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Review

The Evolution of Marketing Channel Research Domains and Methodologies: An Integrative Review and Future Directions

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Abstract

Marketing channels are among the most important elements of any value chain. This is because the bulk of a nation's manufacturing output flows through them. The intermediaries (e.g., distributors, wholesalers, retailers) constituting marketing channels perform specific distribution functions, such as transportation, storage, sales, financing, and relationship building, better than most manufacturers. Over his distinguished career, Louis P. Bucklin investigated many questions about the structuring and functioning of marketing channels using conceptual, empirical, and microeconomics model-based methodologies. Today, the academic marketing literature contains hundreds of articles that have employed these three broad classes of methodologies to investigate issues of channel intermediaries' interorganizational relationships, for example, power-dependence, relational outcomes, conflict and negotiations, and manufacturing firms' channel strategy, for example, channel structure, selection, coordination and control. So far, however, there has been no review of how the three different methodologies have contributed to advancing knowledge across this set of channels research domains. This paper is the first that aims to (1) chart how channels research employing each of the three classes of methodologies – conceptual, empirical, microeconomics model-based – has evolved over seven decades along with current trends; (2) review the contributions and shortcomings of research to date using these methodologies; and (3) suggest future research opportunities using these methodologies, separately or in an integrated fashion.

Keywords: Marketing channels; Literature review; Research trends; Methodologies (conceptual, empirical, microeconomic model-based research); Future research

Introduction

Marketing channels are sets of interdependent organizations or 'intermediaries' engaged in the process of making manufacturers' (or producers') products or services available to their end-users (Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995a, p. 348). In marketing channels of various forms connecting producers and end-consumers, the major types of intermediaries include wholesalers or distributors, retailers, and agents/brokers. Marketing channels are among the most important elements of any value chain and their importance stems from the fact that significant amounts of a nation's economic outputs flow through them. For example, total revenues of US wholesale distributors grew by 4.2 percent to $5.1 trillion in 2013, representing about 30 percent of US nominal GDP according to the 2014 Wholesale Distribution Economic Trends Reports published by Modern Distribution Management (http://www.mdm.com/wdetr). Similarly, turning to retailers, *eMarketer* reports total retail sales in the US topped $4.53 trillion in 2013, amounting to about 27 percent of nominal US GDP (www.eMarketer.com). Manufacturers, of course, do not always need marketing channel intermediaries to sell their goods to consumer and industrial markets.

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However, intermediaries perform certain functions such as transportation, storage, selling, advertising, and relationship building better than most manufacturers. Today, as the forms of channels and intermediary types have proliferated, producers' marketing channel choices and decisions are becoming as important and complex as the decisions they make about product features and prices.

Not surprisingly, academic research on marketing channels design, inter-organizational relationships, and operations, has grown steadily since the early works of marketing scholars such as Louis Stern and Louis Bucklin. As exemplified by the works of Bucklin, channels research articles have tended to employ three broad classes of research methodologies – conceptual, empirical, and microeconomics model-based – to investigate issues of channel intermediaries' inter-organizational relationships, for example, power-dependence, relational outcomes, conflict and negotiations, and manufacturers' strategic choices with respect to channels such as channel structure, selection, coordination, and control. While several reviews of this research have been published to date, they have tended to be narrow in their conceptual and methodological scope, as well as focused on limited time windows or papers appearing in only one journal (see, e.g., the recent papers by Brown and Dant 2008; Grewal and Levy 2007). The present paper is the first that aims to (1) chart how channels research employing each of the three classes of methodologies – conceptual, empirical, microeconomics model-based – has evolved over seven decades along with current trends; (2) review the contributions and shortcomings of research to date using these methodologies; and (3) suggest future research opportunities using these methodologies, separately or in an integrated fashion.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: In the next section, we define the scope and process of our search of the literature resulting in a database of 362 previous papers utilized for this article. We also define the three selected classes of research methodologies and their distinctions, as well as the six selected *research domains*, that is, areas of study that include constructs, theories, and procedures (MacInnis 2011), for example, power-dependence research, that have prominently figured in channels research. Subsequently, in the next three sections, we document the progress in knowledge and understanding with respect to the selected research domains using conceptual, empirical, and microeconomics model-based approaches. Each of these sections includes a discussion of the key contributions as well as perceived shortcomings of research to date using that methodology, and concludes with some potential directions for future research. In the last section of the paper, we offer a more integrative discussion of the state of channels research methodologies and insights they have produced and, with the help of several personal interviews with academic experts in the field, we highlight new questions and opportunities for research combining different methodologies.

Articles Database Scope

Considering the space constraints for this article, our review is confined to research on marketing channels that has appeared in the nine, highly ranked, peer-reviewed academic *marketing and management research* journals, namely, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Journal of Service Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Management Science*, *Marketing Science*, and *Quantitative Marketing and Economics* (i.e., any channels-related research that has appeared in highly ranked journals of other disciplines, for example, economics, political science, sociology, and so forth is not covered in this article). We manually searched these nine journals for channels-related research articles and whenever we identified one, we also examined its references for additional relevant studies as well as Google Scholar lists of articles citing the identified article. This procedure is consistent with the approach recommended by Hunter and Schmidt (1990). As a result, we identified a total of 362 channels research articles. Subsequently, each article was classified according to its primary research methodology as well as the primary channels research domain/s addressed by it. Note that this means that there are instances where the same article is counted as contributing to more than one research domain if they all received the same level of importance in the paper (see Grewal and Levy (2007) for a similar procedure). A structured overview by methodology and domain and list of those articles is available as a Web Appendix. Next, we more precisely define and distinguish between the three classes of research methodologies and the six research domains.

Research Methodologies

As already indicated, channels research methodologies employed in articles in our database fall into three broad classes: conceptual, empirical, and microeconomics model-based. *Conceptual articles* mainly focus on theory development and do not present any data, or perform any data analyses for theory testing (Yadav 2010). These articles contribute either conceptual frameworks, integrative models, or reviews and form the basis of subsequent empirical or analytical work (Stewart and Zinkhan 2006). (In this paper, like MacInnis (2011), we classify only papers that offer or integrate thought-based verbal conceptions as conceptual research. Research that focuses purely on theory development but is microeconomic and mathematical in nature is defined as analytical and included under microeconomics model-based methodology.)

In contrast, *empirical articles* offer theoretical advances with empirical support, that is by empirically testing theories or conceptual frameworks with data, they can provide evidence of the relationship between putative causes and observed effects (the theorized process) and rule out alternative underlying processes (Deighton et al. 2010). Systematically documented data thereby serves as the foundation for developing theories, or assessing the nature of the relationship between concepts (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). In this paper, previous articles classified as "empirical" research methodology papers are those that primarily collected and analyzed either qualitative data, survey-based data, (longitudinal) panel data, and (lab or field) experiment-based data to investigate and shed light on marketing channel strategy and behavior questions.

