

# ONLINE CHANNEL MANAGEMENT FROM MANUFACTURERS' PERSPECTIVE: ONGOING DEBATES AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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## ABSTRACT

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE GAP

In the last decade, digital technologies beat most of all the pre-existing barriers to the development of electronic commerce, and, in the last year, in particular, the covid-19 pandemic ulteriorly pushed the online channel market penetration globally in every sector (Statista. Inc, 2020). Retailers and manufacturers are launching their e-commerce platforms or selling products online through online marketplaces or indirectly. Scholars deeply investigated the factors and drivers of online purchasing from the consumer perspective (Mishra et al., 2021) and the strategies, enablers and barriers under retailers perspective (Melacini et al., 2018), producing empirical studies and literature reviews. However, scholars investigating the management of the eCommerce channel and related strategies are much more recent, the path is still untrodden and nebulous, and no review of the few related pieces of literature has been made. This paperwork aims to produce an exhaustive review of the literature on the mentioned topic, discuss the actual body of knowledge outcomes, and provide insights for future research.

### METHODOLOGY

First, we opt for a bibliometric analysis to avoid potential bias typically generated by the subjective interpretations characterising the exclusive recourse to systematic literature reviews (Zupic and Čater, 2015). Based on the common words used in literature to identify manufacturers and electronic commerce, we developed the following search query:

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TITLE-ABS-KEY ( ( manufacture* ) OR ( vendor* ) OR ( producer* ) ) AND ( ( ecommerce ) OR ( electronic AND commerce ) OR ( e-commerce ) OR ( online AND sales ) OR ( online AND channel ) ) AND ( strategy ) OR ( manage* ) )
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The Scopus database, which is considered an ideal scientific database for systematic literature reviews (Kraus et al., 2020), was used to perform our search. The "\*" operator was used as a dummy character to include as many lexical variants as possible. In accordance with the literature (Kraus et al., 2020),

considering the managerial perspective of our review, we selected only journal articles or reviews in English, already published or in press, released by 15 April 2021 and belonging to the subject areas of business, management and accounting. The implementation of our search query allowed us to select a dataset of 801 publications. Then, we only included pieces of literature edited in peer-reviewed journals since they are primarily considered to include valuable scientific contribution. After this adjustment, the pool of references amounted to 424 units. Subsequently, we opted to exclude all the content published in journals not ranked in the Academic Journal Guide (AJG) to refine the sample with a representative, rigorous and unbiased lens. This criterion led to a final pool of 325 references. Then, after an independent reading of all the papers left, we excluded 234 pieces of research considered non-relevant to the determinants affecting manufacturers' online channel management choices. Finished the process, the studies considered aligned to our research question were 91.

