



## **RETAIL INTERNATIONALIZATION: AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

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### **Abstract:**

*In the midst of growing tendencies towards protectionist trade practices as we approach the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, the retail internationalization practice has become uncertain more than ever. Yet the need for retail internationalization is still prerequisite, not an option. The purpose this paper is to put forward a series of propositions, a research agenda, which might be found useful by the academicians for their future research on retail internationalization that will help the practitioners to navigate in these times of uncertainties.*

### **Keywords:**

Retail, internationalization, research propositions, international marketing

## **1. Introduction**

Since the mid-1990s, the scope and the pace of internationalization of retailing became widespread and accelerated, as a result of the convergence of information and communication technologies that has provided tools and concepts enabling effective management of large networked retail firms. Akehurst and Alexander (1995a) commented on this expansion that: "It will be increasingly difficult to see the dividing line between the study of international retailing and retailing." Dawson (2007) viewed internationalization for retailers not as a final stage, but rather an important one, in the progressive development of retailing as an economic activity.

In the midst of growing tendencies towards protectionist trade practices as we approach the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, the retail internationalization practice has become more complex and uncertain more than ever. Yet, the future research directions for retail internationalization still remain the same, and actually, they are more important for practitioners than ever in order to help them to navigate in these uncharted waters: Further development of retail internationalization thought via expanding the accumulated knowledge basis on the existing and these emerging key issues, especially with case studies and empirical research; reviewing and revising the learnings from the past with a new perspective; and developing new insights based on the analysis of today's divergent and convergent processes, which exist within the host, regional and global environments. The following sections briefly elaborates on these research directions:

### **1.1. Future Theory Building**

Although the conceptualization and theoretical development of internationalization of the firm, and in particular internationalization of the manufacturing sector, have been widespread, similar conceptual development of retail internationalization did not emerge until the late 1980s.

Also, until the 2000s, one of the tensions within the retail internationalization literature was the validity of importing concepts and theories from the wider academic literature. The dominant inclination was towards the adoption of a unidimensional approach. It was argued that the internationalization of retailing and of manufacturing differed from each other both conceptually and theoretically. Whitehead (1992) stated that the study of retail internationalization had to develop its own concepts and theoretical structures based on the empirical findings of internationalization experiences of retailers, because not only the retail internationalization differed from the internationalization of

manufacturers in many respects, but the theoretical foundations of international business and management disciplines did not seem to provide fully matching models in order to understand and explain the retail internationalization process, either.

Dawson (2007) listed the differences between retail and manufacturer internationalizations: The first and foremost of these differences is that retailers sell services, not items. Alexander and Doherty (2010) defined retail internationalization as a market-serving-internationalization, which involves servicing customers in non-domestic markets. While the imperative of internationalization for manufacturers is the search for cost reduction, for retailers, it is the growth. Even for large international retailers, the market is local (with the exception of internet-based retailers), by contrast, large manufacturers can consider their market as international or even global. The organizational/ network, number of supplier, customer and cost structures of retailing and manufacturing are quite different. All retail internationalization has to be localized to some extent as a response to consumer culture or to create a consumer culture, whereas manufacturers often seek to standardize the products they make, and the possibilities for the manufacturers to consumer culture are more limited. Dawson (2007) argued that all of these differences have impact on the nature of internationalization process in these two sectors, and in turn affect the extent to which academicians can transfer concepts from manufacturing-based studies to the studies of retailing.

In the course of the time, realizing that the fundamental theoretical constructs of internationalization of the firms and the wider understanding of international business activities are important for understanding of the retailers' international activities, academicians overcame the dichotomy between unidimensional and multidisciplinary approach. And, in order to better understand and explain retail internationalization, they started to build upon a variety of theoretical frameworks developed in wider academic literature and adopting a multi-disciplinary approach. Among a series of concepts and theories within the broader academic literature that were used to synthesize and adopt to a wider range of retail organizational formats in order to understand and explain retail internationalization, are the Uppsala model (Childs&Jin, 2014; Williams, 1991; Whitehead, 1992), transaction cost theory (Doherty, 1999), the networks approach (Guercini&Runfola, 2010), resource based theory (Haag, et al., (2019), institutional theory (Bianchi&Arnold, 2004), Dunning's eclectic paradigm (Benmamoun, et al., 2018), born-globals (Bhardwaj, et al., 2011), organizational learning theory (Chiva, et al., (2013), the dynamic capabilities approach (Frasquet, et al., 2013), embeddedness theory (Burt, et al., 2016), corporate diversification theory (Frasquet, et al., 2018), etc.

