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The evolving role of trade fairs in business: A systematic literature review and a research agenda

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes and critically discusses the state of the art of the trade fair scientific literature. The study adopts a systematic literature review, performed through a comparison of peer-reviewed articles on trade fairs, trade shows and exhibitions. A total of 125 papers (from 1927 to 2016) included in 31 different journals were used in the analysis. The papers were aggregated into the following themes: i) TF participation and outcomes; ii) TF market and management, and iii) TF structural meaning. Each theme comprises a set of related topics. By systemizing the research to date and deriving research avenues, the paper guides researchers to further understand the trade fair topical and structural meanings, contributing to edify a coherent and robust body of theory relevant to both academics and practitioners.

1. Introduction

The trade fair¹ (TF) is a planned event where “manufacturers, distributors and other vendors display their products or describe their services to invited persons including current and prospective customers, suppliers, other business associates and the press” (Bonoma, 1983, p.76). The TF context may be business-to-business (B2B) (restricted to trade) or business-to-consumer (B2C) (open to the general public) (Palumbo & Herbig, 2002). Although historically TFs can be traced back to biblical times, they still play a relevant role in the current business environment (Palumbo & Herbig, 2002). For example, the relevance of TFs is reflected in their economic impact and worldwide growth (Dekimpe, François, Gopalakrishna, Lilien, & Bulte, 1997; Geigenmüller, 2010). The global TF market covers about 31.000 exhibitions per year, involving 4.4 million exhibitors and 260 million visitors. Europe and North America, followed by Asia offer the biggest venues, with respectively 48%, 24% and 20% of the total indoor exhibition space (UFI, 2014).

Each specific TF event gathers under the same roof most relevant stakeholders related to a particular market or industry (Blythe, 2010) (e.g., producers/sellers, customers/buyers). In general, the TF is a workspace where it is possible to obtain information about the trends in the industry and the market (Hansen, 1999; Smith, Hama, & Smith,

2003). For example, visitors look for information and learning at TFs (e.g. Li, 2006; Rinallo, Borghini, & Golfetto, 2010) that are key at individual and organizational levels (Bettis-Outland, Cromartie, Johnston, & Borders, 2010; Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995). Such learning experience can generate macro-level effects with a collective sense making and idea of communitas (Borghini, Golfetto, & Rinallo, 2006). The TF also tailors to individual stakeholders' interests. From the exhibitors' viewpoint, the TF brings the customer to the company resulting in a high concentration of potentially interested buyers (Godar & O'Connor, 2001; Gopalakrishna & Williams, 1992). Visitors tend to seek for innovation (Blythe, 2002; Munuera & Ruiz, 1999; Rosson & Seringhaus, 1995) or to find new suppliers (Hansen, 1999).

Despite the relevance of TFs for business, existing research in the area seems to be generally scarce (e.g. Geigenmüller, 2010; Gopalakrishna, Roster, & Sridhar, 2010; Shipley, Egan, & Wong, 1993), offers a limited understanding of the field (Kim et al., 2013), and does not clearly report the expanding role that TFs have for businesses. As Pitta et al. (2006, p. 159) refer “...there has been very little academic interest...Moreover, few college curricula cover the topic in appreciable detail... (and therefore) few promotional managers have a theoretical background that can underpin their efforts”. Considering the relevance of this activity to the global economic development and to companies, more research is needed to better understand the field and its evolution.

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¹ The terms trade fair, trade show and exhibition are often used interchangeably (Bettis-Outland et al., 2012). In interest of consistency, in this paper we use the term trade fair, except when presenting the literature review tables and citations where the authors' terminology is used.

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This study presents an extensive scholarly literature review regarding TFs. By looking at the evolving debate in the area, the investigation further rekindles the topic by proposing a future research agenda.

2. Method

The study develops a systematic literature review of the TF-related research. The systematic literature review provides “collective insights through theoretical synthesis into fields and sub-fields” (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003, p.220) and is argued to be reproducible, objective, transparent, unbiased, and rigorous (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015). The review establishes a protocol to objectively identify, select, and assess articles. As an outcome, produces a synthesis that depicts the depth of knowledge in the field (Watson, 2015).

The literature review started with a planning phase and definition of the review protocol. Prior to beginning the review, the researchers defined a plan providing explicit description of the steps to be taken, including the search strategy for identification of relevant studies. The following phase entailed the selection of studies and the data extraction and synthesis (Tranfield et al., 2003). A review panel comprised of 5 practitioners in the field (2 exhibitors, 1 visitor and 2 TF organizers) assisted throughout the review process, in order to mitigate any doubts/disputes faced during the course of the research.

