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COVID-19 pandemic: advancing international marketing theory and guiding practice

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper has a dual purpose. The first is to provide a thorough analysis of developments in international marketing in relation to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic; the second is to capitalize on these developments to set an agenda for future research in the field of international marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper zooms in on and reviews the 18 papers published in International Marketing Review's (IMR) Special Issue on "Covid 19: advancing international marketing theory and guiding practice" (2023, volume 40, issue 5). It also integrates recent research at the intersection of international marketing and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings – The paper highlights five areas that embody significant contemporaneous changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and affect international marketing practice. These include (1) shifts in consumer behavior, (2) digitalization and artificial intelligence, (3) disruptions in supply chains, (4) communication and corporate social responsibility (CSR), and (5) international dynamic marketing capabilities. In order to advance international marketing theory in relation to pandemics and other external crises, the paper establishes research directions for each of these areas.

Originality/value – The paper provides a novel and comprehensive categorization of fundamental shifts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and lays out a research roadmap to advance research in the field of International Marketing (IM). Important implications for practice are also discussed.

Keywords International marketing, COVID-19 pandemic, Pandemic crises, External crises, International business

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

International marketing has long grappled with the effects of global crises, such as natural disasters, economic downturns and political unrest (Davvetas *et al.*, 2022; Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023). However, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought a unique set of challenges to the forefront that are significantly reshaping international marketing strategies and global consumer behavior (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023; Jeong *et al.*, 2023; Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023; Verhoef *et al.*, 2023). Due to the prolonged lockdowns and health concerns, the



pandemic caused a dramatic shift in global consumer behavior, which increased e-commerce and online shopping (Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023). As a result, digital marketing and digital platforms have become more crucial in reaching global consumers, helping international businesses to adapt to the pandemic by changing the way goods and services are marketed and sold globally (Alber and Dabour, 2020; Jeong *et al.*, 2023; Song *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, supply chain disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have compelled international businesses to reevaluate their international marketing strategies, looking more closely at locally sourced goods (Bonadio *et al.*, 2021; Sharma *et al.*, 2020) and shifting to servitization (Behl *et al.*, 2023) to reduce risks and sustain customer relationships. The pandemic also led to changes in international marketing communication, shifting attention to crisis communication and key messages centered on health, safety, and social responsibility (Farmaki *et al.*, 2023; Hesse *et al.*, 2021). Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of agility and adaptability, leading organizations to develop dynamic capabilities in international marketing (Ciszewska-Mlinarič *et al.*, 2024; Kannappan, 2020) to effectively adapt to the changing business landscape.

Within an international environment that has been significantly re-shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, Multinational Enterprises (MNEs), global brands, International New Ventures (INVs) and international small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) must learn how to manage unique and unpredictable challenges, and international marketing research and practice has a significant role to play from a variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, the field of international marketing, which has so far amassed knowledge on other types of crises, such as geopolitical incidents (international incidents between countries) (Heslop *et al.*, 2008; Maher and Mady, 2010), economic crises (Williams and Martinez, 2012) and product-harm crises (Barbarossa *et al.*, 2018; Gao *et al.*, 2015), lacks sufficient understanding regarding the potential effects, problems, and solutions to virus-related global crises. The characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis are unique and unheralded (Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023; Verhoef *et al.*, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic may have had a greater impact on global business than any other global crisis in recorded history (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023; Jeong *et al.*, 2023). Its effects on international marketing theory and practice may be game-changing, requiring both the reassessment of knowledge from past crises and the acquisition of new knowledge. Accordingly, the need for research insights to inform international marketing theory and practice is of great importance for several reasons. As we gain more empirical knowledge on this phenomenon, we will be in a better position to theorize about and comprehend better the widespread disruptions that pandemics can produce and how these can influence international marketing strategies. Theoretically, this new body of knowledge is significant because it can be used to develop predictive models that can help in forecasting the potential impact of future pandemics on international marketing. It can also serve as a basis for creating or expanding theories to interpret the idiosyncratic impact of pandemic crises on international marketing decisions and strategies. However, this body of knowledge can also have important ramifications for international businesses, helping them prepare for future pandemics. Such insights can provide implications on how international businesses can adjust their international marketing strategies to mitigate pandemic risks and flexibly respond to meet the changing market needs during pandemics. In addition, international businesses can better understand how to incorporate emerging technologies in their marketing strategies, develop marketing-specific dynamic capabilities, and use a range of other marketing tactics to remain responsive and resilient in the face of disruptions caused by pandemics.

