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Bridging marketing theory - practice gap to enhance firm performance: Introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

The fast pace of technology is challenging existing business practices and, consequently, widening the gap between marketing theory and practice. This special issue is intended to help bridge this gap. The articles it contains were presented at the 8th European Marketing Academy Regional Conference hosted by the West University of Timisoara, Romania. They provide theoretical insights and practical insights in four strategic areas related to firm performance: marketing strategy implementation; digital technologies in marketing; international branding; and sustainable marketing. This paper reviews existing solutions for bridging the gap between marketing theory and practice, summarize the content of the eleven papers published and provide directions for future research.

1. Introduction

Marketing is a mature field that needs new innovative paradigms, focus on emerging topics and an updated model of scholarship (Eisend, 2015; Lutz, 2011) to preserve its academic status and practical relevance. As an applied discipline, the value of marketing resides in its ability to be a company's growth engine (Kumar, 2008). Over time, marketing value has been questioned, being revealed the decline of its voice at corporate level (Kumar, 2008) and the loss of its power and influence within the company (Homburg, Vomberg, Enke, & Grimm, 2015). However, the results from previous research are contradictory. While some studies found evidence of marketing department's influence and contribution to the firm performance (Feng, Morgan, & Rego, 2015; Homburg, Workman Jr., & Krohme, 1999; Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009), others identified a declining influence (Homburg et al., 2015). In addition, the gap between marketers and practitioners is widening (Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009) because of the dominant focus on rigor in research to the detriment of relevance (Lehmann, McAlister, & Staelin, 2011. To address these challenges, it becomes critical to increase the value of marketing academic research by enhancing its practical relevance for firms. Hence, marketing theory and practice need to keep pace with new technologies and market dynamics (Wind, 2008). In this regard, marketing scholars have analyzed the status-quo of the marketing field, identified major challenges and pathways for future development (Day & Montgomery, 1999; Eisend, 2015; Kumar, 2015). Leading voices in academia have voiced concerns about the major challenges ahead. For example, Reibstein et al. (2009) have questioned whether marketing academia has lost its way, while Sheth and Sisodia (2006) called for a reform in the marketing field. In the same vein, Hunt (1994) suggested rethinking both the discipline and practice of marketing, while McCole (2004) proposed ways of refocusing marketing theory on evolving practice. Rust, Moorman, and Bhalla (2010) argue in favor of reorienting marketing in organizations to become more customer-centric, and Kotler (2011) supports the reinvention of marketing theory and practice to comply with environmental imperatives. Furthermore, Webster Jr. and Lusch (2013) argue in favor of rethinking the purpose, premises and models of marketing since the business landscape is changing. In conclusion, discovering solutions to meet these challenges prevents marketing becoming irrelevant (Kumar, 2017) and marginalized (Reibstein et al., 2009), both as discipline and organizational function.

Thanks to the efforts of academic community over the past 100 years, the marketing discipline has built its scientific status through conceptual and methodological developments that have increased the rigor of the research process and the validity of its results. However, as an applied science, marketing must have practical relevance. Because of this fact, the gap between marketing theory and practice becomes topic of interest for both academics and practitioners. Increasing the credibility and influence of marketing academics on practice (Reibstein et al., 2009) requires focused efforts to understand the causes of this gap and to implement actions to ensure real-time co-evolution of marketing theory and practice. To bridge this gap, well recognized are

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the endeavors undertaken by certain institutions (e.g. Marketing Science Institute), conferences (e.g. Theory + Practice in Marketing – TPM) and leading journals' special issues on marketing theory and practice (e.g. Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research) with the aim of fostering dialogue and collaboration between marketing scholars and practitioners. In line with these initiatives, this special issue (SI) of *Journal of Business Research (JBR)* offered participants at the 8th European Marketing Academy (EMAC) Regional Conference the opportunity to help to fill this gap through new insights generated by the study of marketing practice in emerging and developed economies. The articles published in this SI were selected according to their level of compliance with the four principles of TPM movement: managerial problem focus; method simplicity; communication simplicity; and theory related (Lehmann, 2014).

We begin by presenting the background of this conference-based SI. Next, we synthesize previous literature on important issues of marketing theory-practice gap. Further, we summarize managerial problems and key insights the eleven published articles provide in four areas related to firm performance, namely: marketing strategy implementation; social media usage in marketing; international branding; and sustainable marketing. Finally, we conclude by highlighting opportunities for future research to bridge the gap between marketing theory and practice.