Lastly, microeconomics is a branch of economics that mathematically analyzes the market behavior of individual consumers and firms in an attempt to understand the decision-making process of firms and households. More specifically, microeconomics is concerned with interactions between and choices made by individual buyers and sellers. With regard to the extant marketing channels literature, *microeconomics model-based* methodology can be further classified into three subcategories: (i) decision support modeling, (ii) analytical modeling; and (iii) analytical-empirical structural model-based research. *Analytical models* (e.g., McGuire and Staelin 1983) typically employ non-cooperative game theory and equilibrium analyses. They are aimed at a theoretical explanation of the key forces underlying a channels phenomenon or, more specifically, at answering why-and-how questions of a strategic channels issue (Coughlan et al. 2010) and at "testing and refining conventional wisdom about situations with strategic interactions" between actors (Thomadsen et al. 2012, p. 382). In contrast, *decision support models* are primarily prescriptive in nature and tend to employ reduced-form models of quantitative market responses to marketing variables, which are subsequently utilized in firm-level decision optimization models (e.g., Rangan, Zoltners, and Becker 1986). Finally, *structural models* are usually derived on the basis of individual agents' optimizing behavior (e.g., utility maximizing by consumers, profit maximizing by firms) (Chintagunta et al. 2006) and the appropriateness of underlying assumptions tested and investigated with actual data (e.g., Kadiyali, Chintagunta, and Vilcassim 2000; Lee et al. 2013; Sudhir 2001).

Table 1 shows the distribution over time of conceptual, empirical, and microeconomics model-based research papers in our database. Specifically, 177 of the 362 distinct papers in our database are primarily empirical, 130 are microeconomics model-based, and 55 are conceptual. The number of papers taking a purely 'conceptual' approach to channels research has evidently declined over time, while the numbers of empirical and microeconomics model-based papers have steadily increased, with microeconomics-based analytical models becoming more prominent of late.

Next, we specify six research domains addressed by the 362 articles in our database and the distribution of articles across them.

Research Domains

Upon review, we find the foci of channels research papers in our database fall into one or more of six broad research domains summarized below:

1. Power-Dependence Relationships: Power has been a central construct in channels research since its early days, for example, Alderson (1957). In general, power is the ability to cause someone to do something s/he would not have done otherwise (Gaski 1984). More specifically, power refers to one channel member's ability to influence another channel member to alter her/his behavior in favor of the objectives of the channel member exerting influence (Wilemon 1972). Thus, power is the *potential for influence* (Coughlan et al. 2006). El-Ansary and Stern (1972) operationally define a channel member's power as her/his ability to control the decision variables in the marketing strategy of another member in a given channel at a different distribution level. Moreover, following Emerson (1962), power stems from the *dependence* of one member on another. For example, the power of a wholesaler over a dealer is related to the dealer's dependence on the wholesaler. Gaski (1984) notes that *channel member dependence* and *sources of power* in marketing channels are conceptually inseparable. Understanding the power-dependence patterns in a channel has always been viewed as key to understanding the channel strategy outcomes and its long-term viability (El-Ansary and Stern 1972).

2. Relational Outcomes: Relational exchange in a channel setting can be defined as "ongoing transfers of value between independent channel members where interactions and associations of personnel affect governance" (Frazier 1999, p. 231). Therefore, relational outcomes are of fundamental importance to understand channel members' relationships and to evaluate their management efforts. Research investigations of channel members' relationships have considered several relational outcomes such as satisfaction, opportunism, trust, commitment, and fairness (Geyskens, Steenkamp, and Kumar 1999; Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995b; Mohr and Nevin 1990).

3. Conflict: Conflict in marketing channels is an inherent aspect of interdependent relationships that impedes, blocks, or frustrates a channel member in the pursuit of its goals (Stern and El-Ansary 1977; Thomas 1976). More specifically, channel conflict mirrors the tension between two or more channel members which arises when channel members have mutually exclusive or incompatible goals, values, and interests (Stern 1970). Accordingly, it can be seen as the disagreement or lack of goal congruence between channel members with each party attempting to achieve its own goals (Samaha, Palmatier, and Dant 2011). It is widely seen as a dynamic process composed of a series of episodes with each episode determined to a substantial degree by the previous one (Rosenberg and Stern 1970). Certain feelings, perceptions, and behaviors characterize each episode due to conflict. Unsurprisingly, research into channel conflict, its outcomes, how it arises, and how it can be mitigated is of longstanding interest to marketing channels strategy.

4. Control Mechanisms: A channel member's power determines the potential to control another channel member's behavior (Lucas and Gresham 1985). The control behavior in a channel relationship reflects a channel member's actual influence and impact on another channel member's behavior and decision making (Frazier 1999). Accordingly, a control or governance mechanism refers to the way of organizing transactions and mechanisms to structure and regulate channel collaboration with regard to the overall objective in order to inhibit opportunistic behavior or to induce behaviors that reflect channel members' interests (Bucklin 1973; Jap and Ganesan 2000; Luo et al. 2011; Mohr, Fisher, and Nevin 1996).

5. Channel Structure and Channel Selection: Within this research domain, we subsume research that deals with manufacturers' strategic choices regarding the types of members in a channel, the number of members of each type, and

Table 1
Distribution of conceptual, empirical and microeconomic model-based articles in compiled database over time.

	Conceptual articles	Empirical articles	Microeconomic model-based articles	Number of papers
Before 1970	10	0	4	14
1971–1980	17	18	3	38
1981–1990	15	46	15	76
1991–2000	9	65	40	114
2001-to date	4	48	68	120
Overall	55	177	130	362

understanding the different channels that coexist in the market (Coughlan et al. 2006).

6. *Negotiations*: The conditions for channel collaboration (i.e., prices and other trade terms) are established through bargaining and negotiation. These forms of channel interactions have a major impact on the profit outcomes throughout the duration of a relationship between channel members (Srivastava, Chakravarti, and Rapoport 2000).

Table 2 displays examples of the seminal work per research domain and methodology.

In the following sections, we chart the evolution of research employing each research methodology, and briefly review each stream's contributions, shortcomings, current trends, and opportunities for future research.

Conceptual Research on Marketing Channels

In the early years of channel research there were many purely conceptual research articles. Table 3 shows the distribution of conceptual articles over time and across the selected research domains. Notably, the number of conceptual research publications has declined since the 1970s. Conversely, more than 75 percent of the conceptual articles in our database were published before the 1990s and only four have appeared within the last 14 years. This decline has occurred despite periodic calls for more conceptual research in channels-related areas, for example, Sheth (1996), and Roy, Sivakumar, and Wilkinson (2004), and is in keeping with the general diminution of the numbers of conceptual research papers in the academic marketing literature noted by Yadav (2010) and MacInnis (2011). A second insight from Table 3 is that the research domains of channel power-dependence relationships and channel structure and channel selection attracted the most conceptual research in the pre-1990s era while the domain of relational outcomes has received more attention since then. Lastly, no purely conceptual paper on channel negotiations figures in the articles database we have compiled.

MacInnis (2011) has proposed that purely conceptual papers can make four basic types of contributions to the academic literature: *envisioning, explicating, relating, and debating*. Therefore, to gain more insight into the nature of contributions made so far by conceptual research papers in channels, we tally the numbers of conceptual papers making these four types of contributions with respect to each of the six research domains. Table 4 displays these data and we see that "*explicating*" is the most common form of contribution made by conceptual research papers in the marketing channels literature and then "*envisioning*". According to MacInnis (2011), conceptual articles that contribute by way of explication include those that offer conceptual frameworks, structural frameworks, propositional inventories, and reviews of prior research in the targeted domain (e.g., Guiltinan 1974). In contrast, envisioning articles identify new ideas, novel concepts and perspectives (e.g., Stern and Reve 1980). Our finding that conceptual articles of the explicating type are most common in channels research literature is in keeping with MacInnis's (2011, p. 151) observations about the state of conceptual articles in Marketing as a whole. It is also no surprise that envisioning conceptual articles in channels research are largely concentrated in the research domains of power-dependence, conflict, and relational outcomes which received a lot of early attention from channels scholars.