The present paper zooms in on and reviews the 18 papers published in IMR's Special Issue on "Covid 19: advancing international marketing theory and guiding practice" (2023, volume 40, issue 5) in order to map international marketing challenges in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and provide directions for future IM research. It also incorporates the latest research at the intersection of international marketing and the COVID-19 pandemic. Our

work provides two important contributions to the field of international marketing. First, we identify five areas that embody significant contemporaneous changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and affect international marketing practice. Second, we lay out a research roadmap to advance theory in the field of IM in each of these areas.

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on international marketing

International marketing has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Griffith and Yalcinkaya, 2023). Global consumer behavior, supply chains and markets have all seen substantial shifts as a result, forcing businesses to drastically adjust their international marketing strategies and tactics (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023; Jeong *et al.*, 2023; Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023; Verhoef *et al.*, 2023). We have identified five areas, which represent important changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and are influencing international marketing practice. In the following sections, we discuss these shifts and their implications for international marketing strategies and tactics. These are summarized in Table 1.

Shifts in consumer behavior: International marketing studies shed light on the presence of changing consumer behaviors on a global basis, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023; Jeong *et al.*, 2023; Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023; Verhoef *et al.*, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on consumers' lives around the world (Sheth, 2020; Zheng *et al.*, 2021). Consumer behaviors have changed due to the prolonged time of isolation, social and physical distancing restrictions, and the financial consequences of rising unemployment and income loss (Jeong *et al.*, 2023; Riefler *et al.*, 2023; Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023). These changes have affected everything from how consumers work to how they make purchases (Verhoef *et al.*, 2023). Globally, there have been notable shifts in consumer behavior, such as the rapid shift from in-store to online shopping, which were mostly due to physical distance restrictions (Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023). Customers' preferences have changed in favor of healthier products due to growing concerns about food safety (Jeong *et al.*, 2023) and rising demands for improving their personal well-being (Hüttel and Balderjahn, 2022; Wood, 2022). Evidence also shows that the pandemic decreased consumer spending on personal luxury products (Park and Tarquini-Poli, 2021). Conversely, consumers have increased their demand and stockpiling for fast-moving goods like groceries, food and beverages, hygiene and personal-care products in an effort to reduce their fear and uncertainty about the pandemic (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2022; Debata *et al.*, 2020; Niros *et al.*, 2023). Other studies also reveal a significant shift in consumer preferences away from sustainable consumption, as consumers seek to purchase more to compensate for the pandemic's constraints and unmet needs (Hüttel and Balderjahn, 2022).

As a result of these shifts in consumer behavior, many businesses had to change and adapt their international marketing strategies and tactics. For example, a lot of international businesses created online stores or adopted digital platforms to sell their goods and maintain customer contact, which will continue to be crucial permanent channels in the future (Alber and Dabour, 2020; Jeong *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, international marketing strategies shifted to the consideration of online promotion channels and higher investment in social media marketing (Nikbin *et al.*, 2022). Crick and Crick (2020) found that the surge in demand for fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) encouraged collaborative business-to-business international marketing strategies amongst major retailers to share data about inventory levels, coordinate closure times (to facilitate cleaning and inventory replenishment), gain access to supply chain networks and lend staff members to competitors' stores.

Digitalization and AI: The COVID-19 pandemic brought a drastic move to digitalization (Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2022; Luo, 2022), involving businesses adopting digital technologies such as cloud computing, robotics, smartphones, artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain and the Internet of Things (IoT) to transform aspects of their value chains