2. Background of this SI

This SI comprises eleven papers that have been presented at the 8th European Marketing Academy (EMAC) Regional Conference hosted on September 20–22, 2017 by the West University of Timisoara (Romania) and organized by the Department of Marketing and International Economic Relations of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. EMAC regional conferences are organized on a yearly basis since 2010 aiming to stimulate high quality academic discourse and research cooperation between marketing scholars in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries. The theme of this conference has been focused on bridging the gap between marketing theory and practice to enhance companies' competitiveness. Since new opportunities and challenges are created by new digital technologies that connect and empower customers, by the globalization of markets and by environmental issues, all organizations must transform their business models and processes to survive and thrive in today's dynamic landscape. To retain its relevance, marketing theory must explore these phenomena and must offer guidance to practitioners in aligning marketing strategies to these developments with the aim of creating sustainable competitive advantage and increasing business performance. In this context, the presentations of the four keynote speakers at this conference have approached challenging issues for the future of the marketing theory and practice. In the first presentation, Roland Rust (David Bruce Smith Chair in Marketing, University of Maryland, USA) shed a light on how Artificial Intelligence (AI) will transform the service sector. In the second presentation, Stelian Campianu (Executive Director, ETA2U Group, Romania) explained the process of Internet of Things (IoT) adoption from business perspective. Next, Adamantios Diamantopoulos (Chair in International Marketing, University of Vienna, Austria) explained the nature of country stereotypes in consumer behavior and their impact on international marketing strategy. In the final presentation, Gerrit van Bruggen (Past-President of EMAC and Professor of Marketing, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands) explained the EMAC's role in CEE region by fostering dialogue and collaboration between marketing scholars and practitioners' communities. Thirty-nine of seventy submissions the conference received were selected to be presented in thirteen parallel sessions covering interesting topics in marketing strategy, consumer behavior, international marketing, new media, marketing communications, retailing, sales force, ethics and sustainability. The authors of twenty-one papers eligible for submission to this SI of JBR have revised their works following conference feedback. Submitted papers followed JBR double-blind review process. Finally, eleven revised articles were accepted for publication in this SI.

3. Filling the marketing theory-practice gap

The value of marketing academic research is twofold: first, advancing marketing theory and second enhancing marketing practice. On the one hand, theory provides the members of the academic community with new concepts, conceptual frameworks and methods that deepen understanding of marketing phenomena. On the other hand, it provides the marketers with guidance for decision-making and deploying resources in marketing processes. Thus, to strengthen its status as academic discipline and business function, marketing scholars have addressed the issues of rigor in the development of marketing theory and relevance for marketing practice. Alderson and Cox (1948) were among the first to explain the need for theory development in marketing. Later, Baumol (1957) described the concept of theory as a systematic explanation of a phenomenon, while Bartels (1968) and Hunt (1983) were influential in the development of a general theory of marketing. Following these early developments, several academics have brought seminal contributions to advancement of marketing theory. A good example is Morgan and Hunt's (1994) commitment-trust theory of the relationship marketing, Hunt and Morgan's (1995) comparative advantage theory of competition, and Vargo and Lusch's (2004) Service-Dominant Logic. In addition to these theoretical developments, prominent academics have contributed to paradigmatic and methodological advancements of research in marketing by focusing on important issues: theoretical paradigms and method bias (Deshpandé, 1983), objectivity (Hunt, 1993), truth (Zinkhan & Hirschheim, 1992), strategies for theory development (Yadav, 2010), types of conceptual contributions in marketing (MacInnis, 2011), formulating interesting research problems (Voss, 2003), developing measures of marketing constructs (Churchill Jr., 1979), index construction (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001), structural equation models (Bagozzi & Yi, 2011; Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and good practices in marketing scholarship (Woodside, 2016). All these remarkable developments strengthened the rigor of research in marketing. However, rigor is a necessary, but not a sufficient driver of value in marketing research. The relevance of research is another dimension of research that must be in balance with rigor (Lehmann et al., 2011). In this regard, Kumar (2017) advocated a shift from the current rigor-versus-relevance paradigm towards a rigor-*and*-relevance approach in marketing research.

The importance of relevance to marketing practice is widely accepted by marketing scholars. However, many scholars have been disproportionately focused on the theoretical and methodological developments at the detriment of relevance. In other words, marketing scholars lost their focus on both rigor and relevance (Wind, 2008). Consequently, even if drawing managerial implications and recommendations has become the norm for publication in many academic journals, their real impact has been rather insignificant (Reibstein et al., 2009). Many marketing academics have failed in addressing substantive topics of interest for business (Lehmann et al., 2011), leading to loss of relevance (Reibstein et al., 2009) and the decline in the influence of marketing knowledge (Eisend, 2015) and marketing function (Homburg et al., 2015). To prevent this unfavorable development, leading academics have periodically assessed the status quo of marketing as academic discipline and business function and proposed future directions for theory and practice alignment with the trends of globalization, technology and sustainability (e.g. Achrol & Kotler, 2012; Day & Montgomery, 1999; Kumar, 2015; Sheth, 2011; Webster Jr. & Lusch, 2013; Wilkie & Moore, 2012). More recently, Jaworski (2011) clarified the concept of managerial relevance defining it in terms of the manager's perception of the help given by academic knowledge in thinking or actions related to her or his job, identifying four categories of managerial relevance: immediate action relevance; short-term thinking relevance; future action relevance; and future thinking relevance. Furthermore, Lutz (2011) advocates the adoption of a more collaborative approach (i.e. *marketing scholarship 2.0*) in production and dissemination of marketing knowledge and makes some recommendations to increase the relevance of marketing research. However, although marketing scholars have at their disposal a variety of useful methods and tools to ensure the rigor of their research, more conceptual and practical guidance is required to address the issue of relevance.

