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Sinkovics Rudolf R., Sinkovics Noemi

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Rudolf R. Sinkovics

The University of Auckland, Business School, New Zealand

rudolf.sinkovics@auckland.ac.nz

<http://www.sinkovics.com/rudolf>

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4471-5054>

and

LUT University, Lappeenranta, Finland

Noemi Sinkovics

The University of Auckland, Business School, New Zealand

noemi.sinkovics@auckland.ac.nz

<http://www.sinkovics.com/noemi>

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5143-6870>

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The internet and international marketing – From trigger technology to platforms and new markets

Structured abstract

Purpose of this paper: We critically examine the paper by Samiee (2019, this issue) “International marketing and the internet: A research overview and the path forward” and offer an appraisal of its merits as well as thoughts for further development of research on advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs) in international marketing.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper approaches its purpose via a reflexive review of Samiee’s paper and continues by offering a content analysis of a broader body of literature which includes internationally oriented papers in international business (IB), international marketing (IM), general management, marketing and strategy as well as information systems. The underpinning question is whether and which particular ICT concepts have successfully been adopted in the IM literature and what the inclusion or exclusion of these phenomena may imply for future research.

Findings: The internet and internationalization implications of the technology have been studied excessively in the domain, however, newer developments such as dimensions of industry 4.0 or advanced manufacturing, have not yet been widely considered in international business and marketing work. The ramifications for future research are significant in that the understudied modern industrial organization of the contemporary firm in the digital world needs much concerted research focus to be adequately understood.

Research limitations/implications: The paper and the literature review is limited to ‘international’ studies. While this is an appropriate limitation for the purposes of this international marketing oriented review, some work in the general management, marketing and strategy domain as well as the information systems domain will have significant ramification for international firms and IM thinking, despite these papers limited to non-international firms.

Practical implications: (if applicable) The notion of advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs), builds on the underpinning internet technology, and has transformative effects on the way in which (international) firms are organized, studied and performing. The pervasive shifts triggered by advanced ICTs and the reconfiguration of firms to platform providers and system integrators need to be well understood, in order to stay legitimate and performant in contemporary markets.

Originality/value: Rather than looking at only international marketing papers, this paper reviews internet/advanced ICT papers in multiple related fields. Significant novelty in this area comes from information systems, by including this discipline in the review, we see real diffusion of novel thinking and potential research areas for IM scholars at the interface of ICT and IM.

Paper type: Conceptual paper

Keywords

Internet; Information and communication technologies (ICT); industry 4.0; advanced manufacturing;

1 Introduction

There is no doubt that the Internet has and continues to have unprecedented and lasting shifts in business markets. Saeed Samiee's paper (2019) in this issue makes a very strong case that despite the tremendous influence of the technology in business and international marketing, there has not been an equivalent impact of global information and communications technology (ICT) related topics in the domain-specific literature. In fact, drawing on a number of review articles of international marketing and aspects of ICT, only a meagre 4 percent of the articles include aspects of ICT which give due attention to the phenomenon (Leonidou et al. 2018; Samiee and Chabowski 2012). Furthermore, Samiee draws on an Internet-focused literature review study of 29 peer-reviewed journals which examined the influence of the Internet medium on relational approaches to foreign market entry and only 94 studies were identified that drew on digital platform or advanced ICT of some form (Watson et al. 2018). It is indeed puzzling why, despite the critical importance of ICT and the significant potential for transaction-cost reduction, opportunity development and relationship-maintenance advantages of the technology, the pattern of research-scarcity in the domain from over a decade ago (Samiee and Walters 2006) continues to persist to date. One possible explanation could be that significant developments from other disciplinary areas such as technology management or information systems are not sufficiently informing international marketing (IM) endeavors and thus the agenda is lagging behind what management practice actually makes of these developments. Consequently, we organize this paper as an overview article which offers an appreciation of the literature regarding internet-mediated international marketing (IM) and deliver an outlook and suggestions for future research, against a backdrop of historical development of international marketing work on the Internet and an appraisal of various broad contributions.

