry in the construction of vendor actions. We also reconsidered our archival material to see if these actions appeared. Rivalry was a common theme in several of the recorded webinars. After multiple iterations, our analysis converged on four main actions that consistently appeared in our data: 'leapfrogging a rival', 'de-positioning a competitor', 'owning a market', and 'encouraging a break-out'.

A final phase consisted of us analysing our observations and semi structured interview and data to shed light on how AR Pros were viewed and viewed themselves in terms of the wider organisation. AR Pros described how they were often regarded in markedly contrasting ways. For instance, they were seen by some as providing basic forms of expertise such as simply 'scheduling meetings', whereas others saw them 'driving business strategy' and making a difference to the overall 'competitive advantage' of the business.

Our analysis of the observational and interview data finally led us to the concept of 'ranking strategy'. After selecting this final theme, we continued to discuss it with informants to validate our reading of the situation, which included sending to them drafts of the paper and making changes based on feedback.

FINDINGS

Extant research suggests that rankings do not just represent competitive rivalries between organisations but have themselves become the new spaces of rivalry (Karpik, 2010; Kornberger, 2017). The goal of this study is to understand *how* ranked organisations respond to the fact that rankings create rivalising effects. What we add to the literature is a detailed analysis of how this new space is animated through various strategic practices. During fieldwork, we saw the intensity of competition that could emerge just prior to and shortly after the launching of a new Magic Quadrant. Vendors that appeared near or above an organisation were increasingly treated as close competitors. Progress against rivals was measured in terms of movement within the ranking. Before describing the actions that organisations take against rivals, we first depict a set of the more internal strategies used by ranked organisations to engage with rankers.

Section I: Strategies to Influence a Ranked Position

In this first section, we show that as rankings have become important for competitive positioning, organisations have sought to build closer relationships with rankers. Rankers, in turn, appear to require similarly close interactions with ranked organisations.

'The battle that goes on internally'

Organisations and rankers in this area typically build and maintain close relationships with each other. From the point of view of the ranked organisations, it is the 'Analyst Relations professional' or 'AR Pro' who is tasked with leading and coordinating the response. The AR Pro will attempt to build "personal relationships" with individual rankers, which includes engineering periods of "social time", often "over a meal" or "drink" (Webinar 1). An experienced AR Pro describes the need for this relationship building process: "You need to know what are the characteristics of these analysts? Are they approachable? Are they people who we have a strong relationship with? And exactly how am I going to work with these analysts?" (Webinar 1). Such interactions allow for the gathering of information not yet publicly available, which includes whether the ranker is currently considering bringing out a new ranking and who s/he is considering including within it. An AR Pro describes how he and his colleagues typically respond to and attempt to exploit an interaction:

> If the analyst asks you something, for instance, researching on bitcoin currency, 'do you cover that?' 'Yes'. 'Could you brief me on that?' 'Yes'. You should always ask why and then see where that fits in. 'Why?' 'Because my client's asking'. 'Why?' 'Because I'm researching about it'. 'When are you going to publish it?' 'Why are you going to publish it?' and so on (AR Pro 1, interview).

The analysts, in turn, were not naive about these approaches and were aware that the AR Pros would likely subject them to some pressure to change what they were thinking. Analysts told us how such advances could occur in the baldest of ways:

> …it is in their interests…to influence it basically. In fact, they call it 'influencer marketing'…So that is what they care about. If you ask a vendor analyst relations person, what they ask the analyst…'Is there anything with our name on?'. 'Yes, that one there in about 3 months' time'. 'Right, OK. That is what I need to plan for'. So, they don't care about anything else that I am writing about…They care about 'is our name going to be on that document?'. 'Right, what do we need to do to stop you saying anything bad about us?' So, it is a PR exercise. So that is the battle that goes on internally (Analyst 1, interview).

That rankers were not disdainful but open to these kinds of channels was because they too benefited. Analysts told us that they required "regular contact with the vendor" (Analyst 2, interview) as the ideas and information exchanged would help them interpret the direction of complex and fast-moving technologies and markets. It is likely that the ranker – especially if the relationships is long-standing – will approach the ranked organisation for a 'briefing' on a new technological topic. Analyst informants confided to us that the more interactions they carried out the better their client insights. Some even lamented how AR Pro would limit access through acting as a 'gatekeeper': "[o]bviously, an analyst would love to have diary access to executives and many things. So, at times, AR can be a positive, be almost an interface conduit into an organisation, but also, can be almost a gatekeeper" (Analyst 3, interview).

Fostering close interactions were in the interests of all parties concerned. In the sections that follow, we show how this allowed ranked organisations to influence the shape of rankings.