However, the dearth of conceptual articles that make "relating" (which includes truly integrative reviews, as opposed to summarizations of past research), for example, Hunt (1995), and "debating", for example, Nevin (1995), contributions is clearly a shortcoming in extant channels research as it is in general marketing research. This is because without review and debate of received theories it is less likely that more envisioning research will be undertaken, and without envisioning research, a field of research soon becomes stagnant. Therefore, the tapering off of conceptual channels research in recent years – especially of the relating, debating, and envisioning kind – even as the channels landscape becomes more complex and rich because of new technologies and so forth, does not augur well for the field. However, making up these shortfalls in conceptual research methodology-based research will not happen easily or speedily. MacInnis (2011) suggests that researchers have to develop special skills to make the needed contributions – such as developing divergent thinking skills and a "beginner's mind" for envisioning, comparative reasoning skills for relating, and syllogistic reasoning skills for debating. In addition, innovative conceptual research in channels calls for steps such as taking time off to learn how related disciplines are looking at channels and/or immersing oneself in current distributive practices. Last but not least, Yadav (2010) advocates more purely conceptual article-friendly review processes at major journals as well as appreciation of the value of strong conceptual articles in universities' promotion and tenure processes.

Empirical Research on Marketing Channels

Both qualitative and quantitative empirical channel studies have been published over the timespan of articles in our database. The former are far fewer in number, but have been helpful to

Table 2
Examples of publications classified by research methodology and research domain.

	Power-dependence relationships	Relational outcomes	Conflict	Control mechanisms	Channel structure and channel selection	Negotiations
Conceptual research	Stern (1967); Frazier and Antia (1995)	Frazier and Sheth (1985); Mohr and Nevin (1990)	Gaski (1984); Lucas and Gresham (1985); Hunt (1995)	Bucklin (1973); Rosenberg and Campbell (1985)	Robicheaux and Coleman (1994); Frazier (1999)	–
Empirical research	El-Ansary and Stern (1972); Heide and John (1988); Lusch and Brown (1996)	Anderson and Narus (1990); Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp (1995a)	Rosenberg and Stern (1971); Brown and Day (1981); Koza and Dant (2007)	Jap and Ganesan (2000); Antia and Frazier (2001)	Dwyer and Oh (1988); Bucklin, Ramaswamy, and Majumdar (1996)	McAlister, Bazerman, and Fader (1986); Ganesan (1993); Srivastava and Chakravarti (2009)
Microeconomic model-based research	Choi (1991, 1996); Moorthy (1987)	Chu and Desai (1995); Cui, Raju, and Zhang (2007)	Jeuland and Shugan (1983)	Lal and Staelin (1984); Ingene and Parry (1995a)	McGuire and Staelin (1983), Coughlan (1985, 1987); Lee and Staelin (1997)	Dukes, Gal-Or, and Srinivasan (2006)

Table 3
Distribution of articles in compiled database by research methodology and research domain over time.

	Year	Power-dependence relationships	Relational outcomes	Conflict	Control mechanisms	Channel structure and channel selection	Negotiations	Number of papers
Conceptual articles	Before 1970	4	0	2	0	5	0	10
	1971–1980	6	3	4	5	5	0	17
	1981–1990	7	5	4	5	4	0	15
	1991–2000	3	6	3	3	3	0	9
	2001-to date	1	2	1	1	2	0	4
	Overall	21	16	14	14	19	0	55
Empirical articles	Before 1970	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	1971–1980	12	2	7	3	0	0	18
	1981–1990	23	13	10	7	7	2	46
	1991–2000	25	30	6	14	8	2	65
	2001-to date	14	25	6	15	6	1	48
	Overall	74	70	29	39	21	5	177
Micro-economic model-based articles	Before 1970	0	0	0	0	4	0	4
	1971–1980	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
	1981–1990	2	1	1	10	8	5	15
	1991–2000	15	2	10	23	8	7	40
	2001-to date	17	1	19	40	17	10	68
	Overall	34	4	30	74	39	22	130

Note: Because any one paper may have addressed more than one research domain, the sum of each row does not reflect the total number of papers in a given time frame.

Table 4
Distribution of conceptual articles by contribution type in compiled database.

Contribution type	Envisioning	Explicating	Relating	Debating	Overall
Research domain	Novel frame-work; new perspective; revised perspective	Conceptual/structural framework, propositional inventory; review paper	Typological/taxonomic framework; classification scheme; integrative framework	Position paper; critique; rejoinder; commentary	
Power-dependence relationships	8	12	1	0	21
Relational outcomes	5	9	0	2	16
Conflict	7	3	4	0	14
Control mechanisms	4	9	0	1	14
Channel structure and channel selection	4	10	3	2	19
Negotiations	0	0	0	0	0

theory development using approaches such as focus groups and in-depth interviews (e.g., Manning, Bearden, and Rose 1998). The bulk of empirical channels studies, however, is quantitative, utilizing data obtained from surveys (e.g., Wang, Gu, and Dong 2013) and/or transactional databases (e.g., Finn 1987). In the following paragraphs, we summarize the history of empirical research across our selected six research domains.

Evolution of Empirical Research on Channels

Table 3 indicates the numbers of empirical papers focused on each research domain over the timespan of our database. We see that there is no empirical research article in our database published before 1970. In the decades since then the evolution has been as follows.

1971–1980: In this timeframe, 17 empirical papers were published in our selected journals. The early work concentrates on *power-dependence relationships* (e.g., El-Ansary and Stern 1972) and *conflict* (e.g., Rosenberg and Stern 1971). Wilkinson (1979) published one of the first articles on *relational outcomes* at the end of this decade. He examined the relationships between channel members' power and their satisfaction with one another's performance.

1981–1990: The number of published empirical research papers increased substantially compared to the previous decade. The volume of research on *power-dependence relationships* remained the highest, while research on *relational outcomes* started to take off (e.g., Anderson and Narus 1984). Research on *conflict*, however, peaked (e.g., Gaski and Nevin 1985) while a few empirical studies on *channel structure and channel selection* (Anderson and Coughlan 1987), as well as on *negotiation* (e.g., Dwyer and Walker 1981) emerged in this decade.

1991–2000: The bulk of empirical research to date was published within this decade. The majority of these papers focused on *relational outcomes* and *power-dependence relationships.* As Lewis and Lambert (1991) noted, relational outcomes (e.g., satisfaction) have often been studied jointly with power and conflict. For example, the use of power has been identified as an important determinant of channel members' satisfaction (Geyskens, Steenkamp, and Kumar 1999).

2001-to date: The volume of empirical research on channels shows a declining trend since 2001. More than half of these recent empirical papers have focused on *relational outcomes*, while a smaller proportion centered on *power-dependence relationships*. However, quite a few papers have addressed *control mechanisms*. As in the previous decades, empirical research on *negotiations* remains sparse. In our database, only one such study on negotiations has been published since 2001 (Srivastava and Chakravarti 2009).