COVID-19 shifts		International marketing [strategic] implications	
1	Shifts in global consumer behavior	- Shift from in-store to online shopping - Lower consumer expenditure - Favor of more health-conscious products - Reduced demand for personal luxury goods - Increased demand for fast-moving consumer goods	- Shift to online channels to sell goods and keep customer contact - Investments in digital and social media marketing - Collaborative b2b international marketing strategies Ahmadi <i>et al.</i> (2022), Alber and Dabour (2020), Crick and Crick (2020), Griffith and Yalcinkaya (2023), Jeong <i>et al.</i> (2023), Nikbin <i>et al.</i> (2022), Riefler <i>et al.</i> (2023), Wood (2022)
2	Digitalization and AI	- Value chains and business models go digital - Remote work - Online consumer purchases - E-commerce firms and digital platforms enhance their sales - Use of digitalization in internationalization - Enhanced cybersecurity measures	- Reliance on online channels to reach global consumers - Enhanced digital channels for customer support - Investments in AI and Machine Learning (ML) - Personalized marketing campaigns - Investment in mobile marketing - Engaging in social media content Behl <i>et al.</i> (2023), Brough <i>et al.</i> (2023), Chatterjee <i>et al.</i> (2023), Chopdar <i>et al.</i> (2022), Dirsehan and Cankat (2021), Lee <i>et al.</i> (2022), Wei <i>et al.</i> (2023), Zahoor and Lew (2023)
3	Disruptions in supply chains	- Bottlenecks and disruptions of global supply chains - Disruptions in manufacturing of commodities – plant closures - Trade was significantly affected - Challenges in sourcing raw materials, components and products	- Diversification, onshoring and regionalization of supply chains - Switch to hybrid offerings - Increased servitization by global manufacturers - Satiation marketing strategies Behl <i>et al.</i> (2023), Bonadio <i>et al.</i> (2021), Finkenstadt <i>et al.</i> (2022), Niros <i>et al.</i> (2023), Shih and Lin (2022), Zahoor <i>et al.</i> (2023)
4	Communication and CSR	- Consumers use multiple sources to get informed on COVID-19 - Fake news” pose a threat - Social media emerge as a core crisis information channel - Global consumer sensitivity toward social media content - Global consumers place a high value on CSR from firms - Firms’ misleading CSR communication (e.g. greenwashing)	- Adaptation of social media content to demonstrate solidarity; offer support; gain credibility - Global communication campaigns centered on CSR. - Use of tactics to communicate “honest” CSR engagement Ahmad <i>et al.</i> (2023), Attig <i>et al.</i> (2023), Edelman (2020), Farmaki <i>et al.</i> (2023), Hesse <i>et al.</i> (2021), Iveson <i>et al.</i> (2023), Özturan and Grinstein (2022)

Table 1.
COVID-19 pandemic
shifts and international
(continued) marketing implications

COVID-19 shifts		International marketing [strategic] implications	
5	Dynamic capabilities	• Need for firms to develop dynamic capabilities to survive the pandemic • Organizations need to amend their marketing practices rapidly to cope with COVID-19	• MNEs/global brands should invest in developing international dynamic marketing capabilities [IDMCs] • IDMCs help international firms adapt products overseas • IDMCs require enhancing international marketing, Operations and dynamic routines • IDMCs can facilitate. Entrepreneurial bricolage by INVs and international SMEs

Buccieri *et al.* (2020), Ciszewska-Mlinarič *et al.* (2024), Ding *et al.* (2022), Donbesuur *et al.* (2023), Ozanne *et al.* (2022), Pfajfar *et al.* (2024a, b), Zahoor and Lew (2023)

Table 1. Source(s): Authors own creation

and business models into digital platforms (Soto-Acosta, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis also stressed the need for companies to make strategic decisions based on the most accurate and latest data, by engaging more closely with advanced modern technologies guided by AI (Gupta *et al.*, 2020; Kumar, 2021). It also drew special attention to contactless, self-service technologies (SSTs). These are “technological interfaces that enable customers to produce a service independent of direct service employee involvement” (Meuter *et al.*, 2000, p. 50) and include automated teller machines, self-service kiosks, self-scanning devices and self-checkouts. Additionally, because of the pandemic’s shift toward increased digitalization, contemporary organizations are starting to designate a new top managerial role – the chief digital officer (CDO) – to lead their digital transformation (Christofi, 2024).

Within a short time period, the pandemic led employees, consumers and businesses to switch to the use of digital technologies to work, consume, and provide products and/or services (Luo, 2022; Shirmohammadi *et al.*, 2022). Lockdowns, national border closures and quarantines, among other restrictions implemented by national authorities, compelled numerous businesses to digitize their business models to continue operating safely and uninterrupted (Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2021). Businesses maintaining online platforms have enhanced their dominance in the market as people were reluctant or restricted to make physical purchases out of fear of infection (Lee *et al.*, 2022). As a consequence, several global e-commerce giants such as Alibaba and Amazon have seen a surge in their sales and profits (Bhatti *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, studies highlight that businesses have been spurred by COVID-19 to embrace and increase their usage of digitalization as they pursue internationalization (Crespo *et al.*, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2023). Lee *et al.* (2022) found that the use of foreign social network services and B2B digital platforms by SMEs during the pandemic could contribute more positively to their internationalization endeavors. Other studies highlight that international firms such as MNEs could achieve better firm performance and value creation from the use of AI analytics and digital technology during the COVID-19 pandemic (Attah-Boakye *et al.*, 2023). Another dimension of digitalization by international businesses being triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic was the remote work for employees

(Shirmohammadi *et al.*, 2022). The pandemic pushed MNEs to adopt digital collaboration and communication tools such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and cloud-based work tools to enable employees to work seamlessly and to ensure business continuity (Mark *et al.*, 2022; Schmidtner *et al.*, 2021). Yet, at the same time, the overreliance on digital technologies for remote work and operations led many MNEs to implement cybersecurity measures and use secure Virtual Private Network (VPN) services to protect their data (Baz *et al.*, 2021; Lallie *et al.*, 2021).