Despite these developments, the marketing theory - practice gap is widening because marketing academics provide with some delay the necessary support for practitioners in solving problems they face in the process of adapting to the new business landscape (Kumar, 2017). Also, the dominant deductive approach in marketing research has proven to be detrimental to uncovering emergent marketing practices and paradigms (McCole, 2004). Furthermore, the theory - practice gap is evolving as a result of differences between interests, standards, and priorities of marketing scholars and the needs of marketing executives operating in an ambiguous, uncertain, fast-changing and complex marketspace (Reibstein et al., 2009).

The issue of bridging the gap between marketing theory and practice has been approached in marketing literature from two perspectives: a) marketing theory-practice relationship perspective; and b) marketing scholars-practitioners divide perspective. First, from the perspective of the relationship between marketing theory and practice, marketing academics recognize the role of theory in driving practice and the practice role in triggering the further advancement of the theory (Jaworski, 2011; Kumar, 2017; Lutz, 2011). Understanding this mutual reinforcing relationship is facilitated by Kumar's (2017) perpetuity model of theory-practice-theory cycle that describes how theoretical knowledge influences marketing practice through developing and implementing strategies and tactics, and how insights from marketing practice lead to new theoretical principles through empirical generalizations. Furthermore, Lutz's (2011) proposed the transition of the system of producing new marketing knowledge from a closed, linear and slow model to an open, digital and collaborative system for advancing marketing knowledge and practice. Several solutions for bridging marketing theory - practice gap have emerged from extant literature (see Table 1): adopting the perspective of rigor - and - relevance in research (Kumar, 2017); focusing on emerging phenomena (Yadav, 2018); positioning research contributions to the higher business level rather than at the narrow level of the marketing department (Brown in Bolton, 2005); conducting role-relevant research driven by the deep understanding of the core tasks of different marketing roles (Jaworski, 2011); adopting a collaborative system of marketing scholarship (Lutz, 2011); performing an audit to identify areas of practice in which marketing theory will be relevant (Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O Regan, & Wornham, 2012); manager-oriented dissemination by highlighting the implications for business practice (Dall'Olmo Riley, Lomax, & Robinson, 2007) and translating research results into actionable principles (McCole, 2004).

Second, from the perspective of marketing scholars - practitioners divide, it is widely recognized that this gap is widening and that the lack of engagement of the two communities is counterproductive for both sides. Despite this, research on the engagement between marketing academics and practitioners is scarce (Hughes et al., 2012). However, some answers to the question of how to best align marketing academics and practitioner have been suggested in marketing literature (see Table 1): assessing the congruence of the perspective of marketing academics on the validity and usefulness of research findings with that of practitioners (Webster Jr., 1981); deploying field experiments and pilot studies to encourage practitioners' interactions with researchers (Kumar, 2017); marketing scholars' immersion in real life of managers to understand their perspective (Jaworski, 2011); identifying communities of practitioners interested in research findings to stimulate their participation in marketing research (Hughes et al., 2012).

4. Insights from this SI

The papers published in this SI provide relevant theoretical and managerial contributions (see Table 2) to deepen the understanding of certain marketing processes that contribute to the company's competitiveness and business performance in today's business landscape. We organized them around the following four themes: marketing strategy

Table 1
Solutions to bridge marketing-theory practice gap.

Solutions	Actions	Sources
Theory-practice gap		
Rigor and relevance research approach	balancing rigor and relevance in marketing scholarship addressing emerging topics converting theories into strategies and tactics useful for practitioners	Kumar, 2017
Focus on emerging phenomena	immersive observation of emerging phenomena clarifying terminology related to emerging phenomena developing new concepts and nomological networks to explain emerging phenomena accelerating the availability of data related to emerging phenomena	Yadav, 2018
Contributions at higher business level	positioning research contributions at a higher level of business rather than at a narrowest level of marketing practice	Brown, 2005
Role-relevant knowledge	deeper understanding of the core tasks of different marketing roles through observation, recording and analyzing managers' work information need's assesement pattern based on the nature of the impact (action / thinking) and timing of the impact (present / future) linking research to role-related decisions and actions	Jaworski, 2011
Digital, collaborative marketing scholarship system	adopting “open-source” collaborative research design following crowdsourcing model the collaborative definition of the research problem selecting and segmenting target audience digital dissemination of marketing scholarship	Lutz, 2011
Marketing practice audit	perform an audit to identify the field of practice in which marketing theory will be relevant	Hughes, 2012
Manager-oriented dissemination	drawing implications for business practice converting research results into actionable principles	Dall'Olmo Riley et al., 2007 McCole, 2004
Researcher-practitioner divide		
Interaction with practitioners	field experiments and pilot studies to stimulate mutual engagement	Kumar, 2017
Researcher immersion in real world	researcher immersion in the real world of marketers to understand managers' roles	Jaworski, 2011
Engaging different practitioner communities	identifying new communities of practitioners interested in research outcomes deploying participatory marketing research	Hughes et al. (2012)
Congruence of scholars' and practitioners' perspectives	assessing the congruence of the perspectives of academics and practitioners on the validity and usefulness of research findings	Webster Jr., 1981

Table 2
Insights into marketing theory and practice from this special issue.

