



International Marketing Channel: Systematic Literature Review 2010–2021

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Abstract. The scope of international marketing channel research has expanded significantly. Initially, the literature focused on the factors influencing the expansion of international marketing channels. The literature now includes a wide range of topics related to the challenges of selecting channel structures and managing channel relationships. This article aims to investigate several international marketing channel research, i.e., by reviewing 146 articles related to international marketing channels published from 2010 to 2021 with a periodic approach. Assessments of the condition and the progress of the literature were used as the basis to identify emerging themes that will advance the field of international marketing channels. The findings of this SLR are several research themes that can be used for future research, such as marketing globalization, marketing channels, and commerce. Research with the theme of commerce has the most opportunity for future research.

Keywords: Systematic Literature Review · International Marketing Channel · Globalization · Relationship Management · Commerce

1 Introduction

Marketing channels such as wholesalers, retailers, and franchises are used globally by companies to deliver offerings to end-users. To reach global sales share, channel systems must adapt to significant changes in the business environment, such as the shift to a service-based economy, consolidation of channel intermediaries, development of new channel formats, increased online shopping, and the globalization of business [1]. A marketing channel refers to a set of interdependent organizations involved in the process of making a product or service available for use or consumption [1]. The theoretical framework of marketing channels is divided into two: 1) Economic-Based Approaches, i.e. emphasizing economic efficiency or functional optimization as a means to overcome situational and cost constraints through channel design, as well as profits; 2) Behavioral-Based Approaches, i.e. combining theories from sociology, social psychology, and organizational behavior to explain inconsistencies as the result of assumptions made by rational actors in the economic-based approach [2].

In the previous literature, the Economic-Based Approach used several theories such as Transaction Cost Economics (microeconomics), Agency Theory (micro-economics),

Game Theory, and Resource-Based Theory (economics, management). Meanwhile, the Behavioral-Based Approach used the theories of Power-Conflict and Dependence (social exchange theory, social psychology, sociology), Relational Norm (social psychology, contract law), Commitment-Trust (social exchange theory), and Network (sociology). Then, the Behavior-Based theories and constructs have become more critical than the Economics-Based ones [2]. This shift reflects the new common view among academics and practitioners that a channel system is an interconnected network of relationally bound social entities for cooperation essential to the success of the company [3]. On the other hand, the price of a product becomes the main consideration for exchanging commodity products [1]. As a result, there are still important topics in the domain of power dependence and conflict that require attention.

The integration of various theoretical approaches still needs to be expanded. Conceptual and empirical research is needed to investigate how theoretical approaches can be integrated into a more comprehensive framework to explain the relationship performance. [4] found that only trust, commitment, and relationship-specific investments had a direct effect on the relationship performance when different theories were included together. Another research opportunity is how effective different approaches and theoretical constructs are in explaining relationships that may depend on the context of the channel. Appropriate measures for relevant constructs such as channel relationships between two companies can be analyzed according to the relationship between employees, organizations, or individuals and companies (dyadic method). Also, how other constructs are relevant to channel settings such as brand, supplier, customer perceived value, and customer engagement. Digitalization, such as the trend of social media, also needs to be studied and how it affects the key constructs of marketing channels.

Based on the literature, the most popular topics of marketing channel research (basic theme research of 2010–2021) are related to relationships and marketing channel structures. These topics reflect the analysis of two fundamental aspects of marketing channels, i.e., the interpersonal interactions between channel behavior and the organization. Relationships in marketing channels arise when two or more channel doers, through legal, economic, or interpersonal relationships, work together to pursue a common interest [1]. The members change their behavior to suit the purpose of the relationship, rather than pursuing their self-interest. These substantive topics rely on Behavior-Based theories, such as trust-commitment and power dependence [4], cooperation [5], and conflict [6]; [7], as well as a conceptual framework that describes the relationship life cycle [8]. More recent research has also addressed the dynamics of channel relationships and their relationship capacity at different levels of analysis to understand channel phenomena [1].