Next, we consider some trends in empirical research designs, data, and methods within the empirical research methodology papers in our database.

Trends in Research Design

(1) From Single-sided to Dyadic Design. Channel management research domains such as power-dependence relationships, conflict and so forth are inherently (at least) dyadic in nature, that is, involve two parties, and obtaining data from the perspectives of both sides of the channel dyad, and their divergence if any, permits a more comprehensive view and additional insights into the parties' working relationship (e.g., Anderson and Weitz 1992; Lusch and Brown 1996; Mohr and Sohi 1995). Further, empirical investigations of channel management theories such as commitment-trust need to recognize the intrinsically dyadic nature of measurements of constructs such as trust (for an extensive review on theories in channel management research see Watson et al. 2015, in this issue). Frequently, however, methods that have been applied to test these theories gather and utilize data from only one side of the dyad. This potentially leads to the misunderstanding that the obtained measure of a dyadic construct like trust refers to only one of the channel partners, that is, *pseudo-unilaterality* or the error of attributing to the individual what is really a product of interactions between partners (Duncan et al. 1984; Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006).

There have been more dyadic studies since the work of Anderson and Weitz (1992). The trend of an increasing number of dyadic channel power structure studies was also noted by Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp (1998). Still, the volume of studies using dyadic study designs remains fairly low relative to non-dyadic design studies. This could be because of the difficulty and expense of getting data from both sides of the channel (Steinman and Deshpandé 2000). Moreover, along with more effort, gathering dyadic data also requires considerable cooperation from channel members (Anderson and Weitz 1992).

Not only is the volume of extant dyadic empirical research on channels still relatively small but also channels scholars have not taken advantage of recent advances in the modeling and analysis of dyadic data that offer a promising avenue for future research. For example, an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) might be used to more precisely model the channel members' amount of impact on their respective counterparts, and vice versa. Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) offer an extensive overview of such approaches to investigate dyadic relationships.

Many scholars continue to call for more dyadic data designs. For instance, Koza and Dant (2007) suggest a dyadic perspective to gain insights into the conflict resolution process. Windsperger and Dant (2006) recommend collecting dyadic data for their measure of intangible assets. Roy, Sivakumar, and Wilkinson (2004) suggest future research should study dyads for a better understanding of the innovation phenomenon in channel management. Similarly, in their study on supply chain contagion, McFarland, Bloodgood, and Payan (2008) stress the need to examine dyadic interactions. Other researchers have emphasized dyadic designs to investigate, for example, fairness perceptions (Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1995b) and punitive action (Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp 1998). And, such designs are also helpful to overcome common method biases. Steinman and Deshpandé (2000) also consider multiple informants and the simultaneous measurement of suppliers and customers.

(2) From Cross-Sectional to Longitudinal and Experimental Research. The majority of empirical channel management

research relied on survey data to examine a relationship at one point in time. That is, cross-sectional, one-shot studies have dominated empirical channels research. Such research designs, however, often impede finding meaningful channel management effects (Frazier 1999; Koza and Dant 2007). The first longitudinal designs were applied to channel research in the 1980s. But a substantial increase in longitudinal studies has occurred in recent years.

Empirical research reveals that the majority of papers investigating interrelationships between relational variables assume a causal ordering of these variables, although causality often remains unclear and cross-sectional observations cannot prove causality. Thus, there is a lack of clear evidence with regard to the causal ordering (Weitz and Jap 1995). For example, Brown, Lusch, and Muehling (1983) argue that causality between power and conflict appears to flow in both directions. Mohr and Sohi (1995) also highlight the causality issue regarding the relationship between norms of information sharing and actual communication flow.

Longitudinal research should, however, be able to untangle causal relationships. Thus some researchers have employed longitudinal research to investigate the causal order between, for example, the use of ownership and opportunism (Brown, Dev, and Lee 2000), or cooperation and trust (Anderson and Narus 1990). Besides stronger inferences about causality, longitudinal analysis might also reduce concerns with regard to common method variance bias (Einhorn and Hogarth 1986; Podsakoff et al. 2003).

In addition, relationships develop over time and, by definition, require a longitudinal perspective (e.g., Anderson and Weitz 1992). More specifically, Lusch and Brown (1996) state that performance outcomes in a channel setting might influence the dependence structure, channel design, and relational behavior in a longitudinal sense. As stated previously, conflict is a dynamic phenomenon as well, reflecting a sequence of conflict episodes. However, we find that most channel conflict studies are cross-sectional investigations. Accordingly, these studies cannot uncover the dynamics of channel conflict. Recently, however, researchers have started to evaluate conflict episodes and their corresponding outcomes from a longitudinal perspective (e.g., Antia, Zheng, and Frazier 2013). Other domain topics that could benefit from more longitudinal investigations include the dynamics of the ownership redirection (Windsperger and Dant 2006), the dynamics involved in development of interorganizational relationships such as particular governance types and mechanisms available for structuring relationships over time (Ganesan 1994; Heide 1994; Heide and John 1992; Sudhir 2001). In this vein, Steinman and Deshpandé (2000) recommend the use of longitudinal data to examine the effect of training, reward, and performance programs on the market orientation gap to better understand how this gap can be reduced and how relationships in general operate. Payan and McFarland (2005) note that additional longitudinal studies are needed to investigate the sequential use of influence strategies. Mentzer, Min, and Zacharia (2000, p. 563) suggest that "longitudinal research should examine the evolutionary and interactive aspects of partnering orientation, implementation, and its consequences", while Mohr and Nevin (1990, p. 49) argue that "a longitudinal analysis of communication may reveal how communication affects the evolution of channel structure and behavior". Moreover, Langerak (2001) calls for longitudinal research on market orientation's effects on the behaviors of channel members, channel relationships, and performance outcomes.

Rindfleisch et al. (2008) investigated the merits of cross-sectional versus longitudinal survey research. They recommend marketing channel researchers should consider using a longitudinal design, (1) when the relationships between predictors and outcomes are expected to be weak or theoretically not developed (e.g., relational outcomes of channel members' engagement); (2) for research on more internally oriented and abstract topics, such as trust and commitment within marketing channels; (3) when researchers have some knowledge about when the effect of a predictor variable begins and ends (e.g., annual negotiations between channel members); (4) when alternative explanations are likely and researchers are unable to account for them (e.g., competitor's behavior); and (5) when researchers focus on how outcomes are influenced by changes in a predictor within a set of entities (e.g., the effect of channel member interaction on relationship lifecycle).

Lastly, an experiment represents a different powerful approach to establish causal claims empirically (Imai, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2013). However, experiments have infrequently been conducted in channel research and such studies have predominantly focused on the power-dependence research domain. As shown in Table 5, only 13 out of the 177 empirical publications entail experiments. For example, Kim, Hibbard, and Swain (2011) conduct experiments among managers in business-to-business industries in order to uncover the role of commitment in situations of conflict. They find that different types of commitment (affective, calculative, and normative) reveal different effects on activities that go beyond the precise role prescriptions of the business relationship. In a set of studies (e.g., Bradford, Stringfellow, and Weitz 2004; Dwyer 1980; Stern, Sternthal, and Craig 1973) laboratory research is conducted by setting up scenarios where participants are assigned to different roles in a channel relationship. Participants then have to interact with each other regarding their respective roles (an approach also referred to as a parasimulation (see Stern, Sternthal, and Craig 1973)).