Authors	Managerial	Sample	New insights in marketing theory	New insights in marketing practice
Marketing strategy implementation				
Stathakopoulos, Kottikas, Theodorakis, and Kottika	Profiling managers in market-driving strategy implementation	Greece	Conceptual framework and research propositions to investigate the effects of managerial characteristics on the effectiveness of implementing the market-driving strategy	The effectiveness of implementing the market-driving strategy requires: a) strong vision, strategic human resources management, predictive abilities and wisdom of top managers; b) expertise, commitment, entrepreneurship and flexibility of middle managers; c) open policy, transformational leadership and creativity of all managers.
Zaborek and Mazur	Enabling value co-creation	Poland	Arguments for the differentiated effects of value creation building blocks on the company's operational and financial performance in manufacturing and service sectors	To capitalize on the value of co-creation, service business managers should focus in particular on customer dialogue, while those from manufacturing companies on providing customers with access to relevant information.
Micevski, Dewsnap, Cadogan, Kadic-Maglajlic, and Boso	Managing salesperson role stress through sales intra-functional flexibility	United Kingdom	Definition and operationalization of the concept of intra-functional sales flexibility Measuring the flexibility of sales resources Arguments to support the performance effects of intra-functional sales flexibility	Improving the intra-functional flexibility of the sales team will enhance company's performance. Higher customer performance requires greater flexibility in sales and customer orientation of the firm. When flexibility of sales resources is high, allowing the ambiguity of the role will increase sales performance.
Digital technologies in marketing				
Foltean, Trif, and Tuleu	Enhancing customer relationship management capabilities through social media technology use	Romania	Explaining the use of social media technology in CRM based on institutional factors Contextualizing social media drivers in CRM	Customer requirements and competitors' practices leads to the use of social media technology to enhance CRM capabilities. The decision to focus primarily on being sensitive to customer requirements or aligning with competitors' practices regarding the use of social media in CRM depends on the size and innovativeness of the company, as well as on sector and market settings.
Michaelidou and Micevski	Preventing undesirable customer actions through ethical use of social media analytics	United Kingdom	Discovering indirect consequences of ethics of social media practice and organizational trustworthiness on consumer responses Arguments for the moderator role of the consumer's personal gains on the effects of the perceived risk	Informing consumers about the truthfulness of information about the practice of social media analytics will increase organizational trustworthiness. Concentrating marketing communication on consumer personal gains will prevent their negative their actions against the organization.
International branding				
Diamantopoulos, Davydova, and Arslanagic-Kalajdzic	Capitalizing on consumer xenocentrism in international branding	Russia	Serial mediation model of the relationship between consumer xenocentrism and purchasing intention Arguments for the mediating role of the product-country image and brand attitude in the relation between consumer xenocentrism and purchasing intention	Companies from countries more developed than the target market should focus their branding strategies on brand's origin and its social and symbolic value. Local companies should focus their communication strategy on neutralizing consumers' perception of inferiority of domestic brands.
Sichtmann, Davvetas, and Diamantopoulos	Building consumer-brand relationship through brand globalness/localness positioning strategies	Austria and Bulgaria	New conceptualization of brand localness Theorization and empirical validation of the positive influences of brand globalness and localness on consumer-brand identification Arguments for the complementarity of the effects of brand globalness and localness in building consumer-brand identification	Brand globalness and localness hybridization in positioning strategy can enhance consumer-brand relationship for both global and local brands. Positioning as a "glocal" brand must be based on customer knowledge about the origin of the brand.
Kolbl, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Diamantopoulos	Driving purchase intentions through positioning strategies	Austria and Bosnia and Herzegovina	Integration of stereotyping theory into explaining the influence of brand positioning strategy on consumer-brand relationship Conceptual framework to explain the effects of the brand positioning strategies, stereotype content and consumer-brand relationship on purchasing intention	Driving the content of the brand stereotype through positioning strategies should be adapted to the specific context of developed and developing countries. Leveraging stereotype content to strengthen consumer-brand identification will stimulate purchase intention and brand ownership.
Micevski, Halkias, and Herz	Leveraging EU consumer identity in shaping consumers product preferences	Germany	Conceptual framework of consumer's multiple community-based identities	Using the EU identity in marketing communication strategy will be beneficial for both domestic and foreign products.

