

Review

Looking Back to Move Forward: A Review of the Evolution of Research in International Marketing Channels

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Abstract

Over the past fifty years, the scope of research on international marketing channels has significantly evolved. From an early focus on factors influencing the expansion of marketing channels internationally, the literature now investigates a myriad of topics related to the challenges of selecting channel structures and managing channel relationships. This article investigates the evolution of international marketing channels research by reviewing 353 international channels-related articles published from 1965 to 2014 under a periodization approach. The assessment of the state and evolution of the literature is used as a foundation for the identification of emerging themes that will move the field of international marketing channels forward.

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Introduction

Marketing channels are inter-organizational institutional configurations for directing and supporting the flow, from production to use, of value (Balderston 1964) and have been a central focus of the marketing discipline since its founding as a field of academic inquiry (Bartels 1965; Wilkie and Moore 2003). Through the study of marketing channels, researchers have developed a thoughtful understanding of the structure and management of such inter-organizational arrangements (e.g., Frazier 1983; Heide 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006); however, it was not until the field of marketing channels progressed from domestic issues to a global focus, slightly more than fifty years ago, that the study of its more intricate international element began to be formalized (Achrol, Reve, and Stern 1983; Griffith and Ryans 1995; Wilkie and Moore 2003). Driven by a dramatic increase in the international activities of firms post-World War II, research

has since investigated a plethora of international issues ranging from the factors influencing the internationalization of marketing channels to the cultural, political and economic differences that effect the structure and management of international marketing channels (e.g., Anderson and Coughlan 1987; Bello and Gilliland 1997; Cavusgil, Deligonul, and Zhang 2004; Contractor and Kundu 1998; Kauser and Shaw 2004; Morgan, Kaleka, and Katsikeas 2004; Severin, Louviere, and Finn 2001). The rapid growth and expansion of research on international marketing channels has resulted in the emergence of many independent areas of inquiry. The failure to systematically evaluate the literature not only limits our understanding of the advancements made to date, but more importantly limits our ability to advance the field into new areas of study.

Consequently, the purpose of this article is to review the evolution of research on international marketing channels from the past to the present day in terms of established trends in topics and thought as well as to provide a prospective look to future areas of inquiry. By doing so, this article attempts to make two key contributions to the literature. First, while previous reviews have been conducted on specific topics or constructs commonly examined in the literature (e.g., Aspelund, Madsen, and Moen 2007; Katsikeas, Leonidou, and Morgan

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2000; Sousa and Lages 2011), to the best of our knowledge, none have sought to take a broad-based developmental approach to understanding the extant literature. We examine the topics, theories, and methods from a bird's-eye view to uncover the breadth and depth of the field as well as the themes that intertwine between areas to push the field forward. Second, this review contributes to the literature by employing a periodization approach (cf. Hollander et al. 2005) assessing the literature into five-year periods to identify changes in the thoughts and actions of researchers in the field of international marketing channels. Through utilizing a periodization approach, we can better understand not only what contributions have been made and in what areas they have occurred, thereby organizing the extant literature, but also their pattern of development, thereby providing a foundation for identifying emerging themes that could assist in determining the future of international marketing channels research.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: First, we begin with a discussion of the study of international marketing channels, identifying its fundamental distinctions from domestic marketing channels using the political economy framework (cf. Achrol, Reve, and Stern 1983; Stern and Reve 1980). Next, we present the methodology used to provide the foundation for the review. Then, through a systematic analysis of 353 articles from the extant literature, we detail the current state of the literature via the trends in the topics examined, the theories employed, and the methods utilized and describe the evolution of thought in international marketing channels. Lastly, building from the review and the framework, emerging themes of future research are discussed. We conclude with prospective reflection on the role of international marketing channels research within the larger literature on marketing channels.

International Marketing Channels

The importance of international marketing channels on the firm's global marketing operations (and strategies) has been a focus of scholars for over half a century (e.g., Achrol, Reve, and Stern 1983; Morgan, Kaleka, and Katsikeas 2004; Samaha, Beck, and Palmatier 2014). To better understand international marketing channels research, it is important to identify the key distinction in philosophy between studies examining domestic marketing channels and studies examining international marketing channels. Marketing channels, as noted previously, are generally defined as inter-organizational institutional configurations for directing and supporting the flow, from production to use, of value (Balderston 1964). Conceptualized within the political economy framework (Achrol, Reve, and Stern 1983; Stern and Reve 1980), marketing channels can be decomposed into a primary task, a secondary task and a macro-environment. The primary task environment consists of the immediate parties within the focal dyad (i.e., suppliers and customers). The secondary task environment consists of the less immediate upstream and downstream parties that interact with the focal dyad as well as the regulatory agents and other parties that have an influence on the focal dyad. The macro-environment consists of the general social, economic, political and technological

forces impinging on the activities occurring within the primary and secondary task environments. The key distinction between international marketing channels and domestic marketing channels research is the environment that is selected as the primary focus.

In the domestic marketing channel context, the primary focus is on understanding the activities occurring within the primary and secondary task environments while maintaining homogeneity in the macro-environment. Research on the primary task environment has examined issues that influence the behaviors of the focal dyad (inclusive of the structure of the dyad and its management), such as implicit and explicit contracts or extra-contractual incentives (e.g., Kashyap, Antia, and Frazier 2012; Lusch and Brown 1996), whereas research on the secondary task environment has expanded beyond the focal dyad to issues related to upstream/downstream channel partner structure and management, such as how behavior toward a downstream customer depends upon the governance mechanisms employed toward an upstream supplier (Wathne and Heide 2004) or how suppliers enhance profitability by balancing the investments made with their manufacturers and their indirect industrial buyers (Dahlquist and Griffith 2014). By focusing on the activities occurring within the primary and secondary task environment, research on domestic marketing channels has broadened our understanding of how domestic channels are structured and managed.

Broadening this understanding, the primary focus of international marketing channels research has been on examining the influence of macro-environmental heterogeneity on the primary and secondary task environment (investigating primary and secondary task environmental phenomena under consideration of macro-environmental heterogeneity). For example, heterogeneity has been investigated via constructs such as national culture dimensions (Kim and Oh 2002), cultural distance (Lee 1998), psychic distance (Griffith and Dimitrova 2014), institutional distance (Yang, Su, and Fam 2012) geographic distance (Trimarchi, Liesch, and Tamaschke 2010), market volatility (Bello and Gilliland 1997), etc. The use of macro-environment heterogeneity within research has primarily occurred in two ways. The first is by utilizing a comparative approach to examine differences in the activities in the primary and secondary task environments across heterogeneous macro-environments. An example of the comparative approach would be examining how the trust and commitment of channel members differs between channel relationships based in Chile and those based in Bangladesh (e.g., Bianchi and Saleh 2010) (i.e., an examination of primary task environment interactions compared across macro-environments). The second is by utilizing a contrasting approach to explore situations where the macro-environments of the focal dyad actors, who are participating in the primary or secondary task environment are heterogeneous (i.e., understanding primary task environment interactions when channel members come from heterogeneous macro-environments). Examples of the contrasting approach would include examining the efforts of firms to internationalize into new countries (e.g., Vasilchenko and Morrish 2011) or the factors that influence trust between Chinese buyers and

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