A RETAILER'S INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT: CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ITS DETERMINANTS

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The goal of this paper is to apply existing theoretical and empirical knowledge in the field of international business to the study of internationalization of firms in the retail industry. A conceptual model of international retail involvement (IRI) is proposed. The model postulates that five firm and industry specific factors are the major antecedents of IRI: retailer's knowledge and experience, retailer's differential advantage, perceived attractiveness of international retail expansion and domestic market situation. Furthermore, the model suggests that two dimensional characteristics of a retail firm exert a moderating effect in the relationship between the five constructs and the IRI: the retailer's size and its operating format/sector. Recommendations and conceptualizations for future empirical research are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to manufacturing industries, which have a long tradition in international business, the retail industry has remained relatively national in its orientation. One of the most conspicuous reasons for this is the position of retailing in the distribution channel; serving the final consumer, retailers are bound to the local cultural and external environment (Salmon and Tordjman 1989; Kacker 1988; Treadgold 1990). However, internationalization of retail activities is becoming an increasingly viable strategic option to sustain the corporate growth of retail firms, particularly in the developed economies and mature retail markets of Europe, the United States, Canada, Japan and Australia. Despite the lack of publicly available statistics on international involvement of retail companies across countries, recent industry analyses provide evidence of increased instances of retailers trading outside their national borders (Coopers and Lybrand 1995; Corporate Intelligence 1995).

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According to industry experts and analysts, the pursuit of global business operations will continue to be the most prominent trend as the retail industry enters the new millennium. Consequently, an understanding of the processes and patterns, attitudes and behavior of retail firms expanding operations internationally becomes increasingly vital both for practitioners who need to make rational choices and for the academic community attempting to explain international marketing phenomena. The topic of retail internationalization has attracted attention among researchers, particularly in Europe where the pace of retail internationalization has been more rapid than in the United States and elsewhere. Recent writings have acknowledged the need for more in-depth investigations of various aspects of international retailing, such as the triggers for the process, the nature of the decision-making process and relationships between organizational and strategic dimensions. Moreover, the need to broaden the conceptual base by drawing on the existing literature in international business, marketing, management and industrial behavior has been noted (Akehurst and Alexander 1995; Brown and Burt 1992; Whitehead 1992).

The purpose of this paper is to apply the existing theoretical and empirical knowledge in the field of international business involvement to the study of internationalization of firms in the retail industry, and to propose a conceptual model of international retail involvement (IRI). The emphasis in the model is on retail firm and industry specific determinants of IRI. As the process of retail internationalization is a complex phenomenon a poorly understood one, the model proposed could serve as a basis for future empirical investigations and enhance our understanding of this process.

LITERATURE REVIEW: INTERNATIONALIZATION THEORIES

Historically, theoretical and empirical interest in the determinants of international involvement is evidenced in almost every field of international business. Yet, our ability to understand and explain international involvement of firms or its process is still somewhat limited, particularly when focusing on a specific sector within the economy. Although the existing academic literature offers a myriad of theoretical explanations of a firm's international involvement, current work varies in the depth of investigations as well as in empirical rigor.

The theoretical basis adopted for the development of a model of the IRI is grounded in the internationalization process (IP) perspective, which attempts to explain determinants of international involvement and the nature of such involvement. Three major streams of conceptual and empirical research embedded within the IP theoretical perspective have been identified: a) the attitudinal approach (Perlmutter 1969; Wind, Douglas and Perlmutter 1973), b) the Nordic model of firm internationalization (Johanson and Vahle 1977; 1990) and c) the export stage schemes (Bilkey 1978; Cavusgil 1980; 1984; Czinkota 1982; Wiedersheim-Paul, Olson and Welch 1978).

Pioneering work in the area of international involvement of firms was done in the late 1960s when Perlmutter (1969) introduced the typology of a firm's orientation in terms of its managers' attitudes toward foreign markets and marketing systems, i.e., ethnocentrism, polycentrism and geocentrism, frequently referred to as the EPG model. The attitude/orientation types are based on the goals, philosophies and levels of international involvement, and are associated with successive stages in the evolution of multinational enterprise. As partially confirmed by the empirical study conducted in the early 1970s (Wind, Douglas and Perlmutter 1973), the EFG model suggests that firms gradually move from their initial ethnocentric orientation toward polycentrism as they gain more experience .