Human interaction plays a fundamental role in marketing channels. It is an essential key to how market offerings cycle from producers to end-users. This structure affects the value delivered and the performance of all the organizations involved. Channel structures can be in many forms, from direct selling to users (B2C) to multichannel intermediaries, and exporters-distributors (B2B) in international marketing. This Systematic Literature Review focused on B2B of international marketing. Relationships as a domain refer to the study of social exchanges between buyer and seller firmly involved in the transaction. Because the relative costs of generating new customers are higher than maintaining

previous customers [9], actions that promote exchange continuity are associated with greater company performance, greater customer lifetime value, reduced prices, and also increased viability of B2B companies [10].

International marketing channels are important in global marketing operations [7, 11]. To better understand international marketing channel research, it is important to identify the main differences in philosophy between the studies investigating domestic marketing channels and those investigating international marketing channels. Marketing channels are defined as inter-organization institutional configurations to direct and support the flow, from production to utilization and value [12]. The main focus of international marketing channel research is to investigate the effects of macro-environment heterogeneity on the primary and secondary environments. Heterogeneity was investigated through constructs such as dimensions of national culture [13], cultural distance [14], psychic distance [15], institutional distance [3], geographical distance [16], and market volatility [17]. Therefore, creating long-term relationship between partners is important to improve company performance.

Given how uncoordinated and unstructured the marketing channel relationships research in B2B context are, therefore, this SLR aims to synthesize the existing literature to improve our understanding of the integrated topics, i.e. provides the strategic guidance for practice and identifies the possible future research topics or directions. Furthermore, identification of the key themes also allows the possibility of discussions in B2B marketing channels. Hence, the objectives of this review are as follows:

- 1) To provide a holistic view of B2B (international) marketing channel research;
- 2) To improve the understanding of B2B (international) marketing channels; and
- 3) To identify the knowledge gaps and provide possible research directions indicated by an analysis of the current literature.

This SLR provides an overview of the methodology following the process established by [18]. The comprehensive literature synthesis in this SLR includes 146 articles published between 2010 and 2021. Therefore, it also captures some academic literature investigating the relationships in international marketing channels. The third section presents descriptive statistics of the publication activities related to the field. The fourth section presents various descriptive statistics about three themes, i.e. commerce, marketing globalization, and marketing channel. These three themes emerged while searching articles focused on how to improving performance through marketing channels. The next section shows how this SLR is constructed and contributed to the previous literature, sets out future research directions, and discusses the implications for practical application. Finally, the last section is the conclusion.

2 Research Methods

The methodology in this SLR adopted the three-stage process proposed by [18], i.e. planning, implementing, and reporting reviews. This systematic approach aimed to provide collective insights through theoretical synthesis into the fields and their sub-fields [18]. In the first stage, the research team identified the need for literature reviews in international marketing channels and determined the study design. Next, in the second stage, the

research team looked for the literature such as published peer-reviewed journal articles investigating international marketing channels in the main Scopus database (conference articles and book chapters were not included). The selection of keywords was guided by the research objective, i.e. to spread a wide range of comprehensive overviews of existing research related to international marketing channels [19].

The related articles were obtained from Scopus.com. To obtain relevant articles, the research team used the keywords “Marketing Channel” and (International or Relationship) and then used the filter menu on Scopus.com, i.e. by sorting them according to the released years between 2010 and 2021. There were 198 articles found. *The articles obtained from Scopus.com and their journal sources were as in Table 1.*

To avoid subjectivity regarding the inclusion and exclusion criteria [18], the research team decided to exclude ambiguous abstracts. The initial searching process already identified abstracts of each article. Then, each was reviewed and selected individually to ensure that the main topics were related to international marketing channels by taking into consideration its publication quality and e. As a result, 146 articles that fulfilled the criteria were chosen. These 146 articles, then, were used for further analysis. The steps of identifying the articles were adopted from Hamdoun (2020) in Fig. 1.