Consequently, expanding research activity in retail internationalization, with the application of such a wide variety of concepts and multidisciplinary approach, resulted in a large, but also a disparate, collection of studies. Several researchers (Akehurst&Alexander, 1995b; Alexander&Doherty, 2010; Dawson, 1994, 2007) argued that retail internationalization does not exist in isolation; they particularly underlined that it is part of a wider process of internationalization and the globalization of trade. Thereby, it must be considered in the wider context of the theories of international trade and of foreign direct investment, and the internationalization process of the firm. The principles and theories of international trade already exist to be integrated into the retail internationalization literature. The process of retail internationalization can only be examined properly with an in-depth understanding of the foundations of these theories. Yet, because classical and neo-classical theories of international trade remain short to fully accommodate the changing nature of international trade and developments in economic thought, it becomes also necessary to utilize from the theories of international business and the established economic theories to accommodate the experiences of retailers.

However, as Alexander and Doherty (2009) put it, any attempt to use the general concepts and theories of wider academic literature in explaining the process of retail internationalization requires a thorough understanding of the validity and limitations of these concepts and theories that were developed for non-retail and non-service environments. Doing so will help avoiding to force the retail internationalization conceptualization into unsuccessful frameworks. Likewise, retail internationalization has also to be viewed as part of wider trends and developments associated with internationalization within the service sector.

Provided that these already accepted understandings are in their place once more, and given the current growing complexity and uncertainty of the international environments, the employment of interdisciplinary research lens and integration of multiple theoretical frameworks, will continue to contribute to the advancement of retail internationalization thought, no matter which perspective is adopted

## 1.2. Methodology: Sine Quo None of a Robust Platform

Case studies allow researchers to study an organization and its environment in a natural setting and obtain rich insights into complex processes (Yin, 2014). Since the first release of Robert K. Yin's book, "Case Study Research Design And Methods" about 40 years ago (1984), case study research has gained a much wider acceptance as a research method. This acceptance was also recognizable in the retail and service internationalization research and literature. Case studies have been fundamental to the knowledge of distinctive characteristics of retail internationalization, such as geographic coverages of cultures and countries as well as to the exploration of specific issues, such as entry modes, divestment processes and characteristics of emerging countries.

Methodologically early international retail research was mainly based on observation (Treadgold, 1988), surveys and questionnaires (Alexander, 1990, 1996; Davies&Whitehead, 1995; Myers&Alexander, 1996; Williams, 1992a), databases (Burt, 1993, Davies& Fergusson, 1995) and case descriptions of individual firm experiences based on secondary data (Moore, 1998). As retail internationalization academicians started to move away from a static interpretation of international activity towards a more dynamic conceptualization since the early 2000s, the number of single and multiple qualitative case study studies started to increase.

Among the wide range of issues that the case studies investigated were international retail franchising, international divestment, retail multinational learning, internationalization from emerging markets, characteristics of the retail internationalization process of specific types of firms such as SMEs, and fashion retailers (Burt et al., 2008; Doherty, 1999; Hutchinson et al., 2007, 2009; Palmer, 2005). Not surprisingly, the number of empirical studies have also increased, and their direction also moved from the traditional focus of a broad set of motives of the internationalization process (Hennart, 1991; Williams, 1992b) towards a more precise contextual understanding of the motives for specific entry mode strategies (Palmer et al., 2010; Quinn&Doherty, 2000), reasons for expansion (Myers&Alexander, 2007; Moore et al., 2000; Vida, 2000), motives for emerging markets (Tatoglu et al., 2003), and firm performance (Evans&Mavondo, 2002) and firm size (Hutchinson et al., 2007).

As the single and multiple case studies and empirical approach have become increasingly popular methodology within the late retail internationalisation literature, they have enabled various academicians to provide very important new insights into the retail internationalization discipline. Various studies on the internationalization processes of particular retailers at different sizes (i.e. global retailers, small and medium retailers, etc.) in particular countries illuminated a number of different dimensions of these retailers' international experiences.