(3) Inferential Techniques – Keeping up with Marketplaces Becoming More Complex and Dynamic. With regard to the inferential techniques applied in the papers in our database, we distinguish between regression analysis (e.g., OLS, Logit, Tobit), analysis of variance (e.g., (M)ANOVA, (M)ANCOVA), structural equation modeling (e.g., CBSEM, PLS), other simultaneous equation models (e.g., 2SLS, 3SLS, SUR), and correlation analysis (e.g., canonical correlation, partial correlation). Table 5 summarizes the numbers of articles using various inferential techniques in our database.

While regression analysis has been the most common estimation method used in channel management research over the last six decades, structural equation modeling has been increasingly used since the 1980s. Research has only recently started to control for the contemporaneous correlation of errors and error covariances across equations in the estimation of

Table 5
Distribution of empirical articles in compiled database across methodological approaches and inferential tools.

	Methodological approaches					Inferential techniques				
	Experiment	Survey	Longitudinal design	Dyadic design	Triadic design	Regression analysis	Analysis of variance	Structural equation modeling	Other simultaneous equation models	Correlation analysis
Power-dependence relationships	6	65	1	14	3	26	8	19	2	13
Relational outcomes	5	64	7	16	3	25	8	26	4	7
Conflict	2	25	4	9	1	10	5	7	0	7
Control mechanisms	1	37	1	8	3	19	2	10	2	4
Channel structure and channel selection	0	18	2	1	1	11	3	4	1	0
Negotiations	3	2	0	2	1	0	3	0	0	0
Number of papers	13	158	10	31	9	63	20	46	8	21

simultaneous equation models. The adoption of correlation analysis has declined over time. Simple methods might fall short in accounting for, for example, unobservable heterogeneity that comes along with more complex and dynamic marketplaces and hence, more sophisticated approaches are imperative. Interestingly, only Grewal et al. (2013) use a Bayesian estimation approach in their research on channel management. Given that Bayesian methods allow scholars to account for heterogeneity in a flexible way, and correct for measurement error, we can expect to see more studies using such methods in the future.

(4) *Coping with empirical research hazards.* Of foremost concern in survey-based research on channels is the problem of *common method variance*, or the bias attributable to respondents having their own thoughts on how variables are interrelated that is a concern when both the independent and the dependent measures are obtained from the same source (Wang et al. 2013). It is only recently that attention has focused on untangling common method biases. In a similar vein, Gaski (1984) had earlier declared that *key informant biases* might be the most serious methodological threat in the context of channel management research. We find that very little attention has been paid to controlling for key informant biases since Gaski's (1984) caution, although Kumar, Stern, and Achrol (1992) did offer a comprehensive approach to handle potential key informant biases. More specifically, they suggest a four-step procedure, which includes using multiple informants, snowballing, informant competency checks, and triangulation.

Non-response bias stems from potential differences in the answers that respondents and non-respondents provide in empirical research. There has been a considerable increase in the number of articles in which the authors try to control for non-response biases. A total of 63 publications on channel management control for non-response biases. It is evident that control for non-response biases has become a standard in this research field.

The problem of *endogeneity bias* arises when independent variables are correlated with the error term. This might be due to omitted variables, measurement error, and simultaneity and result in inconsistent estimators. With regard to the papers we examined, researchers have only recently tried to control for endogeneity problems in their empirical studies on channel management (Antia, Zheng, and Frazier 2013; Grewal et al. 2013; Yang, Su, and Fam 2012). The need to control for endogeneity can be emphasized by the common practice in channel management survey research, where interviewees are often required to refer to an exemplary channel partner they are conducting business with (e.g., Wang et al. 2013b; Yang, Su, and Fam 2012). In these cases the observed outcomes might be correlated with unobserved factors other than the ones examined as independent variables (e.g., the managers' inherent reasons to conduct business with the chosen channel partner). Such unobserved factors or omitted variables might result in endogeneity problems in terms of biased and inconsistent coefficient estimates as shown by Yang, Su, and Fam (2012). In their study about international marketing channels the authors reveal that independent variables' estimates differed significantly, when not accounting for endogeneity.

Future outlook: In summary, we find an increase of studies using dyadic design, longitudinal and experimental research, and methods for dealing with potential biases and endogeneity issues. Although many researchers have called for more dyadic studies, we find little use of available techniques for the analysis of dyadic data. Similarly, although many researchers have called for longitudinal research, such channel studies are still not common. In particular, future research should use longitudinal designs to uncover the dynamics of channel management phenomena and to account for dual causality between measures of channel management research.

Microeconomic Model-Based Marketing Channel Research

Our database includes 130 microeconomic model-based papers. Many of these papers tend to address more than one of the six research domains. In the following paragraphs, we summarize how microeconomic model-based channels research has evolved over time. Table 3 indicates the counts of microeconomic model-based papers, addressing each of the research domains in different decades of our time horizon.

Evolution of the Microeconomic Model-Based Research

Before 1970: Microeconomic modeling research in this era was limited and largely related to questions of channel structure (design) and channel selection such as whether and when a manufacturer should use channel intermediaries (decentralization) or a vertically integrated channel. If the manufacturers were to use intermediaries, what types, how many levels (channel length) and how many at any level (distribution intensity) should be used and when? How can the coexistence of different channel structures in the same market be explained? Much of this research was analytical in nature, applying economic principles to explain forms of vertical market structures observed in the marketplace (e.g., Balderston 1958; Baligh and Richartz 1967; Bucklin 1965). At the same time, a stream of operational or decision support modeling research began. For example, Artle and Berglund (1959) provided a quantitative decision model to determine whether a manufacturer should sell directly, or through one or more wholesalers, to retailers in a marketing channel. A few years later, Hartung and Fisher (1965) proposed a mathematical programming model to determine the optimal number of distribution outlets that a firm should open in a market area over time, utilizing a response model function that related the firm's distribution outlet share to its market share.

1970–1980: Interest in investigating and resolving channel structure problems continued to grow in this period. Specifically, the Hartung and Fisher (1965) model was extended to address increasingly complex channel structure, intensity, and selection decisions by Naert and Bultez (1975), Lilien and Rao (1976), and Corstjens and Doyle (1981). But, overall, microeconomic model-based channels research remained relatively sparse in this decade.

1981–1990: The stream of decision support models of distribution channel structure and channel selection culminated in the papers by Rangan, Zoltners, and Becker (1986) and Rangan (1987). The former article focused on channel intermediary selection decisions, while the latter proposed a channel design model based on Bucklin's (1966) idea that the optimal channel structure should be determined by the distribution functions that the channel has to perform. Lastly, Rangan and Jaikumar (1991) developed and demonstrated an integrated model that solves the strategic issue of channel levels and the tactical issue of price rebates simultaneously. The flow of decision-oriented channel models, however, tapered off after these works, as interest shifted to investigating channel strategies using analytical game-theoretic models (see, e.g., Staelin and Lee 2014).