2 Internet driven international marketing contributions

Samiee proceeds in the paper to offer a research overview of the developments in the literature regarding Internet-mediated international marketing, and organizes his thoughts in three broad sections. First, the Internet and early developments of internet-driven IM, second, initial views about the internet and IM and third, the internet and exporting. The sections appear somewhat arbitrary, as the underlying time-dimension and the references do not allow a precise delineation of the associated topics. However, broadly, the notion of early developments of internet-driven IM points at conceptual work and viewpoints which stressed the potential of the internet technology and the ways in which it might impact IM (e.g. Hamill 1997; Quelch and Klein 1996; Samiee 1998). Furthermore, the early developments category captures more functional rather than strategic work, which started to offer an appreciation of the internet as a facilitating mechanism for exporting and internationalization (e.g. Bennett 1997; Hamill and Gregory 1997). Samiee also allocates papers which offer more foundational knowledge about the nature and potential influences of the internet in this early developments category (Peterson, Balasubramanian, and Bronnenberg 1997; Porter 2001) and we fully agree that these papers were largely theme setting papers without substantial empirical evidence-base or expressive adoption and adjustment of IM theoretical thinking.

The second section in Samiee's paper labelled 'initial views about the internet and IM' is organized in two subsections, a) the internet and competitive advantage, and b) the internet and internationalization. Therein, Samiee takes issue with the exaggerated benefits which were originally attributed to the internet, specifically the mistaken view at the time that the internet would facilitate instant internationalization and furthermore, that the adoption and

deployment of internet technology would – almost by default - contribute to the development of competitive advantage and thus generate sustainable value to the firm. We agree with Samiee's notion that conceptually, the internet intensifies the competitive arena and thus makes the attainment of competitive advantage more challenging than the literature at the time suggested. Yet, it is important to note that some of the earlier work which is not mentioned in this section has successfully challenged overly simplistic interpretations. For instance Yamin and Sinkovics (2006) point at the dilution of sequencing in pure online internationalization and connects the concept of psychic distance to the online context to suggest the possibility of the 'virtuality paradox', which has later been empirically explored by Sinkovics, Sinkovics, and Jean (2013). More broadly, this section demonstrates that with notable exceptions the IB and IM literature has been predominately positive in its take on the effects of the internet and ICT in general. The paradoxical (Sinkovics and Yamin 2007) or the 'ambiguous' relationship between ICT and organizational performance (Jean 2007) has been a phenomenon at the fringes of the domain. For instance, the resource based view perspective has been used to successfully move beyond the limitations of viewing ICT and the internet only through the lens of transactions-cost economics (Jean, Sinkovics, and Cavusgil 2010) and the concept of virtual integration has been introduced recently to connect relationship marketing concepts to the online domain (Kim, Jean, and Sinkovics 2018). Furthermore, although Samiee rightly points at the naivety of the belief that the internet as an indiscriminate means of gaining competitive advantage, there are instances where such advantages can be achieved. For example, in the organizational context, there are suggestions that internet technology, if applied with a focus on streamlining operations, may reduce multinational advantages of multinational enterprises (MNEs) (Yamin and Sinkovics 2007, 2010), and thus effectively generate competitive disadvantages.

The internet and internationalization subsection and the third subsection on the internet and exporting in Samiee's paper, in our view, can be seen as connected. The major story built up is the conceptual separation of internet-based exporting in consumer markets and business markets. This is an important distinction, which leads the paper to encourage further IM research efforts so that we arrive at a better understanding of managerial and strategic approaches in exporting and internationalization. Unfortunately, the conclusions of the paper seem to mask an underlying problem that has, arguably, haunted the approach to the study of the internet and ICT in the context of IM more broadly.