The second stream of literature within the IP theory is the Nordic model proposed by Johanson and Vahle (1977; 1990). These authors developed a dynamic model, the basic premise of which is that the general and experiential market knowledge and resource commitment of firms affect commitment decisions and current business activities. The latter, in turn, increase the market knowledge and stimulate further resource commitment to foreign markets in the subsequent cycle. The aim of this Nordic model is to explain the pattern of international involvement in terms of a firm's host market selection and the mode of establishing operations in international markets. The Nordic model also assumes that firms increase their international involvement incrementally due to uncertainties, and react to perceived opportunities and problems within those foreign markets in which they currently operate.

The export stages literature views the IP as a step-by-step process, whereby the higher level stage represents more commitment and a higher level of international involvement than the lower level stage (Bilkey and Tesar 1977; Cavusgil 1980; 1984; Czikota and Tesar 1982; Reid 1981; Wiedersheim-Paul, Olson and Welch 1978). Contrary to Perlmutter's (1969) framework, where attitudes are used as a criterion, the authors of the stages models refer to characteristics of management, firms and to strategic decisions to delineate the stages. The main differences among the various "stages models" pertain to the number of stages or phases, the specific cognitive criteria employed for the description of stages, and the mechanisms that initiate the process.

Common to all three research streams is the adoption of a relatively closed system approach in explaining international involvement, focusing primarily on internal organizational and managerial characteristics. Underlying assumptions are in these theoretical streams that international activities involve high risk, that international involvement is a sequential process. Consequently, international decisions are made incrementally. The key determinants of international business involvement in all three research streams are associated with the firm's differential advantages, its international experience, its resources, and the perceptions, goals and expectations of its management.

A MODEL OF INTERNATIONAL RETAIL INVOLVEMENT

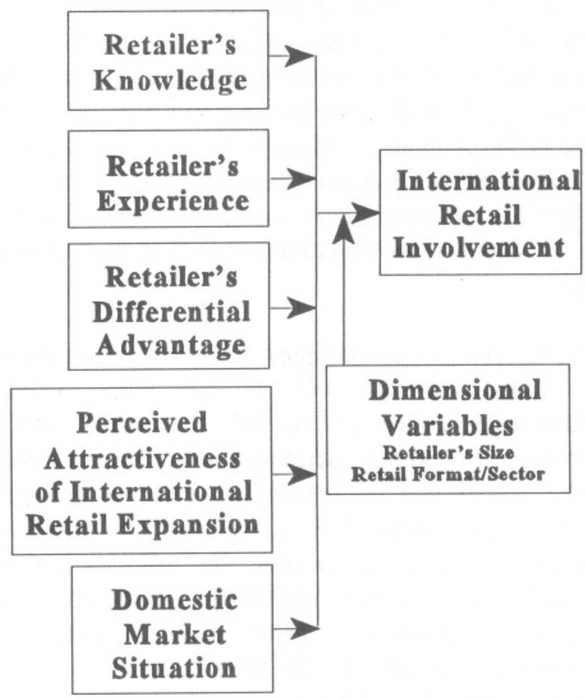
Against this theoretical background, a conceptual model of IRI is generated in this section. In view of the relative newness of internationalization for retail firms and markets, the IP perspective appears to offer the most suitable theoretical basis for the development of an IRI model. Nonetheless, alternative theoretical perspectives within a broader context of international business involvement, e.g., the theory of internalization (Buckley and Carson 1976) and the eclectic paradigm (Dunning 1981), have been also been considered in specifying the constructs proposed. After the general overview of the model, its components are discussed separately.

The model presented in Figure 1 postulates that the following five factors are the major determinants of a firm's IRI: the retailer's knowledge, the retailer's experience, the retail differential advantage, the perceived attractiveness of international retail expansion, and the domestic market situation. Furthermore, the model suggests that two dimensional characteristics of a retail firm, i.e., the retail firm size and the retail format/sector exert a moderating effect on the relationship between the five constructs and the IRI.