The 'tools' to influence a ranking

Influencing a ranking requires mustering more than one set of skills. Organisations have learnt – and AR Pros have proceduralised – the process of creating and building opportunities for changing an analyst's opinion. We listened to many AR Pros as they described the various instruments they had at their disposal: "…[h]ow do I use all the tools within my toolbox in order to change that analyst's opinion? So, that's what we call 'AR 1.01', that's what we do day in and day out" (Webinar 2). These tools were not organisation-specific but seemed to be similar across the ranked organisations studied.

The first was to start the work of shaping a ranking well ahead of its publication. For instance, a document on influencing the Magic Quadrant describes how "Building credibility with a Gartner analyst is a process that can take years" (Internal document 1). Seasoned AR Pros would gently admonish more junior colleagues who thought improving a ranked position could be done immediately. As the document goes on to say, "Many AR managers are tasked with the challenge to move from one quadrant to another in the timeframe of a year…Anyone who's looking for a quick jump to the upper right-hand quadrant clearly is confusing AR and PR" (Internal document 1).

Another tool was to understand specifically 'who' – e.g. which analyst - was to be influenced. An AR Pro tells an audience, "[d]on't think of it as Gartner as 'a firm' but think of it as the 'individual analyst', and the relationship that you're trying to build with that analyst" (Webinar 1). Many Magic Quadrants are constructed by 'teams', with each team led by an analyst as well as those who will play other roles such as data collection. A document unpacks the key interactions that need to be taken around the lead author:

> Identify the analyst who leads the creation of a MQ (they do change) and engage the analyst to learn more about the criteria used for vendor evaluation in previous MQs. Engaging the analyst in a discussion, (e.g., a briefing or phone inquiry), should uncover any possible changes in the planned criteria for a forthcoming report (Internal document 1).

A further tool was identifying those aspects that might be reworked. AR Pros typically interrogated analysts around a core set of questions: "What is their set of *assumptions*? What is their *criteria*? What's their *scoring mechanism"* (Webinar 1). A final – and perhaps most important - question was, "What they *think* about you" (Webinar 1). These were the aspects the AR Pro anticipated they might be able to change: "So, it's really, really important to work with that analyst and understand what are their assumptions and what will the criteria be for the upcoming Magic Quadrant?" (Webinar 1). Analysts are increasingly open about and will publicise information on evaluative criteria on websites. But seasoned AR Pros know there are often a set of more subjective or emergent criteria. Teasing this out requires sophisticated strategies as one AR Pro explains: "Gartner is resisting to publish more detailed scoring [and] in some cases this methodology is pretty loose around the edges; it's difficult to get the specifics" (Webinar 1).

A further part of the toolbox was to be judicious about which point in the lifecycle of a ranking to apply pressure as it was commonly understood that there were most opportunities during its birth stages. As this analyst describes:

> The interesting bit is when a market is in flux, when it is in the first year or two. After a while, after two or three years, it is pretty much understood on both sides. And [the criteria] will nudge around a little bit, and the analyst will weight it slightly differently each year, move things around a bit each year, to try and reflect what they think is going on (Analyst 1, interview).

AR Pros recognised that during these initial stages that "[v]ery radical shifts can occur in both the underlying assumptions and the criteria" (Webinar 1). But they also expressed uncertainty about whether and how to approach the analyst. It was recognised that, on the one hand, "sometimes [analysts] don't want to tell you about [the evaluation criteria] because they haven't got it thought out in their head" (Webinar 1). On the other, informants saw how this offered opportunities: "it's actually not a bad idea [to approach the analyst] because if it's not thought out in their head, you have a chance to potentially influence it. If it's really firm, and firmly set in their head, those are the ones that are going to be more difficult for you to change" (Webinar 1).

Certain AR Pros had worked out that it made sense to approach an analyst during a particular moment or 'season':

> At [AR Agency] we're constantly trying to figure out methodologically speaking what we do to make the biggest impact and what we found is…you must also run your 'off-season' well. So, I just want to introduce this word and this concept and talk a little bit about it…the reason why we call the off-season is, just this straightforward sports analogy, champions are made in the off-season. By the time the game starts, you've already lost a huge opportunity to make a difference (Webinar 2).

The 'on' season is the period just before the launch of a ranking when most if not all of the decisions about ranking criteria have been taken; the 'off' season alternatively is the period following the ranking launch and before the work for the new annually updated ranking has begun. This informant stressed that "[t]his off-season we believe is the best time to shape criteria. It is the best time to change weighting and it's the best time to completely inform the analyst about changing their perception about what they think about you" (Webinar 2). The AR Pro goes on, "during this off-season, it is the best time to say, 'Hey, can I ask you to think about the problem in a different way?" (Webinar 2).

We have provided evidence that organisations have developed sophisticated internal expertise and strategies to respond to the new competitive battlefield tendered by rankings. Changing a ranked position was a very real possibility in these circles. Our informants clearly sought to improve their *own* organisation's ranked position. But they indicated that one outcome of their efforts was that they were increasingly in a situation to influence the ranking of a competitor also. We now turn to describe these various strategies.

Section II: Strategies to influence a rival's position

IT vendors focused as much on each other's ranked position as their own. A seasoned AR Pro described how it had become like a "chess game". The goal was not simply to work out their own response but required "anticipating competitors' moves" (Personal email). According to this informant, there was a "widespread and constant chess-game of one vendor trying to de-position a competitor by supplying the analysts with information, insights, and intelligence that puts the competitor in a bad light" (Personal email).

Analysts also deployed similar kinds of analogies to describe how vendor organisations were attempting to organising the competitive encounter through them: "the vendors know exactly how the game is played - and they are *using* the analysts" (Analyst 1, interview). He tells us what 'using the analyst' means:

> It is an interesting two-way battle. The firms don't talk to each other, the vendors - not in a direct fashion, they might off the record - but they are working *through* the analyst and trying to pull it a little bit in their direction of course, how we view their products. We are aware of that. We are aware that we are being manipulated to some degree (Analyst 1, interview).

The competitive encounter between organisations has today been extended onto the new terrain of rankings. As this informant sums up, "[t]hat is where the conflict comes, on those documents, and Magic Quadrants are the epitome of those conflicts" (Analyst 1, interview).

This extension of the competitive encounter onto rankings has also propelled the rise of a new powerful strategic actor – the AR Pro - who is able to claim a tactical role (as opposed to a mere technical assistance or professional expertise) because they control (or promise to control) these relevant 'zones of uncertainty' (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980).[1] Because rankings were channelling the encounter between competitors, it was recognised how their actions could become strategically important. There were those who saw the AR Pro role as merely about arranging meetings with rankers - described pejoratively as a "diary booking service" - but there was also a growing sense that this actor could – or should – be "driving strategy" (Internal presentation 1). Some advocated for how the AR Pro was in a position to leverage "the unique insights of the industry analysts within their value chain to drive superior strategy" (Internal presentation 1), to work upstream and "[s]upport the explanation of a business strategy", to "[a]ssist with short and long term planning" (Internal document 2), to offer the organisation a significant "competitive advantage opportunity" (Webinar 1).

But what are the concrete strategy actions through which organisations engage with rankings? Figure 1 summarises the different ways an organisation might attempt to counter a competitor through a ranking. Firstly, vendors enacted strategic actions to 'leapfrog a rival'. Secondly, vendors deployed strategic actions to 'de-position a competitor'. Thirdly, vendors enacted strategic actions to shake-up an area through 'creating a breakout'. Finally, there were strategic actions whereby a vendor could set the rules of the game or 'own the market'. We will describe these actions in more detail.

[1] This is consistent with Crozier and Friedberg's (1980) classic definition of power as the control over 'zones of uncertainty'.

Figure 1: Inventory of strategic practices through which actors shape rankings

Strategic actions to leap-frog a rival

Organisations embraced strategies to "leapfrog a rival" or to push a "competitors' dots either down or to the left or both" (Webinar 1). This meant actions were not simply conceived of as stratagems for improving one's own position but were imbued with the sense that you could make a move against a rival organisation. For instance, an AR Pro advises others on the different ways they might go about leapfrogging a rival: "Now, if you're on the Magic Quadrant...[w]here do you fit in comparison to your competitors, to all the other people on this Magic Quadrant?" (Webinar 1). If a vendor finds itself unable to move itself up, the advice given is to consider how it might push its competitor's down. The reason being, "[i]f I had the ability to push my competitor down, then by inference, I've pushed myself up" (Webinar 1). This particular AR Pro goes on: "If I happen to have a competitor who's in the Leader box, what can I do to de-position them, move them into the Challenger and perhaps put myself into the Leader?" (Webinar 1).

To push a rival down, an organisation will apparently supply analysts with information "that puts the competitor in a bad light" (Webinar 1). An analyst talked us through such a scenario. Here the vendor was briefing him on their own products but took the opportunity to criticise a rival:

> When we are preparing a Magic Quadrant, when we are having interactions with the vendors, we have to have regular contact with the product managers and the product leaders…Obviously, in those sessions, they'll be saying, 'I can't believe that you've got [rival-1] here or you have got [rival-2] here [on the Magic Quadrant]. You know they are complete rubbish. You know that we have just won this customer from them who had to throw them out because they were completely useless'. So, we get that all the time, you know. They are constantly hectoring us and badgering us and saying, 'You really don't know what is going on out there' (Analyst 4, interview).

There was the (very real) possibility that a rival in working to highlight your weaknesses "could impact your dot" (Webinar 1). An informant gives an example where a rival successfully argued for a modification to the Magic Quadrant's original evaluative criteria, which saw his organisation 'drop' to a weaker position:

> I was a Leader in the original Magic Quadrant, and actually not too bad a position as the Leader. But, because the criteria changed in the new release…not because I changed, but because the way in which I'm being measured has changed, I'm suddenly dropped to a Challenger position, indicating, for example, that I don't have the Vision anymore that Gartner has now put into the criteria for this Magic Quadrant (Webinar 1).

Informants recounted anecdotes about vendors who had become complacent after moving into the top position**.** Successfully moving up and to the right could apparently motivate a rival - especially a close competitor - to double its own efforts to 'de-position you':

> I did have a client once say, 'We have moved into the Leader quadrant, the Leaders' section, on the Magic Quadrant: we're done!'. And that's a really important thing to understand - that to say 'You're done', and not move ahead can be very, very dangerous. Because remember, your competitors are trying to de-position you. So, one of the reasons why we see vendors fail is that they're not staying on top of these evolving criteria and assumptions and they didn't continue to improve the communications with the analyst (Webinar 1).

The work of analyst relations is both a matter of improving your own position and to stop a rival leapfrogging you. This comprised the reflexive task of paying close attention to others' practices, including carrying out research to work to understand a rival's knowledge or expertise. There were apparently a number of tell-tale signs to indicate a rival's preparedness. For instance, an AR Pro advises organisations to "[g]o out and look to see if your competitors have posted any of these Magic Quadrants as reprints" (Webinar 1). Buying 'reprints' – often costing several thousand pounds - would indicate their "understanding of it, and their level of influence, and likewise, how much effort they may be putting into trying to change it as well" (Webinar 1). In these settings, such skills and knowledge provided vendors a competitive edge, especially if rivals did not (yet) possess these skills.

Strategies to de-position a competitor

There were a number of ways to dent the ambition or progress of a close competitor, but none was as damaging as 'killing-off' their ranking. An ex-analyst told us "Magic Quadrants do have a life" and overtime they "become stale", such that they "eventually become killed off or they morph into something very different" (Analyst 5, interview). Killing-off a ranking was not common as it required very high levels of expertise and detailed knowledge of the inner workings of analyst firms. An AR Pro described how: "Gartner does retire old ones and create new ones…Working with the analyst that has two Magic Quadrants, you might be able to alter the characteristics. Working with an analyst that has lots of Magic Quadrants, you might be able to kill a Magic Quadrant" (Webinar 1).

Why might an organisation attempt to kill-off a ranking? An organisation might be incentivised to attempt this when its rival is dominating a ranking and they by contrast were positioning less well. One AR Pro told us how its main rival was ranked as the 'Leader' on one Magic Quadrant but his organisation just a 'Niche Player'. Despite efforts to reverse the position, he was unable to. He thus set about an alternative strategy:

> Gartner had two Magic Quadrant for [technology]: one for [product 1] and the other for [product 2]. My employer…was consistently a Leader in the MQ for [product 1], but a Niche Player in the [MQ for product 2]. Not for lack of trying or significant R&D investment, but [my organisation] did not have a snowball's chance in hell of catching the Leaders on the [product 1] MQ (Personal email).

Our informant brought together evidence to convince the analyst that that the initial market specialisation which warranted two rankings had been replaced by more encompassing 'multi-domain' vendor solutions, which required just the one Magic Quadrant. He goes on to explain:

> So I worked to get Gartner to create a new MQ focused on Multi-domain [products]. It worked! >>grin<< For the 2016 MQ refresh cycle, Gartner retired the two legacy [product 1 and 2] MQs (2015 was the last year of publication) and launched a new MQ for [Multi-domain] Solutions (personal email).

This was highly beneficial as he recounts: "For all three years, [my organisation] has not just been a Leader on this MQ, but the CLEAR Leader" (Personal email).

Encouraging the retiral of a ranking could have significant disruptive effects. Analysts told us that killing-off a ranking "does make vendors very angry" (Analyst 1, interview). Often this is because it means their products are no longer visibly part of the market of offerings. As one ex-analyst describes, "[v]endors often take the view, 'Oh my God! What are we going to do?' There is no Magic Quadrant for us to use as our main mouthpiece" (Analyst 5, interview). The same informant goes on, "if the Magic Quadrant goes away, it is going to hurt. We are not pretending it won't. If you're a Leader in a Magic Quadrant, it is definitely going to win you business. And you will have to find new ways to make up for the loss of that MQ" (Analyst 5, interview).

We also came across less obvious effects from killing-off a ranking. For instance, it was not just that vendor products lose their visibility in the marketplace, there could be other more 'in-house' implications. Apparently, "[a]t many vendors, MQs have more impact internally than externally" (Internal document 3). As an AR Pro explained, if a particular vendor product was well positioned on a Magic Quadrant, the particular internal 'business unit' producing it would typically be held in high regard. The reverse also seemed true:

> Imagine an organisation like [Vendor A] or [Vendor B] for whom it is very important that they are the No. 1 or No. 2 in every market, using the Magic Quadrant. Imagine you are running a line of business inside an organisation and the Magic Quadrant maybe might close. That will be a disaster for you because your work currently is feeding up to some corporate scorecard where the organisation strategically is trying to align its resources to the organisation's performance in Magic Quadrants (AR Pro 2, interview).

Because rankings are often used as internal performance measurement systems, this means that if killed-off, the performance information about the specific product no longer feeds into or make a difference to more organisation-wide measures. From then on, as our informant points out, "your performance doesn't matter to your boss in the same way" (AR Pro 2, interview). As a result, that part of the business could be treated differently: "And if one [business unit] stops being in the Magic Quadrant…you are going to have 9 most important business units rather than 10" (AR Pro 2, interview). Potentially, as this informant makes clear, this could mean that the ones "no longer in Magic Quadrants will be spoken about differently. They will be spoken about as 'mature organisations'; they will be treated like 'cash cows' rather than 'growth markets'" (AR Pro 2, interview). It was not uncommon, we were told, for an organisation to 'retire' a product if its Magic Quadrant was killed-off.

Strategies to own a market

There were a number of strategic actions where a ranked organisation could potentially "own a market" (Webinar 1) thereby forcing everyone else to compete according to the criteria they have had a hand in shaping. Owning a market could be enacted through lobbying for a new ranking and/or market category. An internal document explains how "[c]ategories are vital to validating a technology's value to companies"; they make it "possible for buyers to understand where different solutions fit, and help vendors to reduce confusion about whether their solutions compliment or replace others" (Internal document 3). The document goes on: "In the same way that technology vendors co-create industry standards, influencing categories is crucial for the success of firms that are leading markets, and thus might not fit pre-existing schemas" (Internal document 3). Creating a category "could be done within Magic Quadrants" (Webinar 1).

For instance, one AR Pro describes how he was able to encourage Gartner analysts to create the 'Web Services' Magic Quadrant. The category of Web Services was not yet established within the industry: "I suppose one of the ways, is was around Web Services and it was defining the, it was quite a while ago when one of the, before this area came into existence. It was before Web Services was the big area it was now, and it sort of changed in its definition slightly" (AR Pro 3, interview). Category creation campaigns takes a long time - up to "one or two years" (Internal document 3). It also requires "extensive, prolonged investment", "serious executive commitment" (Internal document 3), and high levels of knowledge and expertise. In creating the Web Services Magic Quadrant, the AR Pro drew on his understanding and often direct involvement in the practices of ranking organisations to craft his interventions in way that resonated most strongly with the ranker. As the AR Pro describes:

> And with analysts we have to educate them to say, 'No, we are actually looking at thing differently'. And we have managed to get them to change the way they approach the scenario. It is harder, you have to get some metrics to get them to change the way they think. But it can be done, and I have done it (AR Pro 3, interview).

Our informant understood the ranker's internal processes for Magic Quadrant creation. This includes establishing that there is a market with enough players for the ranker's work of assessment to be pertinent to its own clients: "We knew that for it to become a Magic Quadrant in its own right it had to have a certain amount of revenue within it, it had to have a certain number of vendors competing within it, lots of different scenarios" (AR Pro 3, interview). The AR Pro supplied this information: "And it worked. They actually developed a new way of looking at things" (AR Pro 3, interview).

Creating a new ranking or category was potentially highly advantageous. As an internal document describes, "because few firms attempt it seriously, the benefits accrue massively to those who do" (Internal document 3). As another AR Pro explained, "You can own a market if you redefine the category, so you're the Leader" (Webinar 1). It meant, for instance, that everyone else – your rivals - must compete according to the criteria which you have had a hand in shaping: "[y]ou're unique in this category; everybody else is an also-ran. And you're going to be the Leader" (Webinar 1).

Strategies to encourage or exploit a breakout

A final strategic action is to try to encourage or exploit a 'breakout'. Ranking breakouts were highly disruptive and could place an incumbent under pressure, but also provide vendors previously excluded from a ranking the opportunity to enter. We came across two kinds of breakout: *geographical breakouts* and *technical breakouts*.

Geographical breakouts are where a 'global' Magic Quadrant is divided into a number of 'regional' versions. Large incumbents tend to dominate global Magic Quadrants since they sell into multiple geographical markets. But it was also these vendors who could be most negatively impacted from a breakout because they are *not* automatically included in all new regional rankings if they do not have a physical presence in the region. As an AR Pro describes, "[i]magine you have a global market segment that shows [a French vendor] as the world's No. 6 IT firm, and shows [a Japanese vendor] as being the world's No. 2 IT firm, and you segment that into North America, Europe and Asia" (AR Pro 3, interview). What happens then is that these vendors who "are in the top 10 of IT firms globally" might "just disappear off the North America Magic Quadrant" (AR Pro 3, interview). If this happens, these vendors will then find it difficult to sell into the North American market and could be forced into quite radical action such as striking partnerships with vendors in North America.[2]

Technical breakouts are where a product covered in one Magic Quadrant is divided into several more specialised versions. For instance, we observed the case of 'Governance, Risk Management and Compliance' (GRC) which went from one to eight Magic Quadrants overnight. Technical breakouts put incumbents in difficulty because their products are now subject to more scrutiny. According to this informant, this offered a rival the potential to highlight weaknesses:

> If you have got Governance and Compliance solutions that are able to do the core things, [but] there are 8 Magic Quadrants now. Let's say that there are 8 things that these solutions could do, but probably most of them will only be really, really excellent at 2 or 3 of these pieces of functionality. They won't need to be great at all of them. But suddenly you break it out into separate Market Quadrants and then it becomes visible that you are weak (AR Pro 3, interview).

[2] Our informant describes how he "worked with a client who had exactly this happen to them [a geographical breakout] and…within weeks they had signed a contract with a provider in North America to deliver services to their clients, even though as a massive global IT organisation they had no problem delivering in North America…But they needed to partner with one of those firms in North America that was on that top chart" (AR Pro 3, interview).

Breakouts could be used to identify weaknesses or gaps in a rival's solutions, which could then be brought to the attention of buyers and others. As this informant describes, "suddenly you break it out into separate [Magic] Quadrants and then it becomes visible that you are weak and then that becomes a 'proof point' for your competitors" (AR Pro 3, interview). Our informant describes how these proof points could be used in sales discussions. A prospect is interested in a rival vendor, but despite being a Leader in the old GRC Magic Quadrant, it is not ranked in the new Network Firewalls Magic Quadrant. The vendor makes the prospect aware of how its rival is absent from the ranking and its imputed deficiencies: "[y]ou are using a Firewall System, a system that doesn't have Intrusion Detection. And OK, at the moment you are not worried about Intrusion Detection. But what if you *do* become worried about Intrusion Detection?" (AR Pro 3, interview). A technical breakout could also force an incumbent to take large-scale remedial actions similar to those described above.[3]

By contrast, for those initially excluded from a ranking, a breakout could be highly positive. As an analyst described, this is because "where you have more Magic Quadrants, you have more chance of being on one" (Analyst 1, interview). Similarly, as another analyst describes, the sudden entrance of new Magic Quadrants "provides a stimulus for the vendors to go after the analyst afresh" (Analyst 4, interview). This informant tells us how, "I will find myself talking with vendors who maybe feel the MQ is very unfair to them or maybe they struggle to even get eligibility to even be in a Magic Quadrant". Or, as this informant goes on, "if you have got a very dated MQ that has been there for many years, it probably doesn't change much from one year to another, the mind-set of the analyst maybe closed and myopic as well" (Analyst 4, interview). So, when Magic Quadrants are broken up this provides openings: "the fact is when the analysts are forced to rethink the way they assess the market they are more open minded. They are more open to suggestions and ideas" (Analyst 4, interview).

DISCUSSION

While there is growing evidence that rankings engender competitive rivalry effects (Wedlin, 2006; Espeland and Sauder, 2016; Mehrpouya and Samiolo, 2016; Brankovic, et al., 2018), we know little about how organisations respond to these effects and how they unfold at the level of organisational strategy (Kornberger, 2017; Rindova et al., 2018). In conducting an ethnographic study of how information technology vendors engage with rankings, we have provided insights into the strategic actions they developed to improve their own position and confront their rivals and weaken their ranked position. Our data suggests organisations are exchanging high numbers of strategic moves against one another, identified through the field-inspired labels of 'leapfrogging a rival', 'de-positioning a competitor', 'owning

[3] According to our informant, to offset the increased scrutiny their products were receiving, vendors might be forced to seek out partnerships (and sometimes even acquire) vendors in those areas where it was perceived to be weak: "the existence of these extra Magic Quadrants drives a whole series of partnership deals that the vendors on Magic Quadrant A are suddenly picking up those on Magic Quadrant B and they are looking to make alliances with the vendors on these other Magic Quadrants. These new vendors that have come in, and of course there is a rush for them because not everyone can have the same partner. So that then drives partnerships, and the partnerships if they are successful drives Merger & Acquisition" (AR Pro 3, interview).

a market' and 'encouraging a break-out', which together we theorise as 'ranking strategy'. We have defined ranking strategy as the strategic practices developed by organisations to actively shape rivalries.

Four actions of ranking strategy

The first strategic practice captures how an organisation attempts to 'leap-frog a rival'. E.g. to move above or push them down. Scholars point to how rankings create a "system of stratification" where inclusion of an organisation involves them "accepting the competitive terms of this status hierarchy", which includes how "one [organisation's] ascent requires another's descent" (Sauder and Espeland 2009, p. 77). Though jockeying for position was present in Sauder and Espeland's (2009, p. 77) study, this was seen as mostly unwanted - and in the words of one their informants – "disturbing". Our study shows instead, in the contexts we studied, rankings accentuate these direct forms of competition where an organisation may directly look to 'put a competitor in a bad light' with a ranker.

The second strategic practice is to 'de-position a rival'. The competitive relations between vendors have become so intense that a vendor might be motivated to invest (often significant) resources to 'undermine' a rival's position (Rindova et al., 2018, p. 2195). We found this could include trying to convince a ranker to 'retire' a ranking where a close rival was dominating. Killing-off a ranking could harm a rival because losing one's position on a ranking can be a source of anxiety, especially if the organisation is the leader. There is the potential for 'status anxiety' as there will no longer be the same certainty about "who is on top of the status order" (Brandter 2017, p. 214).

The third strategic practice is to 'own a market'. Here we throw light on how rankings or market categories are created in the first place and the role of powerful "stakeholders" in that process (Rindova et al., 2018, p. 2191). An organisation might attempt to try to reduce competitive pressure, at least briefly, through attempting to influence a ranking's evaluative criteria. The more skilled a vendor is in establishing 'its' ranking, the greater its competitive strength will be, including its resistance to the influences and actions of rivals attempting to displace it.

The fourth strategic practice is how a vendor may try to 'encourage or exploit a breakout'. Breakouts could, on the one hand, offer an excluded organisation further opportunity to enter or excel on a ranking. In a more 'plural' ranking system "there can be more than one winner" (Brandter 2017, p. 201). Large incumbents, on the other hand, could find breakouts harmful as they may might find themselves 'de-positioned' from a ranking or they might provide 'proof points' that competitors could use to show that they are weak in certain areas.

Ranking strategy

Through analysing how organisations respond to rankings at the more strategic level we reveal a significant new set of strategic activities, theorised as 'ranking strategy'. Constructing a ranking strategy allowed organisations to modulate the competitive rivalry effects stemming from rankings – which could include to increase or decrease competitive rivalries. The concept builds on previous studies of rankings which have also attempted to characterise organisational attempts to have a say in setting "the rules of the game" (Corley and Gioia, 2000) and have employed notions like 'lobbying' (Wedlin, 2006) and 'negotiating' (Chelli and Gendron, 2013). In so doing, our study shares in the general shift beyond the idea of the ranking as a 'black box' (Eposito and Stark, 2019) towards conceptualisations that recognise how organisations form close 'interactions' with rankers (Sauder and Fine, 2009; Rindova et al., 2018).

In articulating ranking strategy, we do not wish to convey the impression that organisational actors are able to drive or control the shape of rankings. Rather, they had success in shaping the "cycle of influence" (Analyst 6, interview), to use the words of an informant. E.g. they could open up channels with rankers and feed ideas and information into their evaluation process. Existing work in the sociology of markets has studied similar forms of influence around 'market categories'. As Ponikes (2018, p. 628) writes, because there is "flexibility in how people construct categories", this "opens opportunities for category strategy to influence how people conceive of markets".

Contribution 1: Gaming process giving way to strategic responses?

Our study's findings challenge the narrowly focused 'gaming' analysis in which organisations are seen to embark on "symbolic responses" located at the "margins of organisational practice" (Sauder and Espeland 2009, p. 77). We show, by contrast, how organisations in certain contexts appear to be embracing rankings and putting them at the centre of activities. Though the notion of gaming remains a useful concept, illuminating critical resistance to the internalisation of rankings (Sauder and Espeland 2009, p. 74), there is growing evidence that the organisational response has evolved. In this respect, we answer calls to throw light on the "strategic actions" that organisations take to influence rankings (Rindova et al., 2018, p. 12; Brandter, 2017). Assuming organisations build the necessary expertise, the gaming process might give way to strategic responses. This echoes Power's (2019) discussion of the shift from "push" to "pull" stratagems. In the former, ranking processes are not thought "a priority" as they bear "little relation" to existing organisational practices. In the latter, organisational actors not only "welcome and desire" rankings but seek to "amplify and elaborate" them because they recognise their power and influence (ibid.).

Contribution 2: Rankings pattern competitive rivalries in new ways

Our study offers new understandings of the important question why organisations might become rivals in the first place (Porac et al., 1995) and provides indications of how rankings could pattern competitive rivalries in new ways (Durand and Paolella, 2013; Pontikes, 2019). In this respect, we answer calls by strategy and organisation theory scholars to build understanding of "when and why organisations compete" (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). Others similarly note that "[c]ompetition is more often investigated and questioned in its consequences rather than its preconditions" (Samiolo and Mehrpouya, 2020). There is also growing interest in understanding whether and how competitive rivalries might die out. In particular, how a situation that has "been constructed as competitive becomes uncompetitive?" (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, p. 18).

In the fields of strategy and organisation theory, the question of rivalry has been framed around a discussion of market categories. Our study is relevant here because scholars have identified how rankings are a key trigger in category formation (Durand and Paolella, 2013). But category scholars often approach the study of rivalries as either resulting from managerial cognition or broader institutional and cultural factors. For instance, Porac et al., (1995, p. 205) argued that who might be considered a rival was the "product *of* managerial minds" (Porac et al. 1995, p. 224). In discussing the *US News & World Report* and other rankings, Durand and Paolella (2013) identify how it is ultimately "audience interpretations" that decide rivalry. But we have shown how rivalry is not simply the product of managerial cognition or audience interpretations. There may be benefits in exploring rivalry through the practices of engagement that occur around rankings as we do here. Studying such strategy practices may offer alternative entry point as well as opening up new possibilities for research on rivalries.

In particular, our study not only invites greater integration between discussions of rankings and market categories but raises the question whether ranking strategy realises unique kinds of competition. E.g. are rivalries enacted by rankings likely to be of a different character than those surrounding a category? For example, while our insights echo Pontikes' (2018. p. 626) discussion of how organisations leverage strategy to influence a market category, our focus on rankings runs counter to her inference that shaping a market category requires organisations to "band together" and to pursue "collaboration over competition". Pontikes (2018, p. 625) writes that "sound category strategy focuses on influencing the category boundary such that the firm is in a favorable position with respect to competitors", but this does not extend to keeping "all competitors out of the category". We show, by contrast, that the competitive rivalry effects surrounding rankings appears to encourage struggle and confrontation.

Moreover, rankings appear to afford different temporalities with regard to rivalries. We contrast, for instance, the constantly changing ground of rankings with the rather long-lived character of market categories (Durand and Paolella, 2013). Because rankings in the IT area are constantly created and retired (Pontikes and Kim, 2017), our data suggests that rankings create 'episodic' (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020) forms of rivalry. E.g. organisations are brought together organisations for intense periods of rivalry but may no longer desire the same level of competition once their ranking has been killed-off. Thus, in contrast to the market category literature that assumes rivalries are enduring, our study suggest they can have a rather limited lifespan.

Contributions 3: Illuminating and theorising a new set of strategy practices

Our final contribution is to the strategy practices literature where we provide an inventory of the strategy actions through which organisations engage with these new competitive battlefields. This new inventory has the potential to advance the strategy as practice agenda in two specific ways. First, we extend the focus of this literature into an increasingly important but not yet identified domain of strategising (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). As Vaara and Whittington (2012) note, this literature has generally ignored the problem of the *origins* of strategy (directing attention to already established strategies). In our study we witness the birth of a new domain or category of strategising in response to changing external environments. Indeed, our data shows these actions were not always formally or universally expressed as strategy. Organisations tacitly implemented them (Jarzablowski et al., 2007). But they can be thought of as strategic because they are consequential in creating competitive advantage (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Second, this study also contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of 'strategies of engagement' defined as those "plans and actions that aim at influencing and changing the calculation of another actor in one own's favour" (Kornberger and Vaara, 2020). The literature recognises the importance of strategies of engagement but has not explored them in depth, tending instead to focus on internal strategic practices, which, as Kornberger and Vaara (2020) argue, has meant that it has lost sight of how organisations might engage each other. Ranking strategy goes some way to readdress this imbalance through throwing light on the moves organisations are making against one another.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our data points to how rankings, because they mediate an already large and fast-growing proportion of competitive encounters, are not simply the enabling mechanism for strategy analysis but increasingly the object of strategy itself. We provide insights into how developing and implementing a well-crafted ranking strategy appears to be becoming a requirement for organisations in certain areas (we say requirement because those not devoting often significant resources to such a strategy could be outmanoeuvred by a competitor who is). An empirical programme is needed to build better knowledge of what it takes to develop and execute ranking strategy from one sector to another, while noting that in different contexts the intensity, modalities, and extension of these strategy actions will differ. Though clearly not exhaustive of all possible actions, our inventory provides a focus for empirical enquiry into ranking strategy and its relation to general competitive strategies. We do not necessarily think that organisations will engage in all the strategy actions described above. Strategies are likely to be more developed in certain contexts than others. We should also be careful to pay attention to the limitations of ranking strategy. As acknowledged by Sauder and Fine (2008), influencing a ranking is a difficult and time-consuming process that requires bringing together more than one set of skills. Accordingly, future work could focus on the kinds of limits those constructing and deploying ranking strategy come up against.

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