Most of the work related to the internet and IM is dedicated to functional aspects of internationalization. This focus is not surprising, as 'what determines the international success and failure of firms' has always been a big question in international business and marketing (Peng 2004). However, it is surprising that in other disciplinary areas the transformational nature of the underpinning technology is more widely acknowledged, whereas the IM literature seems not to have benefitted from cross-fertilization in this area. For instance, in a management consulting report and future outlook on the growth in the manufacturing sector, Rübmann et al. (2015) refer to "New, transformational technical advancements, whereby cyber physical systems connect value chains beyond a single enterprise" and identify nine dimensions of this transformation, i.e. autonomous robots, simulation, horizontal and vertical system integration, the industrial internet of things, cybersecurity, the cloud, additive manufacturing, augmented reality, and big data analytics. Hence, the consequences of – what we call here – advanced ICT, underpinned by the internet infrastructure, are much more profound than the IM literature so far as acknowledged. Any review of the ICT and the internet and IM as well as any outlook on the future of work in this domain, is thus expected to miss important dimensions of the transformative and pervasive changes related to these technologies, if ICT is confined to the narrow and traditional

meaning of the internet technology. We look into that through a more systematic analysis of the literature, which encompasses not only the IM field, but IB, strategy, general management and most importantly information systems (IS). This latter is key, as the IS literature is arguably the backdrop against which new studies of technologies diffuse into other management fields.

3 A content analysis of the internet, ICT and a vision for the future of international marketing

The key premise above is that IM literature reviews are likely to capture a rather narrow set of themes regarding the internet, advanced ICTs and the way in which these are impacting on the IM field. In order to understand which themes have and have not diffused via adjacent subject areas, we performed a content analysis, building on international business, international marketing, general management and information systems journals. The cross-selection of the journals was derived from a number of related papers which undertook similar systematic literature endeavors regarding the knowledge structure of international marketing, management and its' intersection with ICT. In all, 55 journals were selected over the period of 2004 to 2019 using the Web of Science (WOS) database, the selection procedure involved four steps.

In the first instance, we defined the body of 'international' journals. While e.g. Samiee and Chabowski (2012) looked the knowledge structure of international marketing and include general management, general marketing and strategic management journals, they only drew on a subset of IB journals. We build on Tüselmann, Sinkovics, and Pishchulov (2016), excluding APBR and TNC journal which are not indexed in the Web of Science, to define a more comprehensive publishing landscape for IB related work. In terms of international marketing journals, we include International Marketing Review and Journal of International Marketing to complement the international marketing function related journals (Leonidou et al. 2018)¹. Second, we include 22 additional general management and strategy journals, as per the Watson et al. (2018) paper, which sit at the interface between international marketing, international business and digital relationship strategies². Third, following Samiee and Chabowski (2012) we add some top-journals from the area of marketing, strategy and general management, which were not included earlier. These include journals with empirical contributions and world-leading methodological outputs.³ Forth,

¹ International IB and marketing journals, as per Tüselmann, Sinkovics, and Pishchulov (2016) and Samiee and Chabowski (2012): Asia Pacific Journal of Management, Critical Perspectives on International Business, European Journal of International Management, Global Strategy Journal, International Business Review, International Marketing Review, Journal of East-West Business, Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of International Management, Journal of International Marketing, Journal of World Business (Columbia), Management International Review, Management and Organization Review, Multinational Business Review, Thunderbird International Business Review

² Add journals in the area of marketing and general management and strategy, as per Watson et al. (2018): Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly, British Journal of Management, California Management Review, Decision Sciences, European Journal of Marketing, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing (The), Journal of Business Research, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Product Innovation Management, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, Journal of Retailing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Long Range Planning, Management Science, Marketing Science, Organization Science, Strategic Management Journal

³ Academy of Management Journal, International Journal of Advertising, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Advertising, Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Consumer Research

given that we argue most recent ICT related advancements in IB and IM emanate from the advances in the ICT domain in the first place, we also include as per the top-10 IS journals from the (SCImago Institute 2017) information systems and management ranking (excluding management accounting journals). This selection itself was corroborated with earlier journal lists from (Serenko and Bontis 2009).⁴

