

A multi-level investigation of international marketing projects: The roles of experiential knowledge and creativity on performance

Taewon Suh^{a,*}, Mueun Bae^b, Hongxin Zhao^c, Seung H. Kim^c, Mark J. Arnold^d

^a Department of Marketing, McCoy College of Business Administration, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, Texas 78666, United States

^b Department of Marketing, Inha University, 253 Yonghyun-Dong, Incheon, 402-751, Republic of Korea

^c Boeing Institute of International Business, Cook School of Business, Saint Louis University, 3674 Lindell Blvd, St. Louis, MO 63108, United States

^d Department of Marketing, Cook School of Business, Saint Louis University, 3674 Lindell Blvd, St. Louis, MO 63108, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study, using a sample of Korean multinational corporations, focuses on testing the relationships between the constructs of experiential knowledge, creativity, and performance in the context of international marketing projects. Relying on a multi-level conceptualization of experiential knowledge and creativity, our findings suggest that process-based creativity is enhanced when the team members have a higher level of experiential knowledge, but outcome-based creativity is not significantly influenced by either team- or firm-level experiential knowledge. It is concluded that, in the context of international marketing projects, the domain-relevant knowledge of the actors (i.e., the team-level experiential knowledge in the foreign markets) largely governs the level of their process-based creativity. The findings also suggest that project performance is directly influenced by firm-level experiential knowledge and process-based creativity, and is indirectly influenced by team-level experiential knowledge through the mediation of process-based creativity.

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1. Introduction

In the area of marketing management, the major body of emerging studies has not taken a comprehensive look at the management of knowledge and innovation in international markets. Particularly, the study of *creativity* has received little attention in the literature of international marketing management. Although it is known that an absence of innovativeness is a critical reason for marketing failure (e.g., Griffiths-Hemans & Grover, 2006; Im & Workman, 2004; Sethi, Smith, & Park, 2001), the previous body of work has largely ignored the specifics of the international market setting. As a reflection of the growing reality wherein multinational corporations (MNCs) are increasingly leveraging their competencies of knowledge and innovation in ever-competitive global markets, we suggest that further research should focus on the importance of knowledge and innovation in the context of the international markets. This work primarily tries to respond to this need.

This work, investigating knowledge and innovation in the international market setting, also focuses on MNCs' marketing processes at the *project team* level. A review of the literature reveals that, with a few exceptions (e.g., Sethi et al., 2001), the major emphasis has been

on the macro-level, focusing largely on organization-wide phenomena and externalities to the MNC, such as research devoted to the network context or the organizational structure of MNCs (Gupta & Govindarajan, 1991; Holm, Johanson, & Thilenius, 1995). In other cases the issue of knowledge and innovation has been discussed within the limited area of the MNC's internationalization process. New knowledge concerning a common set of habits, customs, priorities, and approaches that produce new insights frequently emerges from teams (Brown & Duguid, 2001). Nevertheless, the team as a vital locus of intellectual capital has received limited attention in the study of the MNC's marketing management. The need for studying the team's role in the creation of knowledge becomes apparent in view of the reality that firms are increasingly moving toward more of a team-based structure in response to growing competition (Nijstad & De Dreu, 2002).

The project is the most common form of team undertaking in a firm. A project is defined as "any undertaking with a defined starting point and defined objectives by which completion is identified; in practice, most projects depend on finite or limited resources by which objectives are to be accomplished" (PMI Standards Committee, 1996). Projects have become an increasingly common way of working for MNCs, and project teams represent an important type of organizational form as their organizational capacity to exploit the firm-specific knowledge by sharing it within the firm comprises a key competitive advantage (Hung, Naidu, Cavusgil, & Yam, 2002). The issues of the management of a project or the project team, however, have rarely

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 512 245 3239.

E-mail addresses: ts21@txstate.edu (T. Suh), mueunbae@inha.ac.kr (M. Bae), zhaox@slu.edu (H. Zhao), kimsh@slu.edu (S.H. Kim), arnoldm2@slu.edu (M.J. Arnold).

been discussed in the international context, where the MNCs use projects to acquire capabilities in foreign markets. The present study investigates the nature of team-level knowledge and creativity in international projects. Against these backdrops, we feel that causal connections between knowledge, creativity, and performance of a project team should be established more firmly in the international marketing setting. Although a few researchers have investigated the consequences of knowledge management in the MNC (e.g., Luo, 1999) and it is shown that creativity and productivity are highly correlated (e.g., Suh, 2002; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999), the causal relationships between knowledge, creativity, and performance have never been examined together in a structured model regarding the marketing project in the international market. This study, therefore, attempts to fill in the research void by (1) establishing a research model at the *project-team* level; (2) centering on the crucial factors concerning *experiential knowledge* and *creativity* for the success of the international project; and (3) constructing a structural model encompassing the multi-level relationships between the explaining factors and *project performance*.