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

Authors	Managerial	Sample	New insights in marketing theory	New insights in marketing practice
			Arguments for the role of EU identity in driving consumer's product preferences	Promoting the EU identity for domestic products should be done with caution, as high consumer ethnocentrism could neutralizes its positive influence.
Sustainable marketing				
Papadas, Avlonitis, Carrigan, and Piha	Strengthening firm competitive advantage through strategic/internal green marketing orientation	Greece	Conceptual framework for studying the antecedents and consequences of strategic green marketing orientation Validating the moderator role of internal green marketing on the relationship between strategic green marketing and competitive advantage of the company	Investments in green marketing initiatives will enhance competitive advantage and financial performance. Managers should consider stakeholders' pressures and human capital in designing and implementing effective green marketing strategies.
Kadic-Maglajlic, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, Micevski, Dlacic, and Zabkar	Managing corporate social responsibility initiatives through understanding consumer engagement in sustainable consumption behavior	Croatia and Slovenia	Conceptual model for studying the determinants of two forms of sustainable consumption behavior (i.e. pro-environmental and pro-social consumption behavior) Arguments for the impact of young adult consumer engagement on sustainable consumption behavior and for the moderating role of emotional intelligence	The marketing communication strategy can use storytelling to leverage the firm's pro-environmental and pro-social commitment. Managers and policy makers can stimulate sustainable consumption behavior through initiatives to encourage sustainable lifestyle and collaborative consumption, and to shape consumer's nonmaterial aspirations.

implementation; digital technologies in marketing; international branding; and sustainable marketing.

4.1. Marketing strategy implementation

In order to be effective in sustaining their competitive advantage, it is recommended that companies adopt an appropriate approach to market orientation, value co-creation processes and flexible sales organization, among others. These are the topics investigated by the three articles under this heading.

Market-driven and driving-markets are widely recognized as two complementary approaches to the concept of market orientation, with beneficial effects on business performance. Previous conceptual and empirical research has extensively focused on the market-driven facet of this strategic orientation of the firm. Despite the fact that driving-markets has the potential to create a sustainable competitive advantage, this orientation has not been given the same amount of scholarly attention. Consequently, new theoretical and empirical contributions are required to help managers develop effective marketing strategies in order to shape market structure and/or market behavior. In this article, ('Market-driving strategy and personnel attributes: Top management versus middle management'), *Stathakopoulos, Kottikas, Theodorakis, and Kottika* shed light on the micro-foundations of the market-driving strategy implementation process. Although top and middle management play a central role in this process, previous research did not identify the characteristics required for these managers to be effective. To fill this knowledge gap, the authors adopted a qualitative approach to identify personal traits of top management and middle-level employees that are useful to implement market-driving strategies. Drawing on various literature streams (market orientation, entrepreneurship, change management, and organizational behavior), the authors developed two shortlists of 10 characteristics for top management and middle-level employees. They ran semi-structured interviews with 27 marketing experts from Greece (20 high-level marketing executives and 7 academic experts) to identify the most important features of these managers. On the one hand, the analysis of the qualitative content revealed that the strong vision, strategic human resource management, and prediction skills and insightfulness are the main features needed by top management. On the other hand, middle-level managers must be characterized by expertise, commitment, intrapreneurship, and flexibility to be effective in implementing market-driving strategies. Based on their findings, the authors propose a conceptual framework that relates these traits of top and middle-level management to the effectiveness of implementing market-driving strategies. In addition, they formulate research propositions to be further tested by quantitative research. The authors recommend top managers engaged in implementing market-driving strategies to develop a consistent corporate vision, enable creative behaviors of the employees, develop the expertise of middle-level employees, and stimulate intrapreneurship within the organization.

Being market-oriented in today's business environment requires redesigning the value creation process by adopting co-creation. Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) is the main theoretical framework used to explain the value co-creation process. The original SDL framework (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) was refined by developing new concepts and reformulating its foundational propositions. However, future development of this framework requires more empirical research to test and validate the theory. In their paper entitled "Enabling value co-creation with consumers as a driver of business performance: A dual perspective of Polish manufacturing and service SMEs", *Zaborek and Mazur* investigate empirically the effects of building blocks of the value co-creation (VCC) on the performance of manufacturing and service SMEs in Poland. The authors start by synthesizing the results of previous empirical research focusing on the impact on business performance of VCC, such as product innovativeness, new product performance, customer satisfaction and loyalty. Next they review existing VCC conceptualizations and develop a conceptual framework of relationships between VCC building blocks and the operational and financial performance of the business. In doing so, they rely on Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) DART model of value co-creation and develop a new measurement scale for each component of this process (i.e. Dialogue, Access, Risk assessment, and Transparency). They found that dialogue has positive effects on both operational and financial performance of Polish SMEs, while access only positively influences operational performance. Furthermore, they have identified different effects within manufacturing companies as compared to service providers. More specifically, in the case of manufacturers, dialogue with customers has positive effects on financial performance, while enabling access to information influences positively operational performance. In contrast, in the case of service SMEs, only the dialogue has positive performance effects on both operational and financial indicators. The authors conclude with the recommendation that manufacturers focus on access, while service providers focus on dialogue to benefit from the VCC process.