For non-international journals, i.e. journals in the general management, marketing and strategy (GMS) area and journals in information systems (IS), we first restricted the search to research papers with an international dimensions, including keywords such as multinational firms (MNEs), cross-cultural, globalization, import-export, etc. The next step involved selecting internet and ICT related papers within all the journals identified, narrowing the search question down to “how does the internet/ICT affect and/or transform business?” using a comprehensive search string to that effect⁵. Excluding studies which only used the internet/ICT dimension as a context within specific sectors, we captured a total of 1263 papers which were coded based on their titles and abstracts, using Endnote and NVivo as software tools. A final number of 291 papers emerged which captured the transformative effect of ICT. When organizing these papers along the advanced ICT and industry 4.0 dimensions outlined above, the temporal distributions of research outputs below emerged (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

Advanced manufacturing received a strong attention in and around 2004 and came into the focus again recently. Cloud computing and the internet of things related topics have only lately been diffusing from IS journals and received modest recognition in IB and IM journals. Looking at Figure 2 and the adoption of transformative ICT dimensions in research papers, it is quite surprising to see that its uptake has been the most insignificant in the IM discipline to date. Only one paper was identified which used the system integration

⁴ Top-10 IS journals, SCImago Institute (2017) (if not yet included earlier, e.g. Decision Sciences): Decision Support Systems, European Journal of Operational Research, Information & Management, Information Sciences, Information Systems Research, Journal of Management Information Systems, Journal of Strategic Information Systems, Knowledge-Based Systems, MIS Quarterly, OMEGA - International Journal of Management Science.

⁵ Internet and ICT related search terms: 3d printing / EWOM / ICT / ICT / IIOT / IOT / IT resource / IT-resource / IT/IS infrastructure / Knowledge connectivity / Knowledge Process Outsourcing / Software R&D / additive manufacturing / advanced manufacturing / augmented reality / automation / autonomous robots / big data / big data analytics / big data and analytics / business process outsourcing / cloud / cloud computing / cloud-computing / communication technolog* / connectivity / cyber-security / cybersecurity / cyberspace / cyber*physical systems / digital / digital factory / digital manufacturing / digital platform / digitalization / e-commerce / ecommerce / e-commerce / e-commerce corporation / e-retailing / e-tailing / ecommerce / electronic commerce / electronic industr / electronic marketplace / electronic sector / electronic word of mouth / etailing / factory of the future / fourth industrial revolution / hybrid / ibusiness / industr* 4* / industry 4.0 / information age / information and communication / information and communication technolog* / information technolog* / integrated communication / internet / internet commerce / internet of things / location independent manufacturing / m-commerce / machine-to-humen interaction / machine-to-machine interaction / mobile tech* / mobile platf* / mobile comm* / mobile commerce / offshore service provider / online / online business / online marketing / peer-to-peer communication / peer*to*peer communication / platform / robot / robotics / search engine / simulation / smart factory / smart industr* / smart manufacturing / smartphone / software / social technolog* / supply chain 4.0 / system integration / virtual / virtual integration / virtuality / web tech* / web platf* / web 2.0 / wireless / world wide web / worldwide web

dimension, while there are relatively more papers in IS, IB and the broader GMS area. This limited uptake of advanced ICT and developments in other domains is further confirmed when looking at keywords which are specific to particular areas (see Figure 3), where there is no node that signals a recognition of the transformational value of ICT in the IM domain and only the ‘electronic-word of mouth’ theme is connected to the general management, marketing and strategy (GMS) domain.

Insert Figure 2 and Figure 3 here

Looking at the broad terms which resulted from the coding of the papers, we find that the nodes of virtual, e-commerce, IT-IS infrastructure, ICT, digital, platform, internet and online appears in all four sub-fields. Contrasting this with terms which appear only in two or three of the selected fields, IM papers frequently relate to system integration, virtuality, digitalization, IT resource, and the world-wide web. The advanced ICT terms we see in management related literature and are usually connected with industry 4.0 dimensions, such as automation, additive manufacturing, and even social media related terms, are not (yet) on the radar of IM scholars.