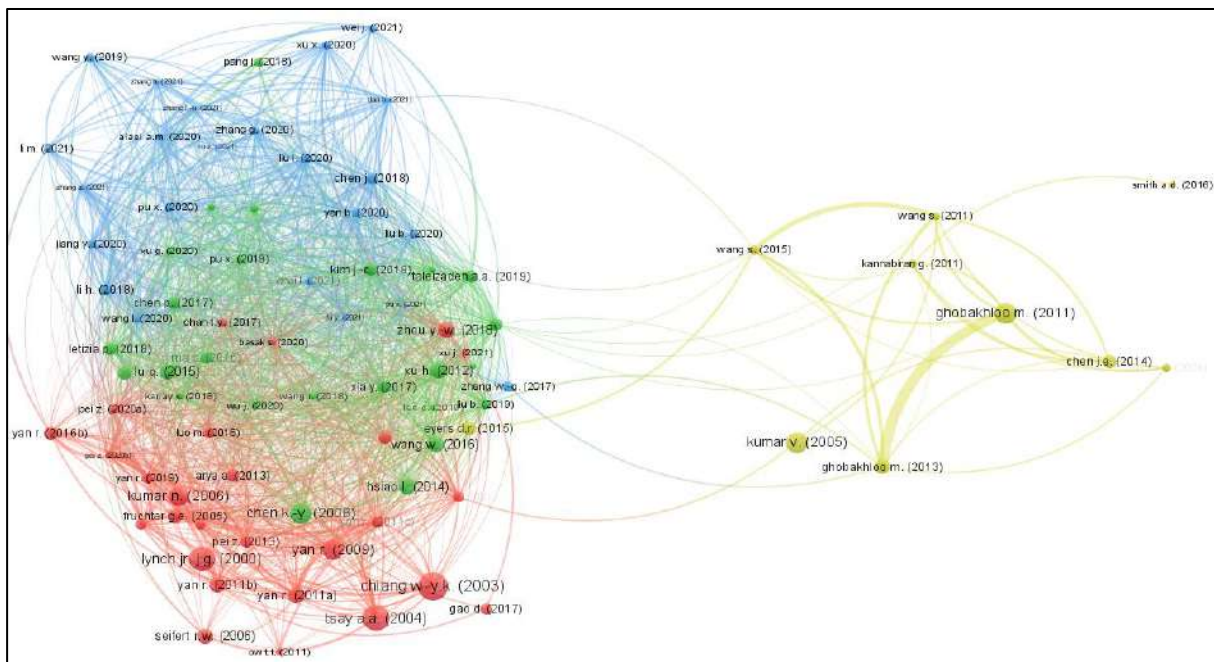


Figure 9: Similarity analysis graphical map

Then we implemented a backward and forward snowballing process intending to check the credibility of the search and the selection. This process was conducted by manually screening the references of all 91 documents and confirmed the reliability of our selection protocols. To analyse the literature's structure and evolution, we investigated some relevant bibliometric indicators (Todeschini and Baccini, 2016). Then, using the software VOSviewer 1.6.10 was conducted a similarity analysis thanks to the software's bibliographic coupling algorithm, on which two contributions are considered to be coupled have one or more common third studies in their bibliography by building a graphical map where each sphere represents a paper, and the papers are split into clusters as a function of the similarity of their references (van Eck and Waltman, 2010). As a result of our similarity analysis, 87 papers were found to

be connected in terms of shared references, forming a graphical structure composed of four clusters whose configurations appearing well defined (figure 1).

## **PRELIMINARY RESULTS**

The year with the highest productivity was 2020, with 15 publications, but just the first quarter of 2021 produced 13 publications, a symptom of the rising managerial and scientific interest in the topic. The distribution between the journals is very balanced, counting 42 journals in total, indicating the multidisciplinary and complexity of the topic, even if the main specific scientific fields covered are production and operations. The distribution of studies per author reveals a restricted number of productive scientists with three or more publications (six), while the distribution by country highlights that the scientific production is mainly focused in US and China (countries with high online channel market penetration), representing the 88% of the total. The yellow cluster focuses on the barriers and enablers companies face when introducing online selling. The green cluster deepens the logistic side of the electronic commerce distribution. The red cluster faces the conflict issue between online and offline channels. The blue cluster focuses on the possibilities of manufacturers and retailers synergies and the different online distribution options.

## **CONTRIBUTION**

The original value of the proposed study is that it consists of the first one to deeply analyse the literature facing the electronic commerce channel management under the manufacturer's perspective by providing three different pieces of contribution to literature and practitioners. First, the study provides bibliographic statistics enabling a clearer vision of the worldwide distribution of the research topic, its development and its trends. Second, a profound content analysis of each of the four identified clusters by highlighting the advancement status of the scientific research on each subfield of the topic of interest and a synthesis of the key concepts is executed. Finally, the study draws future research avenues aroused from possible gap left by extant literature. In particular, although we are still in a preliminary phase, the foreplay content analysis conducted up to this stage of the work can identify already two main avenues that scholars have not yet beaten. The first is the identification of the critical organisational and technical capabilities influencing the online channel management performances. The latter is the research on the several kinds of electronic commerce platforms and approaches and their influence on manufacturer's performance in both the online and offline channel under different endogenous or exogenous conditions and factors. Lastly, the most common and cited pieces of literature are purposing either conceptual works or other game theories; little research has been

conducted with real primary data, and we suggest future researchers could opt for quantitative methodologies for further investigation.

*Keywords: Digital commerce; eCommerce; Electronic Commerce; Online Channel; Channel Management; Digital distribution; Manufacturer; Systematic Review*

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