One such example is Jonsson's and Foss's (2011) longitudinal in-depth study of Swedish home furnishing giant IKEA on how the company uses replication of a fixed format (i.e. replicating a part of their value chain such as sales and marketing format) in its international expansion. The study involves more than 70 interviews that were carried out with IKEA employees from 2003 to 2009 in Russia, China and Japan. They were the markets new to IKEA by the time the study was conducted; they were quite distant in cultural terms from IKEA's home market; and they represented different degrees of development, Russia and China represented the emerging markets, while Japan represented the mature markets. The results revealed how IKEA's organizational mechanisms support an ongoing learning process, which aimed at frequent modification of its format for replication that is treated hierarchically, i.e. across IKEA stores, lower-level features such as pricing, marketing efforts, etc. are allowed to vary in response to market-based learning, while higher-level features, such as fundamental values, vision, etc. are replicated in a uniform manner, and change only very slowly (if at all) in response to learning i.e. flexible replication. Within this case study of IKEA, three different embedded cases can be viewed: IKEA's market entry into Russia, China and Japan; learning in retail internationalization; the interrelationship between internal and external aspects of retail internationalization.

Another example is the Parfois case study, internationalization through franchising (Forte&Carvalho, 2013). This case study depicts how a relatively small retail brand, based in a less developed European region, is able to expand worldwide successfully. Created in 1994 in northern Portugal, Parfois, a specialized retail brand, using only two modes of entry: franchising agreements and wholly owned subsidiary, has been able to expand worldwide to 70+ countries with more than 1000 stores in about 30 years. The Parfois case study showed that its internationalization process was mostly influenced by pull factors, following the market attractiveness and the new emerging markets opportunities, thus expanding in countries such as Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and Asia.

Company has different approaches to different market regions. It started its internationalization with psychically and geographically close markets with high commitment (i.e. whole owned subsidiaries), while franchising was adopted as mode of entry in markets with lower political and economic stability as well as a greater cultural gap, different consumption patterns, difficult laws and languages. This is a mode of entry which allows a small company, in a small

market, with limited resources to grow worldwide, enabling it to be a global player, with extensive influence. The case study also showed that economic cycles did not affect the company's internationalization process. All of these are important and encouraging information for small and medium sized retailers from other countries, with similar activities.

Not all retail internationalization experiences have been successful however. Retail internationalization is not a linear, an uninterrupted process, and even the world's largest retailers have experienced difficulties, strategic adjustments, failures and withdrawals during their internationalization process (Burt et al., 2003; Jackson et al., 2005; Pioch et al., 2009; Wrigley&Currah, 2003). The non-linear, on-going, dynamic nature of internationalization at a variety of levels point out the importance of taking into account these setbacks, interruptions or turnarounds in the internationalization process (Fonseca&Rocha, 2022). In this regard, the difficult process of scaling back retailing operations to remedy mistakes provide equally valuable learning process both for international retailers and academicians (Palmer, 2005).

Written prior to the financial crisis of the world's third largest retailer following its announcement of accounting irregularities on 24 February 2003, the case study on Royal Ahold examines the company's struggles to manage significant investment in the unpredictable business environments and different institutional environments of Latin America. The case study offers a picture of retail multinationals facing distinctive organizational challenges as they seek to transpose internal and inter-firm practices to markedly different institutional environments. The study specifically underlines the lessons for retail internationalization theory: The importance of understanding the reciprocal relationship of the institutional matrix of host and home economies; a view of retail internationalization as a highly contested process – not only in terms of market competition, but also in terms of the relationship between the firm and suppliers of finance; and how the retail investment in emerging markets also involves in the development of an industry and shaping of a consumer society.

As it can be seen from these examples, retail internationalization is a complex, interactive and reciprocal process. It needs to be analyzed systematically, and in ways that allow comprehension of the broadness of the activity (Burt et al., 2003; Fonseca&Rocha, 2022). In this context, increase in the numbers of case studies and empirical research on various topics is one of the ways both for a better understanding of the internationalization experiences of retailers at any size and for strengthening the knowledge basis for the development of a robust theory building.