International Retail Involvement

There are two major types of IRI, depending on the motivation of a retail company to expand its operations beyond the home country: a) resource-seeking (foreign sourcing and/or importing) and b) market-serving (Hollander 1970; McGoldrick and Davies 1995). While the former, due to competitive pressures, is becoming an increasingly important aspect of operations for retailers, market-serving international involvement is emphasized in this model. In market- serving international involvement, a retail firm's output, which includes merchandise, retail services, management know-how and retail formats, is intended for consumption in a host country. Thus, the IRI in the model (Figure 1) is conceptualized as the market-serving involvement in retail activities in more than a single national environment.

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Model of International Retail Involvement



Consistent with suggestions in previous conceptual and theoretical work (Aaby and Slater 1989; Bilkey 1978; Welch and Luostarinen 1988) the scope of a firm's IRI could be assessed by the number of years of a firm's international involvement, the number of its retail subsidiaries in international markets and/or the number of national markets in which a retailer operates. Moreover, a retailer's prevalent mode of operations in foreign countries, i.e., whether a retail firm uses licensing, in-store concessions, contractual agreements, franchising or foreign direct investment methods of entering international market(s), could offer insights as to a retailer's international involvement. Each of these options reflects a successively higher level of cost, control, commitment and risk for the international retailer (McGoldrick and Davies 1995).

The Retailer's Knowledge

Managerial knowledge plays a central role in the Nordic model of a firm's IP as it facilitates mobilizing the capital and human resources needed for international expansion. This construct also represents an important factor discriminating exporting and non-exporting firms in the export stage models. Although studies in export involvement of firms emphasize the role of a firm's knowledge of international business, the construct labels and associated measurements differ across studies. For instance, Cavusgil (1982) examined firm characteristics which facilitate or hinder a firm's progression over the internationalization path and found the construct labeled 'level of commitment to export marketing' measuring a firm's information-seeking behavior to be the most significant discriminant between firms with and without international involvement.

Other variables considered in previous studies and associated with the level of the *firm's knowledge* as labeled in the IRI model were: a) personal characteristics of the decision makers such as their educational background and language skills (Aaby and Slater 1989; Dichtl, Koeglmayr and Mueller 1990; Reid 1981; Welch and Luostarinen 1988) and b) the firm's market research, information gathering activities and resources dedicated to the assessment of foreign market potentials (Bilkey 1978; Cavusgil 1980; 1984).

Considering the complex nature of the decision-making process regarding international expansion of large retail organizations as compared to medium or small size exporters used in the literature, this model does not consider personal characteristics of individual managers. It is assumed that teams rather than individuals are involved in such strategic decisions making.

In view of the inconsistences in conceptualization of the constructs related to the firm's knowledge in previous studies, this model proposes that a *firm's knowledge* relates to the retailer's information seeking behavior on international retailing opportunities on its competitors' international moves, and the ability of the retailer's management to handle international expansion.

The Retailer's Experience

The role of international experience is one of the key determinants of Johanson and Vahle's (1977) thesis, as it not only triggers the IP but also plays a role in the firm's successive international involvement. International experience is accumulated through learning by doing, whereby knowledge of international marketing is enriched by current experience. However, more recent studies testing the whole or parts of the Nordic model argue that the importance of experiential knowledge or "learning by doing" is overemphasized in the IP theory, or might not be as relevant today because recent advances in communication technology and careful strategic planning can substitute for the actual experience (Millington and Bayliss 1990; Turnbull 1987).

On the other hand, the export stage models and subsequent empirical evidence suggest that decision makers' characteristics such as their foreign experience, living abroad, their exposure to international affairs and interest in international affairs leverage a firm's involvement in international markets (Cavusgil 1980; Dichtl, Koeglmayr and Mueller 1990; Lim, Sharkey and Kim 1993; Reid, 1981; Wiedersheim-Paul, Olson, Welch 1978). However, the existing literature does not provide consistent guidelines regarding the measurement of this construct.

The model in this study proposes that *the retailer's experience* is a two dimensional construct related to the retailer's actual experience in international markets as indicated by the extent of its foreign sourcing experience, and to the extent of the decision-making team's exposure to international affairs. The construct *the retailer's experience* in this model includes the retailer's experience in global sourcing. Competitive pressures in consumer markets in developed countries and particularly in the US have been forcing many retailers to engage increasingly in foreign sourcing activities to ensure competitive prices and greater product diversity.