International marketing could not continue to operate in the same way in the face of pandemic-induced digitalization. In the context of increased digitalization by firms, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many MNEs have incorporated enhanced digital considerations within their international marketing strategies (Behl *et al.*, 2023; Zahoor and Lew, 2023). Given the physical restrictions and lockdowns brought on by the pandemic, international marketers have been increasingly relying on online channels such as e-commerce platforms, social media and digital advertising to reach global consumers (Farmaki *et al.*, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, digital channels for customer support became a key component of international marketing efforts (Akter *et al.*, 2023; Shankar *et al.*, 2022). Chatbots and digital assistants have been introduced by many firms to ensure that customer support remains undisrupted (Brough *et al.*, 2023; Farooq *et al.*, 2021). Other international companies adopted artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms to facilitate data-driven marketing, with a focus on big data analytics to streamline customer service and develop more personalized marketing campaigns to targeted global audiences (Barari *et al.*, 2023; Vlačić *et al.*, 2021).

Research also highlights the increased consideration of mobile devices, mobile applications and mobile marketing by international firms during the pandemic to engage their customers in online shopping while safeguarding a smooth user experience (Chopdar *et al.*, 2022; Dirsehan and Cankat, 2021). International marketing strategies now rely heavily on digital content marketing, which involves the marketing of products using digital technologies for both the product's distribution and its entity (Rowley, 2008). In order to interact with their global audiences, international businesses create educational, timely and engaging content, which is effectively distributed over social media platforms (Santiago *et al.*, 2022; Wei *et al.*, 2023).

Disruptions in supply chains: Supply chains have been increasingly globalized and dispersed in recent years (Kano *et al.*, 2020), exhibiting remarkable resilience in the face of environmental disturbances (Xu *et al.*, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, put supply chain resilience and its advancement toward globalization in jeopardy (Magableh, 2021). In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, global supply networks experienced significant bottlenecks and disruptions (Sharma *et al.*, 2020; Soundararajan *et al.*, 2021) both at the source and destination (Magableh, 2021). Lockdowns and virus containment measures led to plant closures and worker shortages, which negatively affected the manufacturing of commodities (Di Stefano *et al.*, 2022; Sheffi, 2021). Trade was significantly affected because of the pandemic-related border closures and air and sea travel restrictions (Griffith and Yalcinkaya, 2023; Xu *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, businesses found it challenging to source a wide range of raw materials, intermediate goods, components and finished products from overseas vendors (Sheffi, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, the pandemic increased global consumer demand for a number of goods, such as personal protective equipment, medical supplies, food and groceries which put a further strain on supply chains, leading to relevant shortages of these products (Micheli *et al.*, 2021; Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023).

While MNEs have used complex global value chains for decades as an effective means to organize their activities and serve their market across the globe (Sharma *et al.*, 2020; Verbeke, 2020), the pandemic is prompting these organizations to rethink their sourcing strategies (Bonadio *et al.*, 2021; Shih and Lin, 2022). Diversification, onshoring and regionalization of

supply chains emerge as possible solutions to deal with global supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic (Bonadio *et al.*, 2021; Sharma *et al.*, 2020). These developments are also making MNEs rethink their international marketing strategies. For instance, to mitigate the pandemic-related global supply chain disruptions, many MNEs have added services to their value proposition and switched to hybrid offerings (Behl *et al.*, 2023). Global manufacturers rushed to integrate services into their product offerings, realizing that this servitization shift becomes essential in sustaining customer relationships and in maintaining their firm's resilience in the face of the pandemic and other upcoming disruptive events (Zahoor *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, studies suggest that MNEs can effectively respond to supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic by implementing certainty satiation marketing strategies (Finkenstadt *et al.*, 2022). According to Handfield and Finkenstadt (2023), certainty satiation marketing involves using marketing as an education and market demand management strategy during supply chain disruptions. The goal is to persuade consumers to reduce demand for the common good of humanity and help the market reach a rational equilibrium (Finkenstadt *et al.*, 2022).