Insert Figure 4 here

4 Conclusion and implication

Samiee (2019, this issue), offers a very compelling case for the fact that despite unprecedented and lasting shifts in consumer and business markets due to technological advancements, research on the internet and ICT in IM is heavily underrepresented. In our reading, the technology has been used predominantly as a trigger technology for understanding rapid firm internationalization, but the IM literature has so far only scratched the surface and failed to catch up with the reality of organizational restructuring that the technological disruption of advanced ICT facilitates. In fact, as Davis (2016) outlines, we are witnessing a regime shift in the cost of organizing. Advanced ICT and communication technologies make it much cheaper to organize commercial activities on a small and provisional basis, rather than investing in long-term institutions such as corporations. This has significant implications regarding the ways in which firms’ organizing, both domestic and international, can be explained. What is more, as far as theories of the economy are concerned, we may even have to challenge the basic assumption of firms as units of production, and have to think about new forms of organizing involving producer and consumer cooperatives next to new forms of platforms that connect buyers and sellers. These are not trivial matters in terms of research agendas. We will have to update our theoretical perspectives beyond transaction cost economics, the resource based view and contemporary theories of the firms and varieties of capitalism. IM researchers would be well served by starting to read economic sociology (Davis 2016; Parker, Alstyne, and Choudary 2016) and expand their imagination by drawing on work in the area of information systems (Srnicek 2017) and the interface of IB and global value chains (Laplume, Petersen, and Pearce 2016; Sinkovics et al. 2019; Strange and Zucchella 2017).

Within this paper we adopted the industry 4.0 conceptualization of advanced ICT (Rüßmann et al. 2015) and draw on a comprehensive and systematic literature analysis of international research outputs in the domains of international business, international marketing, general management, marketing and strategy as well as information systems. We demonstrate that there is tremendous research potential for IM in terms of further and deeper engagement with advanced ICT, beyond the somewhat over researched issue of rapid internationalization facilitated by the internet, specifically as far as consequences of advanced ICT dimensions for IM are concerned. For instance, the implications of augmented reality, additive manufacturing, cloud computing, the internet of things, for IM are wide open for substantive research. These issues could be combined with perspectives that are not simply ‘positive’ aspects of advanced ICT in terms of supporting superior performance of firms, but shedding light on the ‘dark sides of advanced ICT’. For instance, research on detrimental labor or productivity outcomes for producers who transition from traditional manufacturing to additive manufacturing, e.g. involving robotics, is likely to constitute promising, lively and impactful research avenues for IM researchers in the years to come.