New case studies that combine the findings and data sets of previous relevant work, as longitudinal as possible, as well as the ones that will be conducted as a sequence of appropriate case studies, are of great importance to contribute with new knowledge and perspective to the broader retail internationalization research and thought. In this respect, a proposed future research agenda may include topics such as:

- How the changing nature and use of technology (ie. Artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR)) affect retail internationalization;
- How the rapidly changing nature of external and internal barriers within the wider competitive environment affect retail internationalization;
- Factors that aid retailers' competitive differentiation and operational performance in internationalization process in the context of the green and digital revolution;
- Internationalization activities and strategies of retailers of different scales ie. major retailers, SMEs, retailers from the emerging markets, etc.
- Internationalization experiences in different contexts, ie. in different cultures, industries and market environments, and during periods of recessions, crisis, anomalous events, etc.;
- International retail failures and divestments.

Palmer and Owens (2006) argued that published articles in the field of retail internationalization are “often long in their theoretical constructs and empirical findings, but short in their methodological discussions”. Based on this observation, they proposed that “it is important that the strengths and weaknesses of the research approaches and methodologies adopted are documented, discussed and debated in order to facilitate discussion in the retail internationalization literature” (Palmer&Owens, 2006). Integration of not only the previous work, but also the previous approaches and methodologies with a comparative perspective is another step toward the better interpretation and extension of existing knowledge on retail internationalization.

In this context, innovative research designs and techniques that are using the new artificial intelligence powered research tools, combined with multi-method and cross disciplinary methodological approaches, will contribute immensely to the development of the realm both in terms of quantity and quality.

### **1.3. Learning From The Past, While Moving Forward**

#### **1.3.1. Using the learnings from the past**

Case studies and empirical research of retail internationalization process across firms and markets appear as the best methodology that have the capacity to address and illuminate critical and visible events, given the high degree of dependence of these events on contexts (Palmer&Owens, 2006). However, it is important not to forget to view all of these events with their relation to historical processes.

Akehurst and Alexander (1995a) defined retail internationalization process as “the study of contextualized change over time”, which takes place in a broader economic and social environment than simply the global geographical environment. They also warned that without understanding the historical processes, which brought about changes in retail internationalization and in markets, there is a considerable danger that conclusions will be time-specific and deeply flawed: “There is always a danger of interpreting the past with reference to the present rather than with reference to the past” (Akehurst&Alexander, 1995b).

In the past, the accumulated body of knowledge on international activities of retailers and careful examination of findings contributed greatly both in understanding of retail internationalization process and in development of retail internationalization conceptualization. Such findings helped to define the classifications within the structure of international retailers, identification of the differences in their internationalization process, the issues that retailers may face in their internationalization processes.

There is much to learn from the past insights in order to develop the existing conceptual view of retail internationalization further, while the extended and updated versions of previous work can contribute for future conceptual and theoretical development by strengthening the continuity and integration in the retail internationalization literature.

#### **1.3.2. The need for new insights**

As today's firms are internationalizing in greater numbers, in a much faster speed and in a more different ways than ever before, they are bound to face many challenges that were recognized in the past as well as the new ones.

Cavusgil and Cavusgil (2011) depicted the business environment of the last decades of the 20th century as: “Constant in the evolution of the business enterprise has been its relentless search for competitive advantage. What has been phenomenally different about this quest is that it is, increasingly, a global landscape that defines the firm's opportunities and challenges. (Although) the global marketplace has always been dynamic and complex in terms of the changes it brings, but the last decades have been exceptionally transformational.” Some of the complexities and issues that international retailers faced during this period, included: The emergence of new product markets, which involved a significant element of service; digitalization (ie. AI, AR, etc.) and its consequent changes in consumption, consumer demand, behaviour and environment; the growth of time influence; acquisitions; divestments; rise of new mega competitors, such as Amazon, Alibaba, etc.

No matter the effects of these complexities and issues, many observers would only expect international retailing continue to develop as the relatively settled economic conditions have been in place for some time. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has shown to us that we are living in a world, where consumption, many aspects of market behaviors and processes, and life in general, can change at an unprecedented speed and in unexpected ways. The pandemic has had a significant negative impact on global economic activity, global supply chains and capital flows. It also shifted the consumer and social trends all over the world.

Besides the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, there were other complexities and issues that also tested the international retailers, included; prior to the pandemic the global financial crisis in 2008, Brexit, which was completed in 2020, and after that, the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, but more importantly, the imposing pressure of the geopolitical dynamics (i.e. rising protectionism and the shift away from a more globalization oriented mindset by some nations that had previously adapted more free trade oriented policies) on the structure of markets and competition.