2.1. Selection of studies

The selection process focused on academic journal papers. The sources were gathered through a comparison of peer-reviewed papers addressing subjects related to TFs. The selection excluded the following outlets: books, book reviews, special issue introductions, editorials, forewords, brief commentaries, or practitioner publications. The papers were selected following impartial cross-referencing. The major English language peer-reviewed journals in the areas of marketing and management were scanned using the following keywords: trade fair(s), trade show(s), and exhibition(s). The search was conducted in online journal databases namely Proquest, EBSCO, Scopus, Emerald, JSTOR, Elsevier. In order to have a wide interdisciplinary understanding of the field, the selection process included cross-references, bringing together papers in the areas of hospitality and geography, planning and development.

Although no start date was specified, the records identified the first article as being published in 1927 and papers were considered until the end of 2016. The review process resulted in a list of 125 papers. The papers are spread over 31 periodicals in the fields of management, marketing, hospitality, and geography, planning and development (Appendix A). The three periodicals including approximately half of the publications (45,6%) are in the more specialized areas of industrial marketing or event tourism: Industrial Marketing Management (18,4%), Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing (16,0%) and Journal of Convention & Event Tourism (11,2%). The fact that the two most prolific outlets are in the area of industrial marketing, reflects the relevance that industrial and B2B TFs have for companies' in fostering market development and/or consolidating marketing strategies. The importance that these outlets devote to the field is confirmed by the special issue publication dedicated to TFs in the Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing in 2010 including 8 papers. The Journal of Convention & Event Tourism captures work related to tourism events.

2.2. Data extraction and synthesis

The data was inserted in a database capturing the following information related to each paper: i) paper details (author/year/journal/title); ii) keywords; iii) stakeholder perspective (exhibitor/visitor/TF organizer); iv) type of TF (B2B/B2C); v) study's fieldwork location; vi) method/sample; vii) objectives, findings and contribution; and, viii) future research. The analysis entailed articles evaluated without

Table 1
Overview of the TF literature.

Publication date	No. of papers	%	Stakeholder	No. of papers	%
1927–1980	6	4,8	Exhibitor	68	59,1
1981–1990	6	4,8	Visitor	27	23,5
1991–2000	35	28,0	Exhibitor and visitor	10	8,7
2001–2010 ^a	46	36,8	Organizer	6	5,2
2011–2016	32	25,6	Exhibitor and organizer	4	3,5
Total	125	100,0	Total	115	100,0

Type of TF	No. of papers	%	Country	No. of papers	%
B2B	84	79,2	USA	36	35,0
B2C	9	8,5	China	17	16,5
Both B2B and B2C	13	12,3	More than one country	12	11,7
Total	106	100,0	UK	9	8,7

Method	No. of papers	%	Germany	5	4,9
Survey	69	55,2	Portugal	4	3,9
Conceptual	24	19,2	Spain	3	2,9
Qualitative	14	11,2	South Korea	2	1,9
Mixed methods	13	10,4	Norway	2	1,9
Quantitative with secondary data	4	3,2	Canada	2	1,9
Event study	1	0,8	Others (rest of the world)	8	7,8
Total	125	100,0	Others (Europe)	3	2,9
			Total	103	100,0

^a Eight papers included in a special issue of JBIM in 2010.

previous identification of the categories (Dey, 1993). The authors elaborated a preliminary list of topics to synthesize the literature based on an in-depth analysis of the selected data. One researcher classified all papers twice in different moments in time. A second researcher cross-checked the observations made to each paper. The intercoder reliability was 95,2% which is above the acceptable benchmark (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). The list of topics was clarified and refined through an iterative process between the researchers and the panel of experts. The final list entailed 12 topics that were grouped into three aggregating themes: i) TF participation and outcomes; ii) TF market and management, and iii) TF structural meaning. The papers addressing more than one topic were included in all relevant sets.

3. Findings

3.1. Overview

The literature review confirms the little systematic research in the area in particular in the period 1927–1990. Findings suggest an increasing interest in the field after 1990 (Table 1). Although there is a relevant number of conceptual papers (19,2%), research is predominantly quantitative adopting a survey basis (55,2%). The scant number of conceptual papers suggests the infancy of the TF literature and the potential for building theoretical foundations.

Considering the main stakeholders in the TF industry, research tends to focus predominantly on the exhibitor's perspective (59,1%), neglecting the visitor's viewpoint (23,5%) and almost ignoring the organizer's perspective (5,2%). The higher number of research papers focusing on the exhibitor may be explained by the TF participating costs and the pressure to justify the relevance and return on investment. Nonetheless, since 2010, the data shows an increase in the visitor's (28,9%) and the organizer's (8,9%) perspectives. Such figures denote a

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