The seminal analytical papers in the 1980s focused on the research domains of understanding *conflict* (lack of coordination), *mechanisms for achieving coordination* (control), and *channel structure and channel selection*. More specifically, Jeuland and Shugan (1983) examined the consequences of lack of coordination – or effectively 'conflict' – in the channel when channel members act to maximize their respective profits rather than total channel profits. They show that even in a simple bilateral monopoly (one manufacturer–one retailer) model, such self-interested behavior by each member of the channel reduces the other member's profits. These actions eventually create a worse situation for both. Jeuland and Shugan (1983) go on to show that a jointly negotiated quantity discount schedule is an effective way to achieve coordination (i.e., maximize the channel profits). Inspired by Jeuland and Shugan (1983), other scholars analytically investigated alternative mechanisms for channel coordination, such as two-part tariffs (Moorthy 1987), and product delivery, inventory, and pricing policies under dynamic conditions (Eliashberg and Steinberg 1987).

Unlike Jeuland and Shugan's (1983) model that ignored channel competition, a second seminal analytical paper by McGuire and Staelin (1983) did consider competition (a channel system of two exclusive, but independent, retailers and two competing manufacturers) and analytically derived insights into an optimal channel structure under different competitive conditions. Specifically, they showed that if the competing manufacturers' products are highly substitutable in demand, then *decentralization* rather than *vertical integration* is the preferred Nash equilibrium strategy for the manufacturers. Five years later, Moorthy (1988) demonstrated that McGuire and Staelin's (1983) results are a consequence of the interplay between demand dependence (competing products' substitutability or complementarity) and strategic dependence, that is, the impact of one retailer's (manufacturer's) price change on the other retailer's (manufacturer's) price change.

1991–2000: In this decade, as indicated in Table 3, analytical research really took off and grew fast. Analytical modelers' attention turned to investigations of the interplay between channel power-dependence relations and optimal channel structure in the presence of channel competition under varying assumptions about consumer demand functions (e.g., Choi 1991, 1996; Lee and Staelin 1997; Trivedi 1998). It would appear that the fresh emphasis on the implications of alternative power-dependence relations in channels coincided with the power shift from manufacturer to retailers, especially in the grocery industry, noted by many scholars in the 1990s (e.g., Kahn and

McAlister 1997). This power shift has been attributed to factors such as the increase in firm size, store-brand introductions, and service-level differentiation through merchandize assortment (e.g. Ailawadi, Borin, and Farris 1995). For example, Choi (1991) examined the impact of three forms of power-balance structures – Manufacturer-Stackelberg, Vertical Nash, and Retailer-Stackelberg on channel prices and profits when competing manufacturers use a common retailer. Lee and Staelin (1997) subsequently provided more insights into channel members' vertical strategic interactions under different power structures and their implications for channel pricing strategies. Importantly, research on mechanisms for channel coordination continued but with the context shifting from bilateral monopolies to settings where manufacturers use competing retailers (Ingene and Parry 1995a).

2001-to date: Analytical channels research has continued to grow since year 2000 but at a slower rate. The most common research domains addressed by various papers are optimal channel structure and channel selection in competitive contexts, under various assumptions of channel members' power-dependence relations, the consequences of conflict, and mechanisms for achieving coordination. Interestingly, analytical model-based research bearing on *relational outcomes* appears to be slowly taking off. For example, Cui, Raju, and Zhang (2007) focus on the relational construct of fairness and its role in channel coordination and impact on choice of control mechanisms. These authors find that when channel members care about fairness, simpler contracts can be optimal.

Most significantly, a third form of microeconomic model-based research, namely, structural analyses (or the new empirical industrial organization [NEIO] paradigm) of channel issues has emerged and is steadily growing in the field (e.g., Ailawadi et al. 2010; Chu, Chintagunta, and Vilcassim 2007; Sudhir 2001). Structural modeling work effectively combines analytical modeling and empirical (econometric) research. A key distinction of this stream of research is that rather than *assume*, the analyst *infers* from (secondary) data the nature of channel members' vertical and horizontal strategic interactions and pricing decision rules. Scholars in this stream of research have mapped game theoretic models to the data to provide descriptions of the equilibrium interactions in the market as well as perform policy analyses (Sudhir and Datta 2009).

Evolution in Analytical Model Assumptions

Considering the prominence of analytical models of channels today, in the next few paragraphs we take a closer look at the evolution in some key features and assumptions. Table 6 summarizes these characteristics of a few prominent models using a format adopted from Sudhir and Datta (2009).

(1) Competitive Structures: From Bilateral Monopolies to More Complex Competitive Channel Structures. While the foundational work, for example Jeuland and Shugan (1983) focused on bilateral monopolies, starting with McGuire and Staelin (1983), there has been a shift over time toward analyses of more complex competitive channel structures. Further, while the majority of papers to date (69 percent) investigate only one form of channel structure (e.g., bilateral monopolies), a few recent papers, notably Ingene and Parry (2007) and Lee et al. (2013), have developed more general models wherein simpler channel structures assumed in earlier research can be viewed as 'nested models.' These developments are in keeping with Ingene and Parry's (2007) call for developing a more unifying vision or theory of distribution channels.

(2) Power Balance Structures: From Manufacturer-Stackelberg to Retailer-Stackelberg. Beginning with the early papers, the bulk (65) of the analytical papers in our database that have treated decentralized channels have assumed a Manufacturer-Stackelberg (MS) game, wherein each manufacturer first chooses his wholesale price by using the retailers' reaction functions conditional on the observed wholesale price of the competing manufacturer's products. Only 11 papers have considered the retailer as a Stackelberg leader (RS), while Vertical Nash (VN) models are adopted in 17 papers. In a VN model, each competing manufacturer chooses his wholesale price conditional on the retailers' margin and the competing brand's observed retail price. In the case of common retailers, given these wholesale prices, each retailer sets her margin to maximize the combined profit from both the products (Choi 1996). So far, only seven papers in our database have investigated and compared the outcomes under all three power balance structures (Choi 1991, 1996; Eliashberg et al. 1986; Kadiyali, Chintagunta, and Vilcassim 2000; Kuiper and Meulenberg 2004; Lee and Staelin 1997; Sudhir 2001; Trivedi 1998).

(3) Demand Functions: From Linear Demand Functions to Spatial Utility Function-based Demand Models. Due to their high mathematical tractability, linear aggregate demand functions have been extensively used in the analytical models literature (80 papers) (e.g., Choi 1991; Ingene and Parry 1995b; McGuire and Staelin 1983; Shugan and Jeuland 1988; Trivedi 1998). Choi (1991), however, was also the first to show that the type of demand function assumed – linear or nonlinear – could have a major impact on conclusions about the optimal decentralized channel structure under various power balance structures. His results underscore the importance of employing a correct demand function for a channel decision. Accordingly, in recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of papers deriving the demand functions from a theoretically sound, individual-level utility function model, based, for example, on flexible spatial models (e.g., Yoo and Lee 2011; Lee et al. 2013). Such models allow consistent analyses and comparisons of numerous channel structures under a large number of underlying market environments.