2. Theoretical framework

The research model for this study, which investigates the relationships of experiential knowledge, creativity, and performance in international projects, is described in Fig. 1. The exogenous variables in the model are the multiple constructs of experiential knowledge, measured at both the firm- and the team-level. In our model, experiential knowledge is associated with process-based creativity, outcome-based creativity, and project performance. Process-based creativity subsequently influences the other two endogenous variables, outcome-based creativity and project performance, with outcome-based creativity being associated with project performance. We provide the estimation in as parsimonious a manner as possible.

2.1. Experiential knowledge and creativity: A multi-level conceptualization

Experiential knowledge has been identified in the international marketing literature as an important determinant of international expansion. According to the stage model, market-specific experiential knowledge acts as a significant factor in explaining the firm's internationalization process (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975). The literature has established the link between deep or tacit knowledge acquired experientially by the firm's human resources and the firm's internationalization (Athanasios & Nigh, 2002). With increasing experience, firms acquire greater con-

fidence in their ability to assess the true economic worth of foreign markets (Davidson, 1980). Experiential knowledge also represents an alternative to the reduction of uncertainty, and a surrogate for accumulating cultural knowledge (Sambharya, 1996). In our research model, we attempt to incorporate this construct with the creativity research tradition at multiple levels: *Team's or firm's experiential knowledge contains the domain-relevant skills accumulated through operations in international markets.*

The domain-relevant skills component of creativity represents the ability to acquire certain types of domain-specific knowledge (Amabile, 1996). Domain-relevant skills require familiarity with the domain in question—memory of factual knowledge, technical proficiency, opinions about various questions in the domain, knowledge of paradigms, performance scripts for solving problems in the domain, and aesthetic criteria (Ruscio, Whitney, & Amabile, 1998). They can be indicated by measures of an individual's depth and breadth of knowledge related to the problems to be solved. This study, nested in the international project context, focuses on domain-relevant skills as a major determinant of creativity.

Market-specific experiential knowledge is defined here as a product of domain-relevant skills in international markets. It includes a firm's (or a team's) capability and resources to engage in international operations, as well as capability and resources to address competitive situations in specific markets and clients in these markets, and information about the governance structures in specific countries and their rules, regulations, norms, and values (Eriksson, Johanson, & Majkgard, 1997). In the context of an international project, market-specific experiential knowledge containing domain-relevant skills is expected to generate creative behavior and outcomes.

Market-specific experiential knowledge is twofold in this research setting: the team-level experiential knowledge versus the firm-level experiential knowledge. One assumption made here is that project teams as intra-organizational subgroups are not only inherited from their organization, but also have their own characteristics discrete from the identity of the organization as a whole. For instance, team members create a new team-based identity by which their existing identities are replaced, and the unique characteristics of the team are embodied (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). As a result, the team could behave uniquely; independent from its mother organizational environment. Therefore, experiential knowledge of an international project team (i.e., team-level) is defined as both the degree to which the team owns the knowledge of operation in the foreign market(s) where the project is undertaken, and the experienced skills necessary to process information creatively to produce novel and appropriate responses. Experiential knowledge of a firm (i.e., firm-level) means the firm possesses an estimation of accumulated knowledge in the foreign market(s) as a result of the firm's actual, operational experiences.

Another multi-level conceptualization, *process-based creativity* and *outcome-based creativity* are defined in the research model according to emerging conceptualizations of creativity. Creativity, according to the current literature, has three usages: 1) "I am creative"; 2) "I work creatively"; and 3) "my production is creative." These semantically distinguishable usages respectively coincide with the three conceptualizations of creativity, which are personality-based, process-based, and outcome-based. While the personality-based definition of creativity has attained much attention at the early stage of creativity research, outcome-based conceptualization of creativity (which is outcome-based creativity in this study) has just begun to gain a more ubiquitous status (e.g., Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Andrews & Smith, 1996; Menon, Bharadwaj, Adidam, & Edison, 1999; Stein, 1974; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). For outcome-based creativity, the assessment of creativity is made on "some public outcome rather than to a process or a specific person" (Ford, 1996: 19). Menon et al. (1999) developed measures of creativity that clearly observed only the outcome of a process. Outcome-based creativity is operationally defined as the degree of development of new knowledge

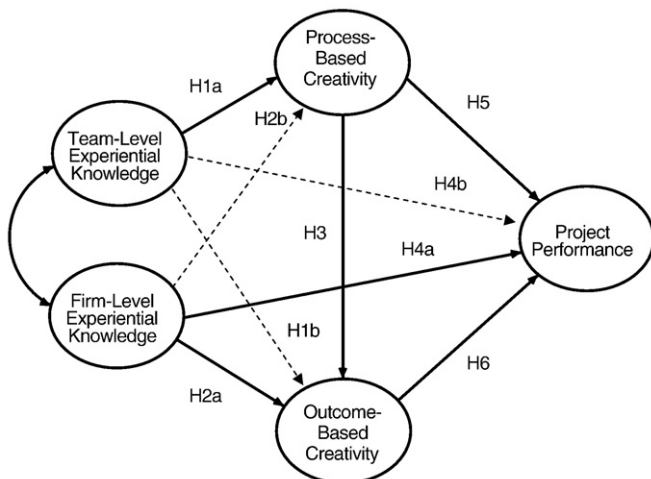


Fig. 1. Proposed research model.

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