According Liu and McGoldrick (1995), international sourcing indicates a more proactive stance of a retail firm in the acquisition of sources from international markets than traditional importing of goods. Hence, the model of IRI proposes that such experience can be utilized in transferring a retailer's formats into a foreign country, i.e., in a retailer's market serving international activities.

The Retailer's Differential Advantage

Differential advantages related to the uniqueness of a firm's product/services to be launched to international markets have been considered to be "attention evokers" for the firm (Wiedersheim-Paul, Olson and Welch 1978). These may provide an incentive to initiate and eventually continue exploiting foreign markets. The concept of differential advantage has a long standing relevance in organizational and international involvement literature. For example, competitive advantage defined as the advantage of one firm relative to other firms in the market has been used in the eclectic paradigm of internationalization (Dunning 1981). Furthermore, this concept is inherent in the internalization theory of international involvement (Buckley and Carson 1976). The primary rationale underlying the internalization theory for specifying firm specific advantage as a key determinant of international involvement is that if a firm's specific knowledge/skills are better than those of its competitors, then a firm will internalize the activity in which it has relative advantage.

Considering that managers in the pre-international involvement phase might lack knowledge, experience, and substantial resource commitment from their firms, Douglas and Craig (1992) believed an important lever to internationalization will be the existence of differential advantages which have the required fit with the foreign market conditions. Hence, the model presented here postulates that a retailer's differential advantage represents an important determinant of international retail involvement.

The *retail firm's differential advantage* proposed in this model is conceptualized as specialized assets and skills a retail firm possesses in performing retailing activities relative to a retailer's competitors. Similarly to Williams' (1992) study, the retail competitive advantages are confined to retail specific operational advantages related to the pricing, promotion techniques and distribution advantages, the uniqueness of retailer's merchandise mix, products, services, retail formats and utilization of retail technology.

Perceived Attractiveness of International Expansion

The importance of top management attitudes in shaping international involvement was initially recognized in Perlmutter's (1969) previously discussed EPG model. Moreover, Bilkey (1978) noted that one of the important internal change-agents in the initiation of international activities is the firm's managers, who "diffuse an impression of the attractiveness of international involvement as an abstract ideal, independently of the extent of contribution such involvement might make to the firm" (p.41). Support for this view has been provided by various researchers who have shown that a favorable orientation towards international operations facilitates the firm's mobilization of its financial and managerial resources (Cavusgil 1984; Dichtl, Koeglmayr and Mueller 1990, Reid 1981).

The *perceived attractiveness of international expansion* in the model proposed is defined as managements' attitudes and perceptions which represent decision makers' subjective evaluation of international retailing activities. Some indicators of these concepts include managements' perceptions regarding the risk, cost, complexity and potential returns associated with international expansion.

Domestic Market Situation

One of the determinants of whether or not a firm takes the initiative in getting involved internationally was shown to be adverse home market conditions, causing management to explore new markets as a means of future growth. Existing studies on international marketing and more specifically retail involvement have found that a firm's opportunities for domestic market growth, the level of saturation in the domestic market, the degree of diversification and whether a firm has a dominant position in the domestic market are significant factors driving internationalization of firms in various industries (Alexander 1995; Bilkey 1978; Cavusgil and Naor 1987; Lim, Sharkey and Kim 1993; McGoldrick and Davies 1995). Also, it has been argued that firms need to go through an expansion process in the domestic market itself before moving into international markets (Wiedersheim-Paul, Olson and Welch 1978).

Alexander (1995) discussed the impact of domestic market saturation in retail internationalization. Based on historical observation of retailers in the 1960s and 1970s, the author concluded that retailers who reached national coverage and perceived the threat of domestic market saturation were likely to consider foreign investment. International retail literature has characterized adverse domestic market conditions as representing "push factors" or reactive rather than proactive responses to retail growth and internationalization (Hollander 1970; McGoldrick and Davies 1995). Some of these domestic conditions, which seem to be relevant to Western European conditions as well as to recent trends in the US, include level of domestic competition and market saturation, adverse demographics, maturity of retail formats and economic indicators in the home market. In view of these considerations, the construct *domestic market situation* in the proposed model relates to the retail firm's domestic coverage, i.e., local, regional or national, and to the retailer's future oppor-tunities for growth and expansion in the home market.