Strategic flexibility consists of flexible resources and flexible allocation of resources and it allows the firm to react responsively to the rapid pace of change in today's business environment. Moreover, it has the potential to become a key factor in the company's competitive advantage and performance. Despite its growing relevance and importance in business strategy, this topic remains underexplored in academic marketing research. To fill this knowledge gap, in their article “Sales intra-functional flexibility: Its relationship to performance and moderating effects on role stressors”, *Micevski, Dewsnap, Cadogan, Kadic-Maglajlic, and Boso* investigate the overlooked issue of strategic flexibility in sales management. Building on the literature of strategic flexibility and the theory of social exchange, the authors propose, define and operationalize the concept of sales intra-functional flexibility (SIF). Next, they develop a conceptual model for testing the SIF effect on sales and customer performance, as well as the moderating effect of SIF on role stressors that vendors face in their activities. In addition, they test the moderating role of customer orientation on SIF's effects on sales and customer performance. Carrying out a quantitative study, they used the empirical data generated by a sample of 229 UK sales organizations to test their hypotheses. Their findings validate the positive influence of SIF on sales and customer performance. Specifically, they found that both SIF components (i.e. resource flexibility and configurational flexibility) generate beneficial results in terms of company performance. In addition, at business unit level, the authors found that customer orientation moderates positively the effect of SIF on customer performance, and negatively moderate the SIF effect on sales performance. An unexpected, but interesting for practitioners is a direct and positive effect of the ambiguity of the role on sales performance. This means that salespeople's creativity is more likely to manifest in the sales process when this ambiguity is accepted. The authors conclude by highlighting the theoretical contributions of their research and making recommendations to managers interested in developing intra-functional sales flexibility to improve business performance.

4.2. Digital technologies in marketing

New digital technologies have the potential to transform marketing practice by influencing a company's competitiveness and performance. Specifically, the emerging phenomena of social media use in innovation, sales, customer relationship management (CRM), and stakeholder communication have attracted the attention of academics and marketers over the past decade. A great amount of research effort has been devoted to developing knowledge about consumer and business engagement in social media, the factors driving social media adoption in marketing processes, and ethics issues in social media use. However, new theoretical explanations and empirical evidence are needed to advance our understanding of these phenomena. Two papers included under this heading investigate the use of social media technology (SMT) in CRM and the ethical use of social media analytics (SMA).

Customer Intimacy has become a valuable marketing strategy to support competitive advantage and business performance by increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty. SMT offers marketers the tools they need to implement such a strategy. Previous theoretical and empirical research analyzed SMT use drivers and barriers in CRM and their consequences on company capabilities and performance. However, new insights are needed to deepen the understanding of the factors that determine the use of SMT and how it can help improve business performance. In this paper ‘Customer relationship management capabilities and social media technology use: Consequences on firm performance’, *Foltean, Trif, and Tuleu* investigates the previously overlooked role of institutional factors in the adoption of SMT. To fill this knowledge gap, the authors rely on institutional theory to analyze the relationships between customer coercive pressure, competitor mimetic pressure and SMT use. To this end, they develop a conceptual framework of these relationships, including the contribution of SMT use to enhance CRM capabilities and the role of mediator of CRM capabilities in the relationship between SMT use and firm performance. When testing their model, the authors used data obtained through a quantitative survey on a sample of 149 companies operating in Romania. They found that both institutional factors determine the use of SMT, but their effects are influenced by the size of the firm, the level of innovativeness, the sector and the market in which it operates. More specifically, the post-hoc analysis reveals, on the one hand, that coercive customer power is more likely to determine the use of SMT by medium and large enterprises, conservative firms, manufacturers and those operating on B2B markets. On the other hand, the competitor mimetic pressure determines the use of SMT for small firms, highly innovative firms, service providers and B2C markets. Moreover, the use of SMT positively influences CRM capabilities, which in turn indirectly only mediate the relationship between the use SMT and company performance. Finally, the authors draw recommendations for managers to capitalize on the SMT's potential for the benefit of the company.

Using SMA-generated information helps marketers develop a better understanding of customer needs and customize the offer accordingly to enhance customer satisfaction which in turn leads to business performance. However, privacy, trust and ethical issues of using SMA have recently become a growing concern for consumers and regulatory bodies. Beyond theoretical developments in studying the ethical features of marketing practices in social media communications, advancing knowledge in this field requires further empirical research to identify how ethical issues influence consumer responsiveness to social media marketing efforts of companies. In this paper ‘Consumers’ ethical perceptions of social media analytics practices: Risks, benefits and potential outcomes', *Michaelidou and Micevski* address the question of how ethics of SMA practices influence consumer behaviors. Building on the theory of ethics and justice, the authors develop and test empirically a conceptual framework to study how the ethics of SMA practices and organizational trustworthiness influence the perceived risk of information sharing in social environments by consumers and what are the behavioral consequences of perceiving this risk. Analyzing the data from an online survey of 316 UK social media users, the authors argue that low ethicality of SMA practice and low organizational trustworthiness increase the customer's perceived risk of information sharing and the tendency to falsify information. In addition, they found that the higher perceived risk negatively influences the desire to share information and leads to actions against organizations. Furthermore, they identified the moderating role of the perceived benefits of SMA practices on the relationship between the perceived risk of sharing information and all its outcomes. The authors conclude by contextualizing the relevance of their findings for the actions of managers and policy makers in increasing the ethics of SMA practices.

4.3. International branding

Branding strategy is a critical pillar of marketing strategy designed to achieve brand performance through an attractive and effective market positioning in the contemporary international business landscape. Brand globalness and brand localness are two strategic alternatives in this respect, which contribute to a clear differentiation of the brand in the mind of the customer and to the brand's sustainability on international markets. To be effective, these strategies need to be aligned with the culture and customer preferences in the markets that companies operate. Four papers under this heading expand our understanding of these issues.

Understanding how preferences and purchasing intentions of global and domestic products are being formed provides key insights into the development of brand positioning strategies. Ethnocentrism and consumer cosmopolitanism, rooted in the theory of social identity, failed to provide complete explanations of these preferences. To fill this knowledge gap, alternative explanatory theories could be developed using new concepts related to this phenomenon. In this article 'Modeling the role of consumer xenocentrism in impacting preferences for domestic and foreign brands: A mediation analysis', *Diamantopoulos, Davydova, and Arslanagic-Kalajdzic* contribute to scant literature on consumer xenocentrism (C-XEN) explaining its role in forming the intention to buy foreign and/or domestic brands. Based on the theory of system justification, the authors develop a conceptual model to investigate a serial mediation model whereby C-XEN contributes to the formation of the intention to purchase domestic, foreign genuine and foreign counterfeit brands. They introduce the image of the country of origin of the product and attitude towards the brand as mediators in this model and control the influences of the product category, ethnocentrism and cosmopolitanism of the consumer. The authors obtained empirical data that they used to test their model through an online survey of a sample of 262 Russian consumers. They argue that C-XEN leads to the intention to acquire genuine foreign brands and limits this intention to domestic brands through the image of the country of origin of the product and attitude towards the brand. In addition, they found that xenocentrism does not influence the intention to purchase foreign counterfeit brands. Finally, the authors draw conclusions on the managerial implications of their research and recommend for foreign companies to focus their marketing communications on the brand's origin and on the social and symbolic value of the brand to capitalize on C-XEN.

The effectiveness of brand positioning strategies (brand globalness and brand localness) can be analyzed through their influence on the customer's intention to buy foreign and domestic brands. In their article 'The relational value of perceived brand globalness and localness', *Sichtmann, Davvetas, and Diamantopoulos* explore the role of consumer - brand relationship on the effectiveness of these brand positioning strategies. Building on the theory of consumer-brand relationships and the international branding literature, the authors develop a conceptual framework to investigate the mediation role of consumer-brand identification on the relationship between perceived globalness and localness and the intention to purchase. In addition, they analyze how these effects vary between domestic and foreign brands. To test the model, the authors conducted two studies, namely a series of face-to-face interviews in Austria ($N = 150$) and an online survey in Bulgaria ($N = 302$). They argue that both perceived brand globalness and localness positively influence consumer-brand identification in both mature and emerging markets. Moreover, they found that the relational value of brand localness is stronger for foreign brands, while globalness is more important for domestic brands. The authors conclude by providing a series of recommendations for marketing managers on how to develop effective international branding strategies to better position the brand and bring it closer to its customers.

Brand image is a valuable resource that helps increase business performance. It is important, however, to keep in mind that consumers perceive the brand and make purchasing decisions based on stereotypes that have been overlooked in previous research. To fill this knowledge gap, *Kolbl, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Diamantopoulos*'s article 'Stereotyping global brands: Is warmth more important than competence?' investigates the mediation role of the brand stereotype in the relationship between the brand's globalness/localness and consumer identification with the brand. Theoretically, the authors rely on social psychology research on the stereotypical content model and its application to international branding to develop a conceptual framework for the mediation role of the brand stereotype in the relationship between brand's perceived globalness/localness and customer - brand identification. The authors conducted two studies, one in Austria ($N = 243$) and the other in Bosnia and Herzegovina ($N = 95$), in an attempt to answer the question whether stereotypical consumer assessments of brand's warmth and competence are influenced by their perceptions of brand's globalness/localness and influence consumer - brand identification, purchasing intentions and brand ownership. Their findings confirm that consumers' perceptions of brand's globalness/localness influence both the warmth and competence dimensions of the content of brand stereotypes. In addition, they found that only the warmth of the brand leads to the purchasing intentions and brand ownership through the mediating effect of consumer-brand identification. Finally, the authors note several implications for the marketing practice of emphasizing brand globalness/localness in brand positioning strategies.

Consumer affiliation to different groups leads to multiple identities. In their article 'Multiple consumer identities and the crossover effect of the EU identity in predicting domestic and foreign product preferences', *Micevski, Halkias, and Herz* contribute to the existing international marketing literature by studying the role played by multiple consumer identities in their purchasing decisions. In particular, the authors rely on social identity theory to develop a conceptual framework to understand how multiple consumer identities (i.e. global identity, EU identity and national identity) influence their preferences for foreign and national products. Using data from a web-based survey conducted in Germany on a sample of 1053 consumers, the authors found that EU identity determines preferences for both domestic and foreign products, while national identity determines only preferences for domestic product, and global identity only preferences for foreign products. In more detail, the effect of EU identity on preferences over domestic products is positive only for consumers with low ethnocentrism, while this effect is positive for foreign products, regardless of the level of consumer ethnocentrism. The authors concluded with recommendations for product and brand managers on how to capitalize on multiple consumer identities in their marketing communication strategy for both domestic and foreign products.

4.4. Sustainable marketing

Corporate environmental responsibility drives academics and managers to address sustainability issues in marketing theory and practice. It becomes imperative to adopt new mentalities, principles, concepts and tools in marketing to ensure sustainable competitive advantage and growth of the company in a responsible manner towards the environment. The pursuit of sustainability in the market landscape has two aspects: on the one hand, sustainability-oriented culture, strategy, operations and marketing and, on the other hand, sustainability-oriented consumption. The two papers under this heading contribute to deepening the understanding of both aspects of sustainability in marketing.

Despite its emerging criticality in the company's sustainable development, the adoption of environment friendly marketing practices is a subject that needs to be further explored in the future. Responding to this need, *Papadas, Avlonitis, Carrigan, and Piha*'s article 'The interplay of strategic and internal green marketing orientation on competitive advantage' sheds a light on the antecedents and consequences of a company's strategic focus on environmental sustainability. Building on the theory of green marketing and corporate social responsibility, the authors develop a conceptual framework of the antecedents and consequences of strategic green marketing orientation. Specifically, the authors investigate the effects of two antecedents (i.e. corporate social responsibility and stakeholders' environmental pressures) on strategic green marketing orientation (SGMO), which in turn will enhance financial performance through the mediating effect of competitive advantage. In addition, they propose that the internal green marketing orientation (IGMO) moderates the relationship between SGMO and competitive advantage. In testing their conceptual model, the authors used data from an online survey conducted in Greece on a sample of 226 companies operating in the business-to-business and business-to-consumer sectors. Their findings demonstrate the role of corporate social responsibility and environmental pressures exerted by stakeholders as drivers of SGMO. In addition, their results validate the mediating role of the competitive advantage in the relationship between SGMO and financial performance, as well as the moderation role of IGMO over SGMO's effects on competitive advantage. Finally, the authors draw managerial implications and recommendations for sustainability-oriented marketing practice.

Understanding sustainable consumption is a critical starting point in formulating effective sustainability-oriented marketing strategies. In the article 'Being Engaged is a Good Thing: Understanding Sustainable Consumption Behavior among Young Adults', *Kadic-Maglajlic, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, Micevski, Dlacic, and Zabkar* investigate how customers engage in pro-environmental and pro-social behaviors. The authors rely on theories of engagement, value-belief-norm and emotional regulation to develop a conceptual framework for studying consumer's sustainable consumption behavior. More specifically, the authors examine the effects of self-identity and consumer values on pro-environmental and pro-social consumption behavior by engaging consumers in sustainability initiatives. In addition, they explore the moderating role of consumer emotional intelligence on the relationship between engagement and sustainability-oriented behavior. In the empirical testing of their conceptual model, they used the data collected in an online survey conducted in Croatia and Slovenia on a total sample of 406 respondents. The results of this study provide evidence that the pro-environment and pro-social engagement of consumers leads to sustainable consumption behaviors. In addition, they found that emotional intelligence moderates the influence of engagement on this type of consumer behavior. The authors conclude with recommendations for managers, policy makers and NGO's.

5. Conclusions

Although the gap between marketing theory and practice is a key issue that marketing academics and practitioners have noted, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of this issue and its solutions. To increase relevance, scholars need to get involved in the real world of practitioners, to design their research according to the needs of different community of practitioners, to engage in dialogue and to collaborate with them in the research process. These actions become more critical as new digital technologies rapidly change the marketing environment and the marketing function must play an active role in the strategic changes necessary for digital transformation.

The papers included in this SI contribute to filling this gap by providing new insights into marketing theory and practice (see Table 2) and by advancing knowledge in four key areas: implementing marketing strategy; digital technologies in marketing; international branding; and sustainable marketing. However, as marketing practice is constantly evolving due to technological progress that creates new business opportunities and business threats and leads to changes in customer expectations and behaviors, new research paths are emerging in these areas. Firstly, the implementation of marketing strategies requires answers to a few questions as follows: how could new technologies enhance marketing capabilities? what new marketing capabilities must be developed to address these new opportunities and threats? what new marketing skills must be acquired in the digital environment? how to effectively manage value creation processes in the digital environment? how could strategic flexibility increase the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing efforts in the digital environment? Secondly, the use of digital technologies in marketing generates new research opportunities related to emerging phenomena: the antecedents and consequences of using new media in open innovation and stakeholder involvement; drivers and performance benefits of adopting artificial intelligence, internet of things, augmented reality and virtual technologies in marketing processes. Thirdly, international branding research could meet the challenges of changing consumer behavior due to the emergence of new digital technologies by studying brand positioning strategies in the context of multi-channel marketing and the use of new technologies to engage customers in brand management. Fourth, future research efforts on sustainable marketing are needed to deepen our understanding of how digital technologies could be used to disseminate a culture of sustainability and to enhance the capabilities of implementing sustainability-oriented marketing strategies. Last but not least, the new challenges of marketing in a computer-mediated environment require further research to fill the gap between marketing theory and practice and identify ways to stimulate interaction and collaboration between marketing academics and practitioners.

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