From Deterministic to Uncertain Demand Functions: That demand uncertainty is a key factor impacting the degree of channel control exercised by a channel leader has been known for a long time (e.g., Etgar 1977). Despite this knowledge, the majority of the early analytical channels papers in our database assumed deterministic demand functions and risk-neutral decision-makers. Ingene and Parry (2004, Ch. 4) demonstrate in detail how incorporation of demand uncertainty and informational asymmetry into the bilateral monopoly model changes many conclusions drawn from the certainty-equivalent model. More recently, an increasing number of authors (e.g., Bhardwaj

Table 6
Examples of model specifications used in the microeconomic model-based papers over time.

	Example of paper	Market: determined demand (DD)/uncertain demand (UD)	Manufacturer: monopoly/ competition (M/C); single player (SP)/multiple players (MP)	Retailer: monopoly/ competition (M/C); single player (SP)/multiple players (MP)	Pricing contract: linear price (LP)/exponential (E)/nonlinear (NL); 2-part tariff (TT)/qty discount (QD)/slotting allowances (SA)	Model: linear/nonlinear demand (L/NL) manufacturer–retailer; Manufacturer Stackelberg (MS)/Retailer Stackelberg (RS)/Vertical Nash (VN)
Before 1970	Artle and Berglund (1959)	DD	–	–		L
1971–1980	Berger (1972)	DD/UD	M; SP	M; SP	–	L
	Levy and Grant (1980)	DD	M; SP	M; SP	–	NL
1981–1990	Jeuland and Shugan (1983)	DD	M	M	LP, EXPONENTIAL	L, NL, VN
	McGuire and Staelin (1983)	DD	C	C, SP	LP	L, MS
1991–2000	Ingene and Parry (1995a)	DD	M, SP	C, MP	LP, TT, QD	L, NL, MS
	Lee and Staelin (1997)	DD	M, SP; C, MP	M, SP; C, MP	LP, EXPONENTIAL	MS, RS, VN
2001-to date	Geylani, Dukes, and Srinivasan (2007)	DD	M, SP	C, MP	NL	L
	Lee et al. (2013)	DD	C, MP	C, MP	Bertrand-Nash horizontal price	MS

and Balasubramanian 2005; Biyalogorsky and Koenigsberg 2010; Chu, Chintagunta, and Vilcassim 2007; Desai 2000; Dhar 2013; Gümüs, Ray, and Yin 2013; Lariviere and Padmanabhan 1997; Sudhir and Rao 2006; Yuan, Gomez, and Rao 2013) have allowed for uncertainty in demand in analytical channels research. Many of these papers have focused on providing rationales for the use of decentralized channel coordination mechanisms such as incentives, slotting allowances and returns policies in the presence of demand uncertainty under varying assumptions of asymmetric information between manufacturers and retailers. Among these works, Tsay (2002) is one of the few who explicitly allows for varying risk attitudes and analyzes how sensitivity to risk affects both sides of the manufacturer–retailer relationship under various scenarios of strategic power; and how these dynamics are impacted by a returns policy. His analysis shows that risk aversion can lead to significantly different behavior from that predicted by risk-neutral analysis, and the penalty for a channel member who ignores or incorrectly estimate the risk sensitivity of its upstream or downstream partner can be substantial. A key takeaway from this previous literature is that future analytical channels model-builders must carefully consider the potential role of demand uncertainty and risk-aversion in their problem at an early stage of model-building and account for them when it is evident that their inclusion is likely to modify deterministic model-based results.

(4) Mixed Methodological Approaches: From Purely Analytical to Analytical Plus Empirical. In our database, a small number (29) of analytical studies also include empirical analyses to further validate their findings by primarily using secondary data (e.g., Ailawadi, Borin, and Farris 1995; Besanko, Dubé, and Gupta 2003). An alternative approach to derive broader insights is to use an econometric analysis to summarize findings across several pure analytical models. A good example of this approach is the work by Lee et al. (2013) wherein they use a meta-analysis to summarize analytical results from ten different channel structures. This approach can be considered an important first step in developing an overarching theory of channel structure design.

Discussion

In the previous sections, we have summarized the evolution, contributions, shortcomings and opportunities for future channels research applying either conceptual, empirical, or microeconomic model-based methodologies. In this section we take a more holistic view of channels research approaches and, with the help of inputs from seven well-known channels research scholars (see Table 7), identify opportunities for applying these methodologies separately or in combination to address emerging questions in the increasingly complex world of marketing channels.

Research on New Channels, Networks, Environments. The advent of new and social media, new technologies and new players in distribution networks provides many research opportunities, or as Richard Staelin emphasized in his conversation with us, "only the sky is the limit". He particularly stressed the need for more research on dual channels and two-/multi-sided markets. Similarly, Jan Heide observed that management

Table 7
Future channels issues, methods, and data sources emphasized by interviewed experts.

		Pradeep Chintagunta	Jan Heide	Sandy Jap	Chakravarthi Narasimhan	Lisa Scheer	Venkatesh Shankar	Richard Staelin
Issues	More research on distributors/retailers	√	√	√				
	Interorganizational management of relationships, networks	√	√	√				
	Category management, shopper marketing		√				√	√
	Dual distribution, distinct customer journeys	√	√	√				
	Effects of emerging markets	√			√	√		
Methods	More qualitative research		√	√		√		
	More experimental studies (also with managers)		√	√				
	Model more appropriate demand functions			√	√			√
	More complex/complete models	√		√	√		√	√
	Mixed methods (analytical and empirical)	√		√	√		√	√
Data sources: Big data, CRM		√		√		√	√	√
Experts' sample papers		Chintagunta and Jain (1992); Kadiyali, Chintagunta, and Vilcassim (2000)	Heide and John (1992); Heide (1994)	Weitz and Jap (1995)	Lal and Narasimhan (1996); Iyer, Narasimhan, and Niraj (2007)	Kumar, Scheer and Steenkamp (1998); Scheer, Miao, and Garrett (2010)	Dong, Shankar, and Dresner (2007)	McGuire and Staelin (1983)

Note: We only report issues, methods or data sources that were at least mentioned by two interviewed experts. "√" reflects topics explicitly mentioned by the scholars. Assigning topics to issues, methodologies and data sources has been done by the authors.

of conflict in dual distribution settings and the implications for strategy and structure was one research domain deserving more attention. An example of work in this direction is the paper by Vinhas and Anderson (2005). Heide also underlined that while channel dyads have been investigated to a great extent, channel *networks* also matter greatly but related research is as yet rather sparse. For example, as noted in Heide (1994, p. 8), networks are likely to have implications for channel governance as individual relationships are embedded in the context of other relationships. However, previous research has largely ignored the influence of distributor–retailer networks when examining dyadic relationships within a channel. One exception is the work by Wuyts and Geyskens (2005) who combine conceptual and empirical research to show that contracting with a non-close partner becomes effective when the focal relationship is embedded in a network of close mutual contacts. Undoubtedly, the analysis of channel networks is an important and promising domain for both conceptual and empirical research studies in the future.

