



International research teams as analysts of industrial business networks

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes case studies in the context of industrial business networks, and in particular from the IMP (Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group) perspective. Two features have been prominent in this research tradition: collaboration in international research teams and interest in business between international customers and their suppliers. Still, researchers seldom discuss the challenges with the international aspects of the research team (as the subject of study) or of the business relations (as the object of study). This paper shows the complications of analyzing international business relations, namely, relations that cross national boundaries, and investigates how an international research team can tackle the challenges of international business network studies. The key contributions are, firstly, to indicate the lack of attention on the methodological requirements and opportunities that the international features create for the analysis of business networks and, secondly, to investigate how collaboration in an international research team may advance the analysis of both international industrial marketing relations and broader business networks.

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1. Introduction

A prominent research tradition that has been increasingly adopted for the analysis of industrial marketing concentrates on business networks and is closely related to the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group. Given that this research community has a relatively long track record in doing empirical research and often using qualitative and rich case studies, the network tradition gives a fruitful basis for discussing methodological concerns in the investigation of industrial markets by case studies.

The initial aim of the IMP Group was to carry out a large-scale study on business marketing and purchasing between five European countries; the goal of the individual researchers was to broaden the empirical basis of their studies (Håkansson, 1982). Since then, two features have been prominent in this research tradition: first, international research cooperation and *international research teams* are common, and second, as Ford (2004) notes, researchers have been interested in learning about what happens in *business between international customers and their suppliers*. The former feature is visible in, for instance, the high number of joint publications and the relatively tight research community involving researchers from different countries (see Morlacchi, Wilkinson, & Young, 2005; Mattsson & Johanson, 2004). The latter aspect, in turn, has led to a clearly visible orientation to develop concepts for the analysis of international business networks (Ford, 2004; Johanson & Mattsson, 1988). Still, research reports seldom discuss the challenges that the international features of the research team (as the subject of study) or

the business relations and networks (as the object of study) may bring to the analysis. The international dimensions of the research setting seem to be taken for granted, and perhaps therefore, not challenged at all in current studies.

The recent advances of qualitative research methods for international business (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004a; Clark & Michailova, 2004; Piekkari & Welch, 2006) show convincingly how foreign research sites and different (e.g. national, cultural and linguistic) contexts provoke challenges and also particular potential for empirical research. Indeed, often the context constitutes the very nature of empirical fieldwork (Michailova & Clark, 2004). This paper argues that since the international dimension is often present in the contemporary case studies on business networks, it also calls for more methodological attention. While business relationships may in several respects be universal by nature, there are important contingencies related to the context (both foreign research sites and different contexts of business actors) that need to be considered. Given that the researchers of international business relationships are interested in interaction and connections, it becomes relevant also to understand how the analysts in practice cross the national, cultural and linguistic boundaries.

This paper shows the complications that are present in the analysis of business relations that cross national boundaries, namely, are international. The aim is to investigate how an international research team can tackle the issues that the international dimension brings to the case analysis of business networks. The contribution of the paper is, firstly, to indicate the lack of attention on the methodological requirements and opportunities that the international features cause for the analysis of business networks and, secondly, to investigate how collaboration in an international research team may advance the

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analysis of international business networks. The discussion is valid for examining both international industrial marketing relations and broader business networks.

Business networks may be analyzed with various approaches and methodologies (for examples of quantitative method choices, see e.g. Solberg & Durrieu, 2006; Iacobucci & Hopkins, 1992), but case studies with a qualitative approach are common. They are fruitful in analyzing industrial marketing (Woodside & Wilson, 2003) and especially in capturing the richness and holism that prevail in business networks (Easton, 1995). This paper focuses on case studies for investigating international networks and on international research teams in particular, and thus adds to the recent methodological discussion on case research in industrial markets and networks (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Dubois & Araujo, 2004; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005).

This paper adopts the relationship view to industrial marketing. This choice directs attention to the *interaction* between the business actors in international networks. From the IMP perspective, international industrial marketing is “the complex task of finding suitable individual relationship counterparts, whether end-users or intermediaries and developing relationships with them” (Ford, 2004, p. 139). The ontological and epistemological premises of the network approach make it peculiar, and the analysis of interaction rather than the partners has fundamental implications for empirical analysis. To focus the discussion, other approaches to industrial marketing are therefore left aside here. Another explicit limitation of the paper is to concentrate on networks in *business-to-business markets*, although networks have aroused a wide interest in other fields, too. Management, organization and international business scholars have produced extensive analyses on international relations. Although these are not considered here, many of the issues presented are valid for analyzing relationships more generally, for instance, as comes to management of MNCs.