Dimensional Variables

The model in Figure 1 proposes that two dimensional variables have a significant contributory effect on the relationship between the five constructs and IRI: the firm's size and the retail sector/ format. The retailer's size is speculated to have an influencing effect for various reasons. The Nordic model acknowledges that initiation and the pace of the IP may be accelerated when the company has substantial resources which can be invested to gain market knowledge by means other than actual experience in the international market (Johanson and Vahle 1990). However, the international business and retail literatures provide inconsistent evidence regarding the influence of a firm's size on the initiation or the extent of its international involvement. The most common argument is that larger companies have a size-related advantage which enables them to more effectively engage in international ventures (Cavusgil and Naor 1987; Williams 1992). For instance, Williams (1992) observed in his study of international retailers in the United Kingdom that among other obstacles to internationalization, "small firm with limited resources" was one of the extracted factors resulting from his principal component analysis.

However, contrary evidence has also been demonstrated in international business literature (Bilkey and Tesar 1977; Diamantopoulos and Inglis 1988). In the retail literature, Morganosky (1993), found that neither sales volume nor the number of employees were significantly related to involvement in international direct marketing. Considering the inconsistent evidence found in the literature, the characteristics of current international retailers and the specifics of the industry, the model in this study proposes the retailer's size has a moderating effect on international involvement of retailers.

The role of a retailer's operating format and the retail sector in the IRI has not been subjected to systematic analysis. Given the paucity of empirical research on determinants of international involvement of retail firms, and the lack of statistical information on retail companies expanding internationally, it is not surprising that little evidence is available as regards the impact of these industry specific aspects on a retailer's international involvement.

The support for the impact of retail sector and format on retail internationalization exists in descriptive research and case studies of individual retail firms, as well as from the trade publication reports (Coopers and Lybrand 1995; Salmon and Tordjman 1989; Treadgold 1988). Furthermore, Burt (1995) analyzed the intensity of international activity within six sectors, i.e., clothing, bodycare, TV rental , furniture, variety store and footwear. He noted considerable differences in the number of companies and total number of international moves (actions), with the clothing sector dominating on both measures of intensity, the number of companies with international presence and the number of a company's international moves. Similarly, Bazko (1993) discussed some underlying reasons why certain retail formats (e.g., category dominant retailers such as Toys'R'Us) are more likely to duplicate their domestic success in international markets.

CONCLUSIONS

The model developed in this paper focuses on the international involvement of firms in a single industry, i.e., the retail industry. This is consistent with the recent literature which recommends an industry specific approach in the examination of phenomena related to a firm's internationalization (Millington and Bayliss 1990; Pellegrini 1991; Turnbull 1987).

The model attempts to address the following questions, which should be empirically investigated in future research: a) what are the driving forces which lead a retailer to initiate international expansion, and move from a low to a substantial involvement in serving consumers in international markets; b) what is the role of organizational factors such as retail-specific ones and retail managements' characteristics in decisions to internationalize operations; c) how do domestic market conditions relate to international involvement of retail organizations?

The overall purpose of the model is to provide a greater understanding of the retailer and industry specific factors as determinants of IRI. The model is of a descriptive nature, which is not atypical in international marketing research. This is primarily due to the relative newness of this subfield of marketing, and the fact that the flow of knowledge in international marketing is commonly from "what managers do to what researchers think" (Bradley 1987, p.216). In the absence of useful frameworks for understanding and explaining retail internationalization (Akehurst and Alexander 1995; Whitehead 1992), the contribution of the proposed IRI model is in that it integrates previous theoretical and empirical knowledge. Yet, the components identified in the model have been adapted to the specifics of the retail industry. As such, the determinants are considered to have relevance in explaining the international activity of retail firms. Personal and telephone interviews conducted with executives of U.S. retail firms with and without current international involvement, as well as a thorough investigation of the current trends in the industry facilitated the final selection of variables in the model, in addition to academic literature. Accordingly, the constructs identified are thought to possess a reasonable degree of external validity for retail firms in the U.S.

Considering strong tendencies toward retail globalization, particularly in mature retail markets, future empirical investigations based on the proposed model are warranted. Such empirical work would not only benefit executives facing difficult strategic decisions regarding the future growth of their organizations but would also contribute to theory building efforts on international retail involvement.

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