



Introduction

Global marketing in business-to-business contexts: Challenges, developments, and opportunities



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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the special issue on global marketing in business-to-business contexts. The aim is to advance knowledge on the subject that can stimulate further research in this important and emerging area of industrial marketing. The twelve contributions selected for this special issue bring together high quality contemporary research that address challenges and recent developments. The articles specifically offer unique insights that progress understanding in the area, provide interesting managerial implications, and present intriguing opportunities for future researchers. These contributions reflect the variety of current work in global marketing in the business-to-business context. While most of the contributions in this special issue focus on the development and deployment of unique resources and capabilities to enhance international competitiveness and performance success, insights are also offered on international relationships and/or relationship marketing within the business-to-business context, country of origin effects, and knowledge transfer between international partners in subsidiaries. The article concludes with a summary of important avenues for further research.

1. Introduction

The gradual decline of trade barriers, increasing regional integration, improved international trade infrastructures, and emergence of new markets around the globe has created a different competitive landscape for organizations (Aykol, Leonidou, & Zeriti, 2012). On the one hand, firms now are able to gain easier access to new markets, identify a wider range of supply sources, and recognize new opportunities for future growth. On the other hand, this increasing globalization of markets and production is making things more difficult for practitioners due to growing intensity and complexity of global competition. Thus, many organizations are increasingly recognizing the essential role of effective international marketing activities in achieving growth and prosperity (Leonidou, Barnes, Spyropoulou, & Katsikeas, 2010).

At the same time, business-to-business marketing is becoming progressively significant for firms and economies around the globe (LaPlaca, 2013) and increasingly relies on international marketing practices to deal with the global challenges and opportunities (Helm & Gritsch, 2014). For example, industrial buyers are shifting to more globalized purchasing strategies (Jia, Lamming, Sartor, Orzes, & Nassimbeni, 2014), establishing new international supply networks (Elg, Deligonul, Ghauri, Danis, & Tarnovskaya, 2012), and increasingly using technology to identify and evaluate new supply opportunities (Wu, Yenyurt, Kim, & Cavusgil, 2006). Furthermore, business-to-business marketers are embracing and recognizing the importance of establishing successful relationships with international collaborating partners (Samiee, Chabowski, & Hult, 2015), as well as understanding the implications of business-to-business branding, and the importance

of building strong international brand management capabilities (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). Knowledge is also being accumulated on the value of establishing strong business networks and political ties in international markets (e.g., Dong, Li, & Tse, 2013), forming and nurturing international alliances and joint ventures with direct and indirect rivals (e.g., Shu, Jin, & Zhou, 2017), and building specific marketing capabilities to enhance international competitiveness (e.g., Evers, Andersson, & Hannibal, 2012). The literature further provides guidance on how firms outsource core business activities (e.g., new product development) to international collaborating firms (e.g., Ahearne & Kothandaraman, 2009), and how sustainability and corporate social responsibility can be applied in international business-to-business markets and incorporated into global supply chains (e.g., Chan, He, & Wang, 2012).

Notwithstanding the considerable proliferation of knowledge in business-to-business global marketing issues, there are still gaps in our knowledge of how and why some international marketing practices work and others fail (LaPlaca, 2013). There is also a general need in the business-to-business international marketing field to address theoretical shortcomings and criticisms, and add to theory development in a meaningful way (Aykol et al., 2012). In addition, researchers need to focus on new and existing problems that are relevant to practitioners and scholars, and continuously look for answers and better explanations of important international business-to-business phenomena (Katsikeas, 2006). Enhancing research rigor with an emphasis on better research designs and procedures is also essential in the field (Hult et al., 2008). Addressing these challenges is critical in an effort to resolve current and future international marketing issues in a business-to-business context, and to move the frontiers of knowledge forward.

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The aim of this special issue is therefore to advance knowledge in global business-to-business marketing and stimulate further research in this important and emerging area of industrial marketing. In response to our call, 41 manuscripts were submitted to the editorial office focusing on a wide area of topics. Each manuscript was initially reviewed by the special issue co-editors and checked for rigor and relevance to the special issue theme. Subsequently, submissions were evaluated by at least three knowledgeable scholars in the field. Decisions were made based on our own careful reading of the manuscripts and on the basis of the recommendations of the review panel.