Another interesting trend pointed out by Chakravarthi Narasimhan is that channels are blurring. For example, it is difficult to identify pure digital or physical channel players, and consumers are shopping for the same goods at different channel outlets on different occasions. Venkatesh Shankar called this confluence of proliferation of channels and the usage of channels for different purposes a "sweet spot" for future research in channels. Consistent with this trend, Amazon has recently announced the opening of its first brick-and-mortar store, and eBay has started to open pop-up stores in big cities. Further, with the advent of omni-channel retailing (e.g., Verhoef, Kannan, Inman 2015, *Introduction to JR's Special Issue on Multichannel Retailing*), it is important to understand how the varying business models of omni-channel retailers like Amazon.com and Alibaba.com are impacting traditional manufacturer–distributor

relationships. Sandy Jap, for example, observed a pressing need for more research that helps manufacturers (a) better understand carryover and spillover effects across multiple channels; and (b) better design and execute their go-to-market strategies in a multichannel world. Additionally, new media, new technologies and an abundance of information have modified channel management, creating new players (e.g., infomediaries) but leaving unanswered questions on what is their role in channel management.

More generally, Lisa Scheer emphasized the need for more research on the impact of macro-environment trends such as discontinuous changes in information technology on traditional channel relationships and channels. Scheer also observed that digital channels imply very different channel player networks in the digital world than in the traditional (brick & mortar) channels world. Moreover, it is not just new channels but also new formats and new business models that are changing the traditional retailing landscape such as the proliferation of warehouse clubs (Costco, Sam's Club). There are as yet few studies on how such developments are affecting both suppliers as well as traditional retailers. While the questions of interest might remain the same, for example how to coordinate channels, what are the effects on profits, and so forth, the answers may change substantially. Finally, as pointed out by Sandy Jap, health care channels as well as the interface between industry and government are promising directions for future channels research. For example, the effects of marketing channels-related practices such as retailer category management and the use of category captains on channel members and consumers are of great interest to government regulators and policymakers but research on these issues is still sparse (e.g., Basuroy, Mantrala, and Walters 2001; Subramanian et al. 2010).

Big Data. All our interviewed experts agreed that the current data abundance is a game-changer and deserves further attention. Channel players are handling more and more ("big") data to improve their performance and update their decisions. Big data are affecting every channel and we start seeing direct results of this impact in many areas (see Verhoef et al. 2010 for an example of the consequences of big data in multi-channel retailing environments). It may not be surprising to see changes among the channel relationships (with power shifts), structures, negotiations and coordination issues as well as effects on performance. Obviously, big data may help to solve many methodological challenges and provide new answers on many of the underinvestigated topics highlighted in this paper. However, as Lisa Scheer pointed out: "More and new data are not necessarily better than old data".

Underutilized Approaches to Conduct Channel Research. Jan Heide encouraged conducting more qualitative research in channel management, for example to learn more about substantive and current challenges or phenomena in channel management. Heide also suggested that conducting experiments is a very promising avenue for future research. We completely agree and in particular we see a need for more experimental work to investigate negotiation strategies and behavior with regard to the effects on relational outcomes. However, a major challenge to conduct such experiments is to get actual decision makers of manufacturers and retailers involved in such studies. Jan Heide mentioned trade shows as an option to recruit participants for such negotiation experiments.

Methodological Challenges. Given that channel relationships are becoming more and more complex, all our experts agreed that we are in need of developing methods to be able to investigate complex channel structures. As Lisa Scheer emphasized, a diversity of research methods should be encouraged in our field. Regarding analytical research, most papers have aimed at low-hanging fruit so far that can be addressed by simple models with few parameters. Richer models that look at several research domains rather than one at a time are now needed. However, our experts in analytic research also emphasized that rather than having the most complex model, we are in need of "complete models" (Shankar) to provide insights relevant to managers. Going beyond current simple models and building extended and more complete models may lead to non-closed form solutions and require simulation analyses, but could provide more important new insights. As stressed by Narasimhan, it is most critical to pick the right variables to include in the model, and then make the right assumptions that do not unduly complicate the model but do capture reality better. Interestingly, reality is in fact more complex today than when channels modeling first started and so the "strategy space has considerably expanded." Narasimhan also felt that in addition to richer models, mixed methods, that is, studies that combine analytical and empirical analyses, are also becoming much more necessary and important in channels research. That is, studies must attempt to capture as well as estimate structural features of channel management strategies.

Relatedly, Pradeep Chintagunta observed that a promising avenue for future research is the incorporation of behavioral phenomena in analytical models. For example, Chintagunta noted that using extant channel models, it was difficult to explain Chrysler's bankruptcy and issues with their dealerships. There were simply no analytical models that properly captured key aspects of agents' behavior. In the same vein, Staelin emphasized the need to develop appropriate and realistic demand functions from a theoretically sound, individual-level utility function model.

Integration of Analytical and Conceptual or Empirical Research. In our field, there are groups of scholars who have concentrated on either conceptual, empirical or microeconomic model-based channel research – and have rarely looked at, let alone attempted to understand, the methods and insights obtained within the same research domains by scholars utilizing the other paradigms. The lack of cross-fertilization is glaring in the literature. In contrast, channel management in practice rarely has the luxury to compartmentalize behavioral from economic issues even as the marketplace becomes more complex. Most strategies and decisions followed in practice are based on a holistic assessment of all behavioral, economic, and competitive factors. From this perspective, most of the implications for managers flowing from compartmentalized research are highly questionable, and becoming more so as the environment becomes more complicated. As this realization spreads, not surprisingly, one issue emphasized by our group of experts was the need for more research using mixed methods. One paradigm that clearly falls in this category is structural modeling in

inter-organizational (IO) research, for example, Sudhir (2001). However, such new empirical IO models also require strict assumptions that may be difficult to justify or accept in reality as well as the right types and volumes of secondary data to be available. Another promising avenue is to combine analytical work with simulations, survey-based studies or experiments to gain new insights. Such combinations could serve to validate or qualify findings from purely analytical studies. Moreover, contingencies could be identified when and why particular findings established in analytical research do not hold. Our panel of experts also suggests that analytical modelers should look more closely at the implications flowing directly from their model.

Conclusion

This article has surveyed seven decades of channel management research from a methodology perspective. Overall, it is exciting to see how the early conceptual studies by pioneers such as Bucklin and Stern have stimulated subsequent empirical and analytical work. Clearly, a process of broadening (additional domains, more complex issues) and deepening (rigorous methods, narrow analytical studies) in channel management research can be detected. In closing, based on our review of the literature as well as observations by the marketing channel experts we interviewed, we believe there will be a high payoff from greater emphasis on the following methodologies in future channels research:

- Conceptual development especially of the relating, envisioning or debating kind
- Qualitative research of complex channel networks and configurations to support conceptualizations and hypotheses development
- Lab and field experiments
- Proper collection and analyses of dyadic survey data
- Longitudinal and panel data-based studies
- Multichannel and competitive analytical models incorporating individual spatial utility function-based demand models
- Building and estimation of structural models
- Mixed methods

Of course, these conclusions are not free from caveats. For example, whereas longitudinal data might help to overcome some methodological issues (e.g., common method variance), other issues (e.g., confounding events) might emerge (Samaha, Palmatier, and Dant 2011). Also, while we need more qualitative work to discover new problems, and open the door to new marketing channels theory, we are also aware that this type of work may be difficult to publish. We advocate editors and reviewers to be even more open toward conceptual papers or "propositional idea papers", and editors should consider special issues or issue sections for conceptual papers in their journals. Finally, we hope that this article will stimulate more interest in channels research. Based on our review, we see a lot of opportunities to conduct influential research in channel management.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2015.05.001.

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