The paper is organized as follows. First, a literature review shows that international business networks have been an object and a context for several studies within the IMP tradition, although little methodological attention has been given to the international dimension so far. The next section investigates the challenges that this dimension brings to the analysis of business networks. The third section looks at team work in the analysis of business networks, and focuses on case studies in particular. The discussion section reflects on the advantages of having an international team as opposed to a single investigator when analyzing international business networks. It also summarizes the key requirements for research team work and their pitfalls. The concluding note outlines some implications for further team work in the area of international business network studies.

2. Earlier studies on international business networks

For several IMP studies, international (marketing) relationships and international business networks have been the explicit object of analysis. These investigations have advanced both conceptually and empirically the broader area of international business studies (Forsgren & Johanson, 1991; Gemuenden, Ritter, & Walter, 1997; Havila, Forsgren, & Håkansson, 2002). The Uppsala internationalization model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977) and the network view to the internationalization of the firm (Johanson & Mattsson, 1988) are widely acknowledged among international business scholars, but there are also other studies revealing the role that various relationships play in the firm internationalization process (Fletcher & Barrett, 2001; Johanson & Vahlne, 2003; Harris & Wheeler, 2005; Solberg & Durrieu, 2006). The network perspective offers a new view, for example, to foreign market entry, as it suggests a managerial task of operating in a complex set of relationships (Axelsson & Johanson, 1992). In practice this calls for involvement in the foreign networks by both individuals and companies (Salmi, 2000; Agndal & Axelsson, 2002). Some of the recent investigations have focused on the cross-

cultural aspects of business interaction (Fang, 2001; Holden, 2004; Salmi, 2007), international supply relations (Salmi, 2006; Ghauri, Tarnovskaja, & Elg, 2008) and national networks (Hallén & Johanson, 2004). Indeed, the IMP researchers have in many different and explicit ways contributed to the international business and international marketing literature (Ford, 2004).

Simultaneously, a number of works within the IMP tradition since its early days have analyzed business networks that are in fact international without any specific (methodological) attention to this dimension. For example, the book by Håkansson and Snehota (1995), which is one of the prominent works in the field, deals with business relationships in an international setting. As suggested by the authors, “the network approach is especially fruitful in a world with increasing trade between countries and regions” (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995, p. 4). The book presents a number of empirical cases (provided by 24 contributors), several of which involve business actors from different countries, thus representing international networks. It illustrates that multiple and rich case studies are needed to reveal the complexities (e.g. activity links, resource ties and actor bonds) of business networks, but does not comment on the research methods used. Furthermore, there is practically no problematization of the analysis of different national contexts. Apart from short comments in three case studies (on the cultural atmosphere, the peculiarities of the transitional context, and the differences between Japanese and Western hierarchies), there is no reference to the potential implications of analyzing business networks that belong to an international setting. Finally as many other works, the book does not mention the role of team work when multiple authors are involved in investigations.

Given that the international dimension has been an integral part of network studies, methodological discussion on how to analyze international business relations is surprisingly scarce. Still, IMP research is featured by the willingness to publish in book format (McLoughlin & Horan, 2002) or via electronic means (e.g. the IMP Journal, on the website www.impgroup.org) both of which would offer relatively abundant space for not only rich case studies but also for methodological discussions (as seen, in fact, in the initial research report by Håkansson, 1982). Interestingly enough, even the instructive articles on case studies in business network research do not voice the international dimension. For instance, as an illustrative case in industrial networks Dubois and Araujo (2004) use the study by Holmen, where key actors come from the UK, Denmark and Sweden, but there is no reference to the international features. Similarly, Halinen and Törnroos (2005) who explicitly take international research work as their illustration, pay no attention to the potential complications of the cross-national methods. The reason for these neglects may be that both researchers and managers take the international dimension for granted: the markets of industrial products have by their very nature been international for long. In the future, globalization will increase the importance of international networks and give even more reasons for the analysts of business markets to consider the international contexts (Matthyssens, Kirca, & Pace, 2008).

3. What more does the international context bring to the analysis?

3.1. Analysis of business networks

To understand why it would be important to pay explicit attention to the international dimension of business networks, we may start from the general premises for their analysis. There is a wide variation of approaches within the IMP research tradition, but the ultimate object of analysis is the interaction and relationship (Dubois, Gadde, & Hulthén, 2005). As the focus is on interaction, there is no single decision-maker to stress, and to a large extent the investigation

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