Communication and CSR: The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that consumers wish to get informed from a variety of sources during major health emergencies because they are wary of relying solely on one source and are aware of the possibility of "fake news" (Edelman, 2020). As a result, social media served as one of the main channels where global consumers could obtain information about the pandemic (Hesse *et al.*, 2021). In this context, studies highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a higher global consumer sensitivity toward social media content, including brand communication (Dineva *et al.*, 2023; Farmaki *et al.*, 2023; Hesse *et al.*, 2021). Hence, many international companies have adapted their digital content on social media to align with the needs and feelings of consumers during the pandemic (Dineva *et al.*, 2023; Hesse *et al.*, 2021; Iveson *et al.*, 2023). Studies highlight that MNEs and global brands involved the COVID-19 pandemic in their digital content marketing through social media (Farmaki *et al.*, 2023; Hesse *et al.*, 2021) in three major ways: (1) to demonstrate solidarity by sharing images and videos of their donations of funds, goods and services for charitable purposes during the pandemic; (2) to provide support in tangible and psychological way, by offering product discounts and displaying optimism to motivate their community to overcome their anxiety and fears; and (3) to gain credibility by sharing information on government virus control measures such as social distancing, lockdowns and mask mandates, and by educating the society on how to protect themselves from the virus (Hesse *et al.*, 2021).

Since the pandemic made consumers throughout the world place a high value on corporate social responsibility (CSR), many MNEs modified their international marketing strategies to incorporate global communication campaigns centered around CSR (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; Farmaki *et al.*, 2023; Özturan and Grinstein, 2022). Ahmad *et al.* (2023) highlight that CSR communication during the pandemic was difficult for businesses because customers often viewed their CSR efforts with mistrust and suspicion. Therefore, it became evident that during pandemic crises, marketing strategies need to take into account tactics that enable communication of CSR engagement to the customer in an honest and transparent way (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023; Edelman, 2020). For example, advertising that focuses on how a brand is helping people cope with pandemic-related challenges can be an effective CSR communication tactic (Edelman, 2020). Nevertheless, research indicates that the pandemic caused a number of international firms to engage in misleading CSR communication in an effort to reduce their vulnerability to this shock (Attig *et al.*, 2023). For instance, it was found that several MNEs were engaging in greenwashing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which involved making false or misleading statements about their environmental performance to create favorable perceptions among firm stakeholders and boost their stock price (Attig *et al.*, 2023; Vangeli *et al.*, 2023).

Dynamic capabilities: The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed the need for international firms to develop dynamic capabilities so they can effectively respond to adverse environmental conditions, such as those shaped by the recent pandemic (Ciszewska-Mlinarić *et al.*, 2024; Ozanne *et al.*, 2022). Dynamic capabilities include “the capacity of an organization to purposefully create, extend or modify its resource base” (Helfat *et al.*, 2007, p. 4) to respond to disruptions in the business environment (Teece, 2007). In this context, recent studies highlight that MNEs and other international businesses should invest in developing international dynamic marketing capabilities (IDMCs) (Ciszewska-Mlinarić *et al.*, 2024; Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024a, b; Chatterjee *et al.*, 2024), which involve the abilities of organizations to transform their marketing resources and capabilities to meet changing international market conditions and outperform competition (Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024b). IDMCs, according to Pfajfar *et al.* (2024a), are made up of several complementary capabilities at four key levels: strategic, operational, analytical and value creation. An international firm must, at the strategic level, build a digital international marketing capability to use digital technologies and a dynamic internationalization capability through the development of dynamic learning routines (Gnizy, 2019; Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024a). At the operational level, a firm can achieve operational excellence through IDMCs such as international marketing capability, international marketing excellence and absorptive capacity (Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024a). Analytical IDMCs reinforce an international firm’s resilience through the development of international marketing resilience capability (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023) and international marketing knowledge management capability (Scuotto *et al.*, 2022). Last, value-creation IDMCs drive innovation through an ambidextrous international marketing innovation capability (Buccieri *et al.*, 2020; Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024a).

Research indicates that international companies can enhance their ability to adjust to the high levels of volatility and uncertainty in global markets caused by external crises like the COVID-19 pandemic by creating IDMCs (Bargoni *et al.*, 2023; Ciszewska-Mlinarić *et al.*, 2024; Kannappan, 2020; Ozanne *et al.*, 2022). Evidence shows that export manufacturers that deployed IDMCs during the pandemic could effectