



# The character and significance of Nordic purchasing and supply management research: A systematic review of the literature



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## ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the character and significance of Nordic contributions to purchasing and supply management (PSM) research. The paper is based on a systematic analysis of the literature, focusing on the contributions of authors with a Nordic affiliation to PSM. We seek to identify the themes in focus of Nordic PSM research, the research methods and theories that are typically employed; ultimately we discuss if a Nordic PSM school of thought or approach can be discerned and evaluate if or in which areas Nordic PSM research has made significant impact. We conclude the paper by outlining and discussing important future avenues of research for Nordic research in PSM.

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## 1. Introduction

The Nordic countries have made many important contributions to management research, including research within or closely related to purchasing and supply management (PSM). For example, the Nordic school of internationalization and networks was led by researchers at Nordic institutions (see e.g. Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). Building on this work, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group, which has strong roots in the Nordic countries, produced seminal research into buyer–supplier relationships and industrial networks (Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). In more recent years we have also witnessed an increasing amount of Nordic research into logistics and supply chain management (Arlbjørn et al., 2008). Indeed, the annual Nordic Logistics Research Network (NOFOMA) conference attracts a large group of predominantly Nordic scholars, whose research spans logistics, supply chain management and purchasing. Thus, there appears to be a thriving community of Nordic researchers who either dedicate all or some of their work to PSM and who appear to have been influential over several decades in shaping PSM research directions internationally.

However, it is not clear if Nordic researchers make significant contributions to PSM that impact the field at the international level and if there is anything that gives Nordic PSM research, in the

words of Pettigrew (1992) in the context of strategy process research, a *significant and distinctive character*. This leads us to ask: Have researchers from across the different Nordic countries made significant contributions to the rapidly developing field of PSM in recent years and do these contributions have a distinctive character? For example, does Nordic PSM research build on and contribute to particular theories, such as the IMP Interaction Approach, and do they tend to rely on a particular methodological approach?

During the last two decades, the field of PSM has developed significantly and in particular directions. Wynstra (2010) identified that supplier relations, supply base management/sourcing strategy, PSM/corporate strategy, PSM organization and Information & Communications Technologies (ICT) are enduring topics published in the *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management* (JPSM). Internationally, researchers have also focused on, for example, issues concerning sustainability (Walker et al., 2012) and public procurement (as evidenced by the emergence of a journal dedicated to this topic) and these topics are clearly growing in importance. However, to date there has been no assessment of the Nordic contributions to specific areas of PSM research, identifying which areas are being researched and which are being ignored, and no analysis of Nordic country patterns.

Within this overall research question we raise a number of specific questions including:

- (1) Which areas have Nordic PSM research focused on?
- (2) What characterizes Nordic PSM contributions in terms of research

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**Table 1**  
Journals included in literature analysis.

| Journal                                                                 | Abbr.   | DK        | SE        | NO        | SF        | Total/journal |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------------|
| Journal of Operations Management                                        | JOM     | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1             |
| Journal of Business Logistics                                           | JBL     | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| Journal of Supply Chain Management                                      | JSCM    | 1         | 1         | 1         | 0         | 3             |
| Harvard Business Review                                                 | HBR     | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 1             |
| International Journal of Logistics management                           | IJLM    | 0         | 0         | 1         | 1         | 2             |
| Sloan Management Review                                                 | SMR     | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| Strategic Management Journal                                            | SMJ     | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 1             |
| Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management (European)                  | JPSM    | 10        | 27        | 10        | 7         | 54            |
| Decision Sciences Journal                                               | DSJ     | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management | IJPDLM  | 0         | 8         | 1         | 2         | 11            |
| Supply Chain Management: An International Journal                       | SCMIJ   | 3         | 2         | 1         | 1         | 7             |
| Production and Operations Management                                    | POM     | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| International Journal of Operations and Production Management           | IJOPM   | 0         | 2         | 1         | 1         | 4             |
| International Journal of Integrated Supply Management                   | IJISM   | 0         | 2         | 0         | 0         | 2             |
| Industrial Marketing Management                                         | IMM     | 10        | 7         | 4         | 3         | 24            |
| Management Science                                                      | MS      | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| Business Strategy Review                                                | BSR     | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing                            | JBIM    | 4         | 2         | 2         | 4         | 12            |
| International Journal of Production Research                            | IJPR    | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing                               | JBBM    | 0         | 1         | 4         | 0         | 5             |
| Interfaces                                                              | –       | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| European Journal of Operational Research                                | EJOR    | 2         | 0         | 0         | 2         | 4             |
| Omega: the International Journal of Management Science                  | Omega   | 0         | 1         | 2         | 0         | 3             |
| International Journal of Production Economics                           | IJPE    | 0         | 1         | 0         | 2         | 3             |
| IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management                             | IEEETEM | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| Journal of the Operational Research Society                             | JORS    | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0             |
| Journal of Public Procurement                                           | JPP     | 0         | 4         | 1         | 2         | 7             |
| <b>Total Nordic Publications</b>                                        |         | <b>31</b> | <b>60</b> | <b>28</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>144</b>    |

Note: DK=Denmark, SE=Sweden, NO=Norway and SF=Finland

#### methods?

- (3) Which theories do Nordic PSM researchers rely on and contribute to?
- (4) Can we discern a Nordic PSM distinctive character?

The paper is intended to provide a critical assessment of the current state of PSM research in the Nordic countries and to evaluate the character and significance of Nordic PSM research. Although some recent research has evaluated Nordic contributions to logistics and supply chain management research (Arlbjørn et al., 2008), there is a lack of research doing the same for PSM. We may ask: why is this interesting? In our view, it is relevant to analyze the state of Nordic PSM research in order to identify patterns in this body of research and, in doing so, decipher if there are particular characteristics of Nordic PSM research and indeed if it makes sense to talk about a Nordic PSM school of thought in the same vein as a Nordic school of industrial networks. It is relevant to establish whether a Nordic-wide approach exists or whether there are significant differences across the Nordic countries. The paper should therefore be relevant to any PSM scholar with an interest in understanding more about Nordic PSM research. Although Nordic PSM researchers may have the most obvious interest in such an analysis, we believe that it should also be relevant to other researchers that have encountered Nordic PSM-related research wondering if there is anything unique about it. Additionally, this research effort will also help to identify relevant topics, theoretical perspectives as well as methodologies that Nordic PSM researchers could embrace to execute their future research efforts.

For this reason we conclude the paper by outlining several avenues of research that Nordic PSM researchers need to embrace because our analysis clearly shows that some areas are neglected yet present obvious opportunities. These avenues of research are meant as a wake-up call for Nordic PSM researchers with which to fully engage and, ideally, develop a leading international position.

## 2. Methodology

While this paper seeks to evaluate Nordic contributions to PSM research, our distinctive focus is on research published in academic journals that are viewed as having an impact on the scientific community. Accordingly, the literature review follows a systematic methodology (Tranfield et al., 2003) that focuses on contributions in 27 journals identified by Zsidisin et al. (2007) as the leading journals that publish PSM research. This means that these are not purely PSM-specific journals, but well-ranked journals that publish PSM research; we excluded one journal as it is not an academic peer reviewed journal and also added a journal that is specifically dedicated to public procurement. The choice of the 27 journals based on Zsidisin et al. (2007) means that we focus on publications that appear in journals that have already been shown as the most important for PSM research. Consequently, we acknowledge that our study does not consider research published in other sources including books, non-listed journals, conferences and reports are not included in our analysis.

Each of the 27 journals was scrutinized for the search terms procurement, sourcing and purchasing in title, keywords or abstract (when appropriate). Abstracts were included, as they often give a better indication of the real topic of the paper than only the title (Rozemeijer et al., 2012), ensuring that papers on unrelated topics such as business-to-consumer (B2C) would be excluded. All journals were searched back to the start of their publication where possible. The three search terms were combined with a country search term (Sweden (SE), Norway (NO), Finland (SF), Denmark (DK) or Iceland (IS) in the field “author affiliation”. As not all journals provide the information on author affiliation, some affiliation searches had to be conducted manually. Following initial analysis it was decided to leave out Iceland from the analysis due to limited results. The search and filtering process resulted in the construction of a database containing the analysis of all the relevant papers meeting our criteria from these 27 journals; in total

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