The third stage was data evaluation, reporting, and disseminating selected articles [18]. The 146 articles were identified using the R-studio software. First, the data of the articles were inputted into an Excel spreadsheet. Meanwhile, the articles were stored in the Endnote database. The spreadsheet included information such as the title, author, and journal, in addition to the methodology, theory, and main results of each article. After entering this information, the team applied a systematic approach to identifying

Table 1. International Marketing Channel Articles Release Rate per Year

Year	Articles
2010	18
2011	22
2012	16
2013	15
2014	16
2015	13
2016	18
2017	19
2018	11
2019	10
2020	21
2021	19
TOTAL	198

Source: developed by the authors (2021)

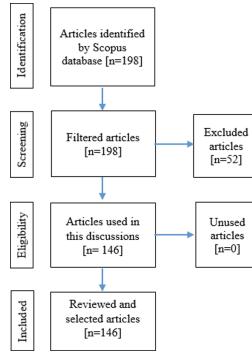


Fig. 1. Process of Selecting Articles. Source: developed by the authors (2021)

common themes across the samples [20]. The thematic analysis applied was similar to that followed by [21], i.e. the research team collaboratively set the theme after reading the article independently. For this purpose, each research team took into account each article's key findings and identified its main theme. Three themes that represented the main topics in the SLR were found during this process, based on the consensus levels shared among the articles [18]. The three themes are commerce, marketing globalization, and marketing channel. These three themes were diverted to each other, though some minor overlap might occur. The division of the data into three themes meant that each theme required its own review and analysis (Sect. 4).

3 Descriptive Analysis and Publication Activities in the Field

The most relevant author, Yang Z, wrote nine articles as the first author in this period out of all citations for the top 20 articles (Fig. 2). It was in line with Tranfield et al. (2003) that descriptive analysis of the study shows the most cited articles for each theme (Fig. 3). Journals relevant to this topic are industrial marketing management, journal of business and industrial marketing, journal of marketing channel, European journal of marketing, British food journal, and journal of marketing.

Figure 3 shows that the most frequent articles found are related to the industrial marketing management journal, followed by the journal of business and industrial marketing, and then the journal of marketing channels. It can be concluded that most of the articles are published only in journals specializing in B2B and published in SCIMAGO Journal and Country Rank (SJR) belonging to Q1 and Q2 known for validating high-quality sample articles. It also shows that international marketing channel research is a popular topic among journals and literature worldwide. The publication rate on this topic shows no significant increase in the number of publications during the review periods. In 2010 there were 18 articles, in 2021 there were 19 articles, and during that period the average publication per year was 16 articles (Fig. 4).

Out of the 146 selected academic articles, nine articles are conceptual studies and 137 articles are empirical studies (Table 2). Among the 137 empirical studies, 95 use quantitative research methods, 25 use qualitative research methods, 2 use dyadic research methods, five use meta-analysis methodseven, 7 use bibliometric methods, threend 3 use experimental methods. In other words, until now, the quantitative research method has been the most frequently used in research.

Various theoretical perspectives have been used in international marketing channel research. Some explicitly incorporate the macro-environment into theory, while others are adapted from a domestic channel that can be generalized to an international context. The most common theoretical perspective and context used is the internationalization perspective, which focuses on the patterns and paths followed by companies for international operations. This perspective ranges from a gradual approach where the company gradually commits to international operations through the acquisition and integration of knowledge to build experience and reduce the risks involved, to a rapid approach where the company will commit to international operations from the start. Culture theory focuses on the influence of a group of people's shared values and beliefs on their behavior and interactions with individuals from other cultures. Each member identifies values, norms, and dimensions that may be recognized within and across cultures. The institutional theory focuses on the influence of the institutional environment on organizational actions, routines, and strategies. To achieve efficiency, effectiveness, and legitimacy, companies must conform to institutionalized market beliefs and practices. Companies operating in the same institutional environment become similar over time. Contingency theory focuses on the interaction between the organization and its environment. It adopts the perspective that there is not even one optimal strategy for all companies. The differences in the company's internal and external environment result in different organizational structures, decision processes, and strategies. Achieving positive results depends on the equilibrium of market and company factors.

Transaction cost economics focuses on the selection of management structure, from hierarchy to the market alternatives-the most efficient way to reduce transaction costs. Because of the manager's rationale limitation and the benefits of potential partners, thus, management decisions are made based on asset specification, interaction frequency, and uncertainty in the market. The relationship marketing perspective focuses on all strategies and tactics to build, maintain, and improve marketing relationships (customers, suppliers, buyers, internal, etc.). Relationships need to be managed carefully, through trust and other relational dimensions, to achieve maximum benefits and performance. Network theory focuses on the subject composition in the networks (customers, suppliers, competitors, public and private institutions) and the direct/indirect connections

Table 2. Conceptual VS Empirical

Type of Article	Number of Articles	Percentage
Conceptual	9	6,2%
Empirical	137	93,8%

Source: developed by the authors (2021)

between them. This relationship with economic and non-economic subjects is expected to have a strong influence on the strategy and performance of the company and may even be necessary for its viability. Expansion of the company operations is seen as the process of joining a new network. The resource-based theory focuses on competitive benefits and superior performance by using the company's resources and its special capabilities. The popularity and use of these various theoretical perspectives in SLR have also changed over time (Table 3). This allows future research to use perspectives from different theories.

Table 3. Theory Maps of International Marketing Channels

Theory	Number of Papers	Researchers
Relationship marketing perspective	10	[7, 22–30]
Transaction Cost Economics	27	[31–56]
Internationalization perspectives (Supply chain management)	6	[57–62]
Social embeddedness theory	1	[63]
Contingency theory	2	[64, 65]
Organizational learning theory	1	[66]
Resource dependence theory	4	[67–69]
Organizational fairness theory	1	[70]
Social exchange theory	8	[71–78]
The theory of power and conflict	3	[79–81]
Institutional theory	2	[82, 83]
Social identity theory	1	[84]
Acquisition-Transaction Utility Theory	1	[85]
Diffusion of innovation theory	3	[86–88]
Service dominant logic	2	[89, 90]
Theory of planned behavior	1	[91]
Entrepreneurship theory	2	[92, 93]
Resource based theory	4	[94–97]
Agency theory	2	[98, 99]
Information processing theory	1	[100]
Theory of regulatory focus	1	[101]
Conservations of resources	1	[45]
Network Theory	5	[23, 102–104]

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Theory	Number of Papers	Researchers
Culture theory	1	[105]
Commitment-Trust theory	4	[106–109]
Prospect theory	1	[110]
Theory of reasoned action	2	[111, 112]
Deterrence theory	1	[113]
Theory of distribution channel	1	[114]
Cognitive consistency theory	1	[115]
Theory of inter-organizational relationship	1	[116]

Source: developed by the authors (2021)

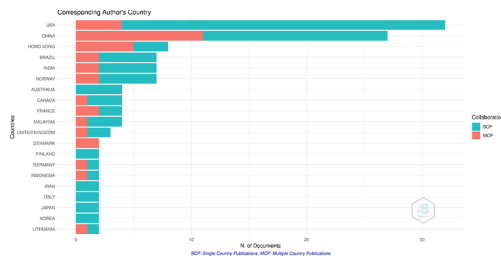


Fig. 5. Most Investigated Contexts in the Selected Articles. Source: developed by the authors using RStudio software (2021)

3.2 Findings 2

According to surveys, the current research is primarily quantitative (95/146 articles: 65%). Quantitative research methods may often provide essential insights, but, conducting in-depth qualitative research is essential to uncover unexpected aspects and narratives of professional industries. Despite the different methods used, international marketing channel research remains fragmented because most articles focus on a single voice, single context, not many have done research with dyadic methods. Hence, the scope of this research needs to be expanded and be based on an appropriate theoretical perspective. For example, relationship marketing theory [7, 22], transaction cost economics [32, 117], can provide a framework to strengthen international marketing channel research but has not answered opportunities from the research context, especially when it is associated with technology or digital media. The research context is mostly conducted in the USA, China, and Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the research context in Indonesia ranks 15th out of the 20 most frequently researched countries. The research context of this SLR is shown in Fig. 5.

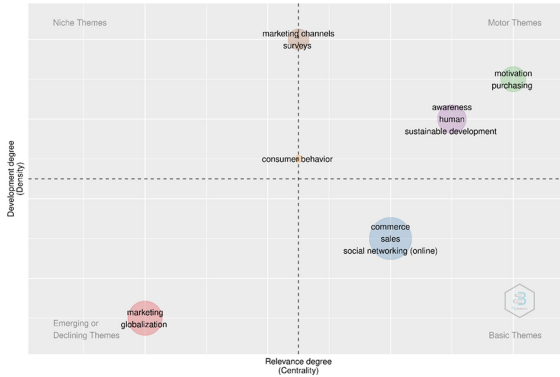


Fig. 6. Research Map of International Marketing Channels. Source: developed by the authors using RStudio software (2021)

4 Discussion of Themes

The international marketing channel literature has broad contexts under its study. When research contexts are consolidated by their primary focus, three substantives are found: commerce, marketing globalization, and marketing channels. The context of this research can be further decomposed into various channel structures and relevant sub-fields. The research map with the theme of international marketing channels from 2010 to 2021 is as in Fig. 6.

4.1 Marketing Globalization

In the research map of international marketing channels, Marketing Globalization is in the Emerging or Declining Themes quadrant. This research theme is mostly abandoned or less researched. The sub-themes of this research are as follows:

- a. Exporting: 5 channel structure articles, focus on the strategies of export [118, 119] and the effects of export performance [120, 121]. [66] explored the relationship between various aspects of international experiences, such as duration, scope, and intensity on the export performance using promotion and adaptation strategies as mediating variables. The result of this research shows that promotional adaptation affects the export performance when the duration is short and the intensity is low.
- b. Business to Business: 10 channel structure articles focus on comparing how B2B companies operate internationally [25, 122, 123]. [124] proposes that the B2B companies engaging in social media as part of marketing effort, should carefully consider the roles and activities of various users directed by different internal and external users.
- c. Globalization: 9 article channel structure, focus on the process, either gradual or rapid, that companies follow to expand their channels from domestic to international [125, 126]. Influenced by the characteristics of the company and affect the performance of international channels.

Entering the international market refers to activities that bring the company offerings to new markets, whether geographically, through channel introduction, or other distinguishing features. Companies can enter new markets directly through salespersons, distributors, online channels, physical retail locations, or wholly-owned subsidiaries. Meanwhile, indirect methods include trading companies, export management companies, online affiliates, two-sided electronic platforms, and others [2].

4.2 Marketing Channel

In the research map of international marketing channels, Marketing Channel is between the excellent themes and motor themes quadrants. This theme is interesting because it is the driving theme of international marketing channels and is a niche research theme.

- a. Franchising: 5 channel structure articles, focus on how to create an international franchise [6, 127–130].
- b. Alliances & Joint Ventures: 4 channel structure articles, focus on factors influencing the partnership formation [131, 132] and partnership success [132, 133].
- c. Retail: 7 channel structure articles, focus on ways of transferring international formats [134, 135], global retailer perceptions [136] and international consumer preferences [137].
- d. Supply Chain & Logistics: 7 channel structure articles, focus on the challenges and opportunities of the global supply chain [138, 139]. Alternative distribution channels are included in this sub-theme such as unauthorized channels/gray market [140] and the presence of new channel structures such as marketplace [141–143].

4.3 Commerce

Other channel structure research on how to manage international marketing channel relationships is automatically developing. This is an opportunity to study and investigate further in future research, i.e. research on channel management, which focuses on choosing the right management strategy, has shifted from a transaction-based or control-based approach [144–146] to a relational-based perspective [17, 147–149], and finally to an integrated approach that incorporates each perspective [144, 150]. Each exploits factors that significantly influence the choice, implementation, and performance of channel structures and relationships which follow the digital growth in marketing (commerce). These sub-themes identify challenging topics and serve to broaden the boundaries of current international marketing channels and become future research opportunities namely (Fig. 7).

a. Trust

There are 48 channel structure articles, focus on the existence of credibility and perceived benevolence [95, 151–156]. Served as the basis for channel interactions and relationships.

Commitment is a mortal desire to maintain a valued relationship [157]. Trust is confidence in the integrity of the exchange partner [158]. [152] in his research investigates

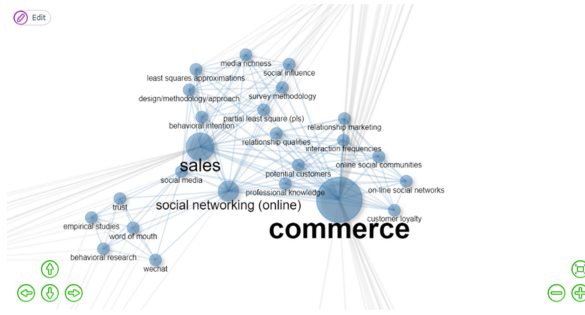


Fig. 7. International Marketing Channel Research Opportunities. Source: developed by the authors using RStudio software (2021)

how relationship duration facilitates business-to-business (B2B) trust. Trust is a significant factor in the study of inter-organizational relationships [158]. [159] describes trust as an inter-organizational management mechanism that improves cooperation and reduces opportunists in exchanges between organizations. [160] define inter-organizational trust as a willingness to depend on others and to take action in circumstances where that action makes one vulnerable to the other. [161] states that mutual trust creates favorable conditions for partners to work together, resulting in increased performance. Existing research empirically verifies that trust-based international B2B relationships create superior relationship performance [11].

This research contributes to our understanding of trust between organizations in four critical ways. First, a new perspective attempts to resolve mixed findings regarding the role of relationship duration in building trust between organizations. This study addresses a weakness in existing research - viewing the age of relationship as a direct measure of relational bonding and the overall effort to foster trust. According to Social Exchange Theory, trust between organizations results from reciprocal exchanges. Relationships develop gradually in communicating, internalizing, and accepting each other's meanings and reciprocal terms [162, 163].

b. Social Networking (Online)

There are eight channel structure articles, that focus on the influence of social, business, and political ties [164–168], performance effect, channel management, and the establishment of international operations.

A network is a group of suppliers, distributors, and retailers defined by the density, diversity, and reciprocity that provide offerings to end-users, brought about by the coordinated channel efforts of the focus company [2].

[165] Their research results show a positive relationship between social and inter-organizational networks and adaptive abilities as well as between adaptive abilities and company performance. There is evidence in the literature that social and business networks are important in facilitating the internationalization of companies and international activities.

c. Technology in Sales (Sales)

There are five channel structure articles, that focus on the impact of new technologies (especially the internet) [169–171]. Disrupts established channel structure and behavior.

The ease of use and continued penetration of the Internet and mobile platforms have drastically increased the ability of upstream channel members to sell directly to customers [172]. The expanded use of e-commerce technology is also the result of increased market reach, lower selling costs, and the associated promise of greater profits. However, this technology can increase competition, because entry costs are low enough that new entrants enter the market and sell directly to consumers, reducing temporal, geographic, or information barriers [173]. The flexibility afforded to online retailers alone also puts price pressure on retailers who maintain physical locations in response. Many companies implement multichannel strategies to take advantage of the benefits of e-commerce technology [171]. In terms of channel management, e-commerce has created a new type of channel intermediary, Internet affiliation, which introduces many unresolved channel management issues [174].

[170] Companies can capture customer interactions across multiple marketing channels (e.g., store, website, social media, mobile) and combine them into an integrated database. The increase in e-commerce technology has also brought related disruption, i.e. the exponential growth of customer data. As companies face increasing demands to differentiate their offerings, the use of technology information to generate customer intelligence and develop more intimate customer relationships, thus better service provision, holds substantial promise for the improvement of marketing channel management.

d. Relationship Marketing

There are 20 channel structure articles, that focus on the process of identifying, developing, maintaining, and terminating relational exchanges to improve performance [7, 175, 176]. Relational marketing aims to increase shared value by increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of all parties involved in the exchange [177].

Relational marketing has played an important role in developing marketing theory and practice. This concept has been widely applied in international marketing to understand the dynamics of exporter-importer relations [178]. Several studies have included culture as a variable that influences performance in a B2B context. Culture is a way to train or purify one's mind from the social environment in which one was raised [7]. Because relationship marketing interactions are social exchanges, therefore, culture influences the norms, roles, and expectations of these relationships. Culture influences the emotional processes related to someone's experience of self-engaging and disengaging in the social environment [179], so it is essential to understand international marketing relationships.

5 Discussion

International marketing channel research results provide insight into established, emerging, and declining research groups. Clusters in international marketing channels are

generally well established, as evidenced by the number of empirical studies compared to conceptual research. This SLR classifies it into three clusters, i.e. commerce, marketing globalization, and marketing channels. These three clusters or themes will continue to develop in international marketing channels, although very slowly reflecting the development of this research from 2010 to 2021. We will reclassify each theme into sub-themes according to the previous research map. Marketing globalization has sub-themes of exporting, business to business (B2B), and globalization. This theme is not a trend among researchers. Marketing channels have the sub-themes of franchising, alliances and joint ventures, retail, and supply chain and logistics. This theme has the opportunity to be investigated because of the development of the marketing channel research context. Meanwhile, the most researched theme is commerce with sub-themes of trust, social networking, technology in sales, and relationship marketing. This theme is a trend among marketing channel researchers for its relevance to the digital era and technological developments.

The research methodology used is 65% using quantitative methods according to surveys. A small proportion uses experimental, meta-analytical, bibliometric, and dyadic methods. Thus, the scope of future research needs to be broadened and to be based on the appropriate theoretical and methodological perspectives.

In the marketing globalization theme, the macro-cultural environments, laws, rules, and politics will be important themes of future research by focusing on how these elements converge/diverge, how they occur, and their influence on the operation of international channel structures and management. The convergence of international channels is linked to the convergence of market segments for consumer tastes [180], driven by cultural convergence.

Within the theme of marketing channels and commerce, new technologies and their impact will continue to be important factors in the field [181]. The acceptance of technology by managers, customers, and the technology readiness of the company will be the main factors in determining the capability of the marketing channel. Beyond assuming their role as decision-makers, managers are beginning to be seen as individuals who can be significantly influenced by their perceptions of culture and can serve as a resource for developing international channel operations.

The increasing presence of unauthorized channels (grey market) is a problem caused by global demand, price differences between markets [140], and technological changes in new channel structures. Meanwhile, there is still no policy on how to manage unauthorized channels [140]. Research could be the only way to explore both short-term and long-term approaches to managing unauthorized channels and the negative (or positive) impacts of their presence on the company's international operations. The process of leaving operations or international relations is such a common occurrence, yet rarely being studied, because of inappropriate perceptions and market turbulences [182]. A further research opportunity is that the appearance of multiple channels and hybrid channels initiates new concerns regarding the selection and management of appropriate channel structures [183–185].

6 Conclusion

This analysis provides a view with significant discretion to examine issues, from a company, relationship, or systems perspective, relating to the dynamic macro environment, company decision factors, and channels. While much has been discovered so far in the study of international marketing channels, much remains to be discovered.

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