The twelve contributions selected for this special issue bring together high quality contemporary research that reflect and address challenges and recent developments. The articles specifically offer unique insights that progress understanding in the area, provide interesting managerial implications, and present intriguing opportunities for future researchers. These contributions reflect the variety of current work in global marketing in the business-to-business context and mainly center on two key themes. First, several articles focus on the development and deployment of unique resources and capabilities to enhance international competitiveness and performance success. Second, a number of investigations showcase the importance of international relationships and/or relationship marketing within the business-to-business context. Other important issues in global industrial marketing, such as country of origin effects and knowledge transfer, are also covered in the special issue.

Together, the contributions of this special issue approach topics from several different theoretical perspectives, such as the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities, social exchange theory, and performance-feedback theory. Such theoretical pluralism allows for global marketing topics to be looked from different angles and enhance collective understanding. The special issue authors also originate from institutions based in all corners of the world, reflecting the timeliness and widespread international interest in global marketing from a business-to-business context. From a methodological standpoint, the special issue includes research conducted in various empirical contexts such as Australia, China, Greece, and Ghana to name a few, thus offering a truly global outlook to contemporary international marketing issues. In addition, authors used a variety of research methods (i.e., qualitative, quantitative), approaches (e.g., dyadic data), and novel techniques (e.g., repertory grid) to examine their research ideas, providing both width and depth to the manners in which the various research issues have been identified and resolved.

In the section that follows, we provide an overview of the papers comprising this special issue and conclude with future directions that stand out from these papers.

2. Overview of the contributions

Kaleka and Morgan (this issue) draw on the capability-based view and performance-feedback theory to investigate the role of both marketing capabilities and current market performance of intended cost efficiency and market differentiation in international markets. Including both the performance feedback and capability perspectives allows for a calibration of their relative importance in determining firm's strategic intentions and assesses potential emergent changes. Kaleka and Morgan also examine the moderating role of target market competitive intensity in influencing the thrust and direction of the links between capabilities and current market performance with efficiency and differentiation. The study's implications focus on the need for managers to look into nurturing those elements that contribute to a more differentiating strategic approach in terms of information gathering and product development capability. Industrial companies are further advised to actively seek differentiation in their offerings and resist the efficiency trend that is evident when competition intensifies.

The key aim of Weerawardena, Mort, and Liesch's (this issue) work is to enhance understanding of how entrepreneurial founders of born

global business-to-business firms drive knowledge transformation in a new firm, and how developed dynamic capabilities ultimately address needs at every step of the firm's internationalization process. The study finds that developing and deploying new knowledge configurations is inherently dependent on dynamic capabilities which transform inherited capabilities to new, and strategically aligned, operational capabilities. The authors establish that this process takes place in three transitional phases: transformation, further development, and deployment of new knowledge. Broadly, the findings reveal that entrepreneurial founders' experience and prior knowledge is important, but not enough for success. Managers instead need to build on such experience and knowledge, to transform, develop, and deploy relevant capabilities at different phases of the internationalization process.

Employing the resource-based view of the firm, the study by Boso, Adeola, Danso, and Assadinia (this issue) details how export marketing capabilities are deployed to drive export performance in less-developed markets. The authors identify that superior export performance emerges when a firm's export market responsiveness is aligned with product innovation activities. This positive effect, however, is substantially weakened when levels of dysfunctional competition grow. From a managerial standpoint, it is important to ensure that product innovation capabilities are used to leverage a firm's ability to address unique demands and consumption patterns in less-developed countries. Firms exporting to markets rife in dysfunctional competition need to be able to respond rapidly to unexpected market changes with new and simple solutions to daily customer needs, while also finding ways to innovate more efficiently.

Another study that builds on the resource-based view of the firm is the one by Gregory, Ngo, and Karavdic (this issue). The study specifically focuses on e-commerce marketing capabilities as an extension of the capabilities–effectiveness–performance model, and assesses the subsequent impact of such capabilities on both marketing efficiencies and export performance. The authors establish that deploying e-commerce resources upon which distinct and specialized e-commerce marketing capabilities are developed, is critical for realizing marketing efficiencies and ultimately export performance. The findings empirically validate the importance of e-commerce resources and marketing capabilities in export success and provide evidence of how distribution and promotion efficiencies can mediate capability–performance relationships.

Skarmeeas, Zeriti, and Argouslidis (this issue) provide insights into how relationship value is created by comprehensively identifying specific exporter capabilities, importer capabilities, governance mechanisms, and contextual factors as drivers. The main thesis is that value creation in an exchange relationship is a function certain exporter (i.e., core offering and customer responsiveness) and importer (i.e., market sensing and customer relationship management) capabilities, thereby increasing the size of the pie for both exchange partners. In addition, perceived differences (e.g., culture, economic conditions, and political systems) between the international exchange partners inhibit, while favorable market and economic conditions facilitate, relationship value formation. Thus, managers are advised to emphasize market knowledge development and customer management skills, and pay particular attention on relational governance, psychic distance, and market munificence as criteria for prioritizing foreign business relationships.

Cross-border business-to-business partnership is one of the main modes for entering international markets and an area of significant and voluminous activity in global marketing research. Yet, Silva, Gomes, and Lages (this issue) focus on a particularly interesting topic that has received scant attention by the literature. Specifically, they focus on how export manufacturers can leverage information and resources from the importer to stimulate product innovation while also looking at relevant organizational and contextual contingencies. The study finds that importer feedback and integration in product development impacts industrial exporters' product innovation. The study also investigates the moderating role of inter-functional coordination, competitive intensity,

and technological turbulence. From a managerial point of view, the study findings stress the need to leverage the exporter's relationship with the importer in a way that yields product innovation benefits, while also presenting the conditions affecting the ability of the exporter to capture those benefits.

The contribution by Paparoidamis, Katsikeas, and Chumpitaz (this issue) focuses on the issue of trust in inter-organizational exchange relations using data from three different countries. Specifically, the authors investigate supplier performance drivers and loyalty outcomes of trust from the customer's perspective using data from France, Hungary, and the UK. The authors find that organizational customer trust in the supplier is enhanced through its supplier's performance in terms of product and sales service quality, technical support, and complaint handling service. In addition, while trust was found to be conducive to customer loyalty, it was evident that smaller firms were better able to appropriately utilize trust for achieving superior performance. These results can partly explain why there are conflicting findings in the inter-firm exchange literature on the role of trusts influence on performance. The study findings also point to the need for managers to adopt a context-specific approach in their trust building activities by focusing on appropriate supplier performance criteria that customers in each country might value and consider before making a purchase.

Infidelity is one of the major causes of failure in interpersonal relationships (Drigotas & Bartas, 2001) and quite common in inter-organizational relationships. The work by Leonidou, Aykol, Spyropoulou, and Christodoulides (this issue) sets out to examine the issue of infidelity within the context of exporter–importer relationships. Specifically, the authors use social exchange theory to investigate the impact of exporter power on distance, opportunism, and uncertainty, and how these in-turn give rise to infidelity in the relationship. The authors' study of Greek manufacturing exporters' working relationships with foreign customers reveal that exercise of coercive power by the exporter in the relationship has positive effects on distance, opportunism, and uncertainty, while exercise of non-coercive power produces negative effects. Furthermore, the study finds that distance, opportunism, and uncertainty are positively associated with infidelity. On the whole, these findings imply that industrial export managers should be cautious in their exercise of coercive power if they want to avoid infidelity in their ongoing business relationships.

Pfajfar et al. (this issue) likewise study power and its sources, but as drivers of functional and dysfunctional conflict. The article adopts the view that conflict is routed in the interdependence that inherently exists in cross-border inter-firm relationships, pursues the distinction between functional and dysfunctional conflict, and considers the positive and negative performance implications in the working relationship. The authors additionally consider conditions under which the magnitude and nature of the performance outcomes of conflict vary. Using a dyadic sample of exporter–importer relationship pairs, the authors show important differential effects of various forms of conflict on relationship performance across samples. A similar trend emerges with regard to the power source antecedents of conflict. The study also finds that the presence of problem solving conflict resolution strategies and power distance contributes to a variation of the conflict's impact on performance. The recommendations signify the importance for managers to bridge perceptual differences between the international exchange parties about their working relationship and establishing appropriate mechanisms for managing conflict.

Gu, Wang, and Wang's (this issue) article takes another angle on cross-cultural business-to-business relationships by emphasizing more on sales representatives who are in a position to interact with buyers, build and maintain relationships, and deliver customer value. The authors distinguish between two levels of commitment (i.e., sales representative-owned and seller-firm owned) and present a conceptual model in which dimensions of trust (i.e., capability and benevolence), together with the moderating effect of cultural distance, influence sales

representative-owned commitment, which in turn impacts seller-owned commitment and sales. The study finds that sales reps play a critical role in the success of international business-to-business relationships, as investing in good sales reps, whom customers can commit to, brings greater benefits to a firm than building seller-firm owned commitment. In addition, there is a need for exporters to be more caring, adaptive, and hands-on about the importer's interests when cultural distance is high, and shift to a more standardized knowledge-based selling approach when cultural distance is low.

Cenamor et al.'s (this issue) article focuses on the ability of industrial subsidiaries to be embedded in the external network of local partners, as well as, the internal network of multinational enterprises. This dual embeddedness is an important aspect in successfully managing knowledge transfers between partners in subsidiaries often hindered by increasingly dynamic competitive settings. The authors present a conceptual model in which absorptive capacity enhances subsidiary performance, and explain why this effect is stronger in emerging economies. In addition, they investigate the role of appropriability mechanisms as a factor mediating the influence of absorptive capacity on subsidiary performance. Using data from global Volvo Group subsidiaries, the study confirms the important role of absorptive capacity and appropriability mechanisms in enhancing subsidiary performance, and highlights the critical role of the subsidiary's absorptive capacity in successfully managing knowledge exchange between headquarters and local partners.

The final contribution to the special issue is by Schätzle and Jacob (this issue). The authors focus on stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria behind the inference generated by country of origin information. Despite the importance of the topic and the managerial interest in finding out how purchasing agents may be influenced by country of origin perceptions for selecting international suppliers, this niche area in the country of origin literature remains relatively under researched. The authors first uncover and analyze the stereotypical supplier evaluation criteria using an inductive approach, and then use the repertory grid technique to capture the content of subjective perceptions in a structured manner. From a managerial standpoint, the results enable suppliers to look at criteria that could help or obstruct their sales to international customers and take appropriate actions.

3. Future directions

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue provide a selection of contextually, methodologically, and theoretically diverse insights which, as a whole, offer a strong basis for developing and re-thinking the way marketing is approached and managed among international business-to-business organizations. The included articles may also provide some much needed incitements to move the field forward in new and interesting directions.

The special issue establishes that relevant and rigorous research is critical for the advancement of practice and theory in the context of highly complex international business-to-business environments. The current contributions make important and timely advancements in this direction by providing a solid basis for extending international business-to-business marketing research that has both relevance and rigor. Indeed, despite the apparent growing body of knowledge in this context, the combined contributions to this special issue reveals that much still needs to be done to, for instance, enhance our understanding of what resources and capabilities are needed to boost international business-to-business performance, and what international marketers should be doing when optimizing international business-to-business relationships to create value.

While there are consistencies detected among the results of the special issue contributions, there is also clear evidence of a pressing need to further investigate the boundary conditions of more-or-less established relationships in the international business-to-business literature. For instance, in the context of capabilities and their outcomes,

Kaleka and Morgan successfully examine the moderating effect of competitive intensity on the capability–strategy relationship. They do, however, also propose that additional cultural and managerial factors are likely to play a significant role on the established relationships. In a similar vein, Boso et al. assert that their examination of dysfunctional competition's moderating role on the relationship between export marketing capabilities and performance could be complemented with an investigation of additional conditional effects potentially exerted by the type of strategy employed, market type, and additional experience-related variables. Yet another example is put forth by Gregory et al. who explain that the explanatory power of their model could increase if the impact of e-commerce marketing capabilities was examined under varying levels of competition, customer preferences and technology.

In the domain of international business-to-business relationships, Padarodamis et al. find that the moderating effect of firm size on the trust–loyalty relationship varies across national contexts and therefore suggest further potential contextual and organizational moderators such as network ties and ownership structure. Leonidou et al. argue along the same lines when they propose that their investigated antecedents of international business relationship infidelity can be enriched by including the conditioning effects of situational factors, while Pfajfar et al. suggest that additional cultural variables should be added to their research on the boundary conditions of the relationship between exporter–importer conflicts and performance. Although the addition of contingency factors adds further complexity to an already complex field of research, the collective evidence in this special issue points towards the fact that it is sorely needed. For the same reason, the considerable idiosyncrasies inherent in this special issue's various study settings calls for significant caution to be exercised when generalizing above and beyond the investigated contexts in question, at the same time as it opens up future research avenues for broader international comparisons, replication work, and potentially more generalizable findings.

In addition to conceptual contributions, the research field would also benefit from some methodological developments. Specifically, with the exception of the qualitative articles, it is clear from the majority of the future research calls in this special issue that longitudinal and multi-level designs would be able to provide even richer insights into many of the phenomena under investigation. In fact, there appears to be a

general agreement among the contributing authors that longitudinal designs in particular would greatly enhance the discipline as it would enable a more detailed and insightful understanding of the dynamic and complicated mechanisms that govern international business-to-business marketing practice.

The contributions to this special issue have also clearly established that international business-to-business research in marketing is often a much more painstaking and challenging endeavour, compared to its purely domestic counterpart, due to the added complications that follow with everything from international and cross-cultural conceptualizations and operationalizations, to data collection and analysis. The researchers contributing to the current issue have not only taken these difficult tasks on-board, but also offered a plethora of future research avenues to tackle existing, emergent, and future challenges faced by international business-to-business marketers and scholars. There is therefore no doubt that the marketing research community can still make many important contributions to the international business-to-business marketing literature by embracing the collective research avenues put forth in this special issue.

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Appendix A. Reviewers in the special issue (listed alphabetically)

Name	Affiliation
Assadina, Shahin	University of East Anglia
Aykol, Bilge	Dokuz Eylül University
Barnes, Bradley R.	Hang Seng Management College
Bianchi, Constanza	Universidad Adolfo Ibañez
Boso, Nathaniel	University of Leeds
Brennan, Ross	University of Hertfordshire
Buchanan-Oliver, Margo	University of Auckland
Cavusgil, S. Tamer	Georgia State University
Chakrabarti, Ronika	Lancaster University
Chan, Ricky Y. K.	Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Chandra, Yanto	City University of Hong Kong
Chao, Paul	Eastern Michigan University
Chari, Simos	University of Manchester
Chelariu, Christian	Suffolk University
Chen, Yi-Min	National Cheng Kung University
Christodoulides, George	Birkbeck, University of London
Crespo, Catia Fernandes	Polytechnic Institute of Leiria
Gilliland, David	Colorado State University
Gupta, Suraksha	Newcastle University London
He, Xinming	Durham University
Hilmersson, Mikael	University of Gothenburg
Hu, Michael Y.	Kent State University

Hughes, Paul	De Montfort University
Iyer, Gopalkrishnan	Florida Atlantic University
Jiang, Xu	Xi'an Jiaotong University
Johanson, Jan Erik	Uppsala University
John, George	University of Minnesota
Kadile, Vita	University of Leeds
Kaleka, Anna	Cardiff University
Katsikeas, Constantine S.	University of Leeds
Kesidou, Effie	University of Leeds
Kim, Daekwan	Florida State University
Kowalkowski, Christian	Linköping University
Kuivalainen, Olli	Lappeenranta University of Technology
Lages, Luis Filipe	Nova School of Business and Economics
Leonidou, Leonidas C.	University of Cyprus
Lisboa, Ana Catarina	Polytechnic Institute of Leiria
Menguc, Bulent	Kadir Has University
Morgan, Robert	Cardiff University
Mouzas, Stefanos	Lancaster University
Musarra, Giuseppe	University of Leeds
O'Cass, Aron	University of Tasmania
Oghazi, Pejvak	Södertörn University
Opoku, Robert Ankomah	Red Deer College
Palihawadana, Dayananda	University of Leeds
Panagopoulos, Nikolaos G.	University of Alabama
Paparoidamis, Nicholas	NEOMA Business School
Parida, Vinit	Luleå University of Technology
Plakoyiannaki, Emmanuella	University of Leeds
Rindfleisch, Aric	University of Illinois
Ritala, Paavo	Lappeenranta University of Technology
Robson, Matthew J.	University of Leeds
Saridakis, Charalampos	University of Leeds
Sharma, Arun	University of Miami
Sharma, Piyush	Curtin University
Skarmeas, Dionysis	Athens University of Economics and Business
Sousa, Carlos M. P.	Durham University
Spyropoulou, Stavroula	University of Leeds
Theodosiou, Marios	University of Cyprus
Thongpapanl, Narongsak	Brock University
Toon, Mark	Cardiff University
Vorhies, Douglas	University of Mississippi
Walters, Peter	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Weerawardena, Jay	University of Queensland
Wilkinson, Ian	University of Sydney
Wincent, Joakim	Luleå University of Technology
Wu, Jie	University of Macau
Yeboah-Banin, Abena Animwaa	University of Ghana
Zhang, Chun	University of Vermont
Zulu-Chisanga, Stella	University of Leeds

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