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6 Figures and tables

Figure 1: transformative ICT over time

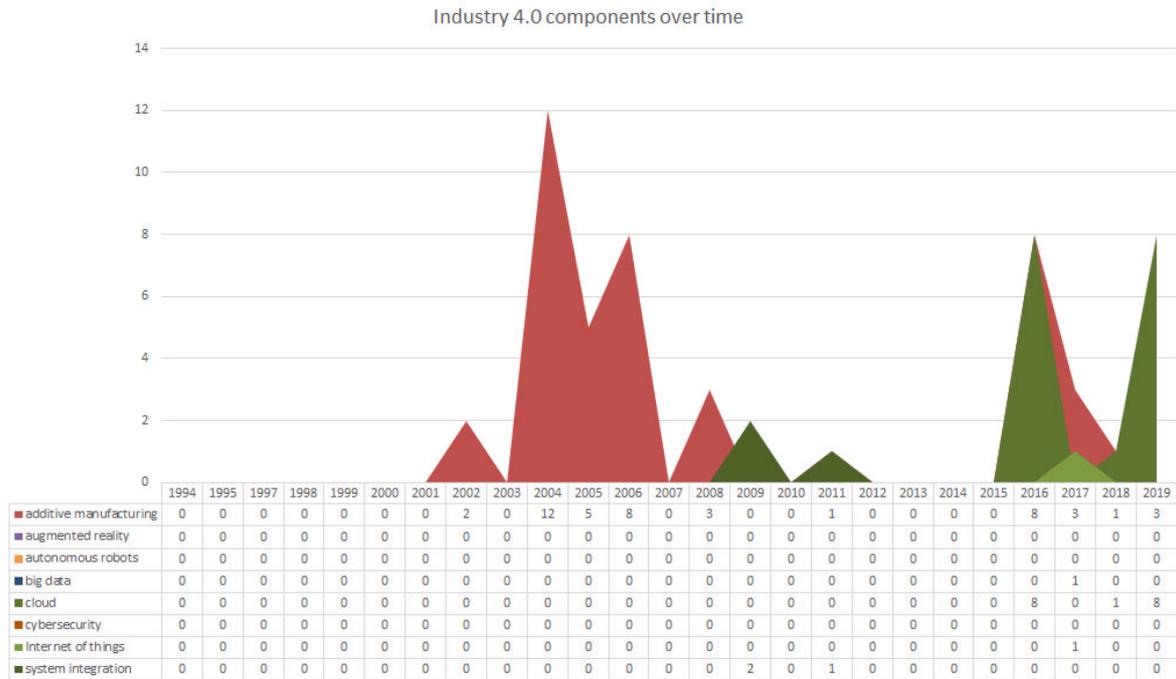


Figure 2: In which academic fields/areas did transformative ICT papers appear?

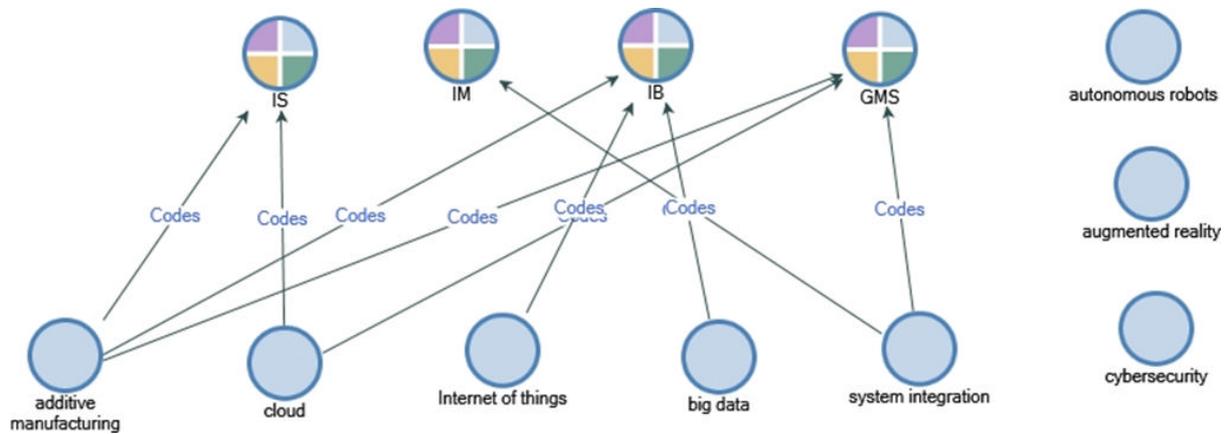


Figure 3: Keywords specific to a particular scholarly area

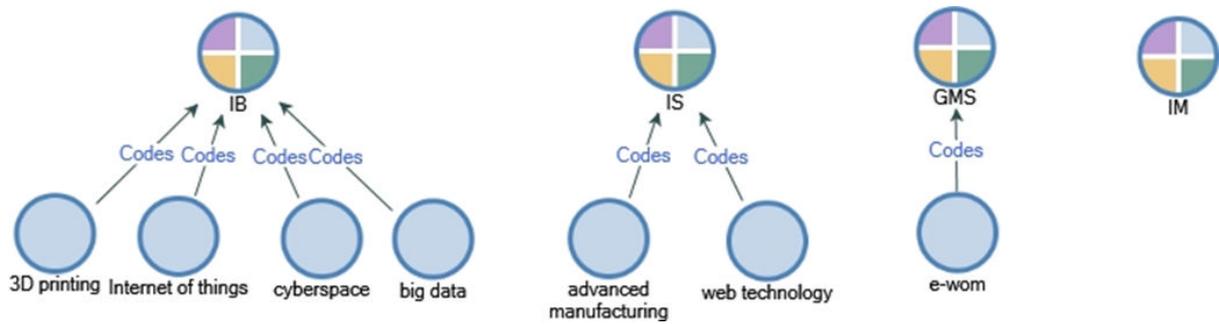


Figure 4: Terms in all four fields