According to Hinrich Foundation's White Paper series, trade restrictions across the G20 were more than tripled the level of liberalizing measures during the period between October, 2021 - Rome Summit and November, 2022, based

on the data from the G20 Trade Policy Factbook, 2022 Edition, prepared by Global Trade Alert. The G20 members, collectively, represent 19 among the world's largest economies, comprising 85% of global gross domestic product and 75% of its trade.

Political stability is crucial to retail internationalization, as depicted by the exit of many brands out of Russian market, including the world's two top retailers, Amazon and Aldi, following the war between Russia and Ukraine. Economic stability is also fundamental to the steady growth for the international activities of retailers, as it has been observed when several retail divestments occurred following the financial and economic crises in the Far East at the end of the 1990s. Although they were not necessarily the main or only responsible of these divestments, they were in part effective.

Against this backdrop, the study of retail internationalization now stands before an intriguing stage. Further new insights based on the analysis of the divergent and convergent processes, which exist within the host, regional and global environments in connection with these development will contribute firstly to the overall retail internationalization literature; secondly such insights will also enhance international retail managers' understanding and knowledge of the most pressing retail internationalization issues; and thirdly, will widely contribute to the conceptual and theoretical advancement of the discipline.

## 2. Conclusion

One of the important future directions of the retail internationalization research agenda in the next decades must be understanding the internationalization process in the new century under the influence of the current prominent trends such as regional protectionism, digitalization, and their effects on retail internationalization.

It is important to re-emphasize that retail internationalization is part of a wider process of internationalization and the globalization of trade. Thereby, it must be considered in the wider context of the theories of international trade, of foreign direct investment, and the internationalization process of the firm. Likewise, retailing has to be viewed as part of a wider trends associated with internationalization in the service sector generally. Therefore, it is necessary to develop theoretically integrated approaches, placing the understanding of the retail internationalization process in a broader economic, international business and international trade frameworks, within which relevant issues may be addressed and methodological developments made.

As Vida (2000) pointed out the literature is still missing enough cross-sectional, longitudinal, systematic or quantitative empirical work. Testing the validity of theoretical frameworks or the proposed models will provide a more integrated, comprehensive and effective basis of retail internationalization thought. Integration of the previous methodologies with a comparative perspective is also another step toward the better interpretation and extension of existing knowledge on retail internationalization. Innovative research designs and techniques, multi-method and cross-disciplinary methodological approaches can also be explored.

As a conclusion, there is more work that await to be done on empirical and conceptual development of retail internationalization in order to further strengthen contemporary retail internationalization thought.

### 2.1. Managerial Implications: When There is a Will, There is a Way

International retailing has considerable exposure to market changes, thus, it requires relatively stable conditions, or it has to find ways to lessen its exposure to volatility in market conditions. Given the imposing pressures of the current geopolitical dynamics on the structure of markets and competition have been on rise globally, it seems there is no easy way.

One of the ways to lessen the impact of the unfavorable prevailing market conditions is the use franchising partnerships that could alleviate and tackle the changes in the market conditions, accompanied with careful risk management strategies. Another way is to utilize from the changing nature and use of technology. Advances in information technologies and e-commerce have drastically changed the landscape of international business, and the impact of digitalization continues to alter how the retailers operate in the international markets. In this respect, successful adoption of digital transformation and actively managing their position in this evolving eco-system as a strategy, becomes one of the crucial factors for international retailers to sustain their competitiveness in the foreign markets, where they operate, and to buffer such volatilities in market conditions.

Because internationalization provides an opportunity for managers to explore new venues of growth and to exploit the competitive advantage, they will continue to monitor for internationalization opportunities, no matter what the

challenges will be that the future holds. As in the past, but now more than ever, given the current geopolitical dynamics signal, managers, who plan to internationalize, need to carefully evaluate their firm-based capabilities in relation to both their home environments and host markets, which they plan to enter. In this context, a thorough understanding of the drivers and barriers to the retail internationalization should help managers to reduce risk and possibilities of failure and to develop competencies prior to entering into foreign markets. Also, a better understanding of the failure experiences can be beneficial for managers.

For future retail internationalization activities, new markets, which provide good growth opportunities with relatively uncluttered competitive environment as well as the second and third-tier cities in host countries, where they internationalized into, will become the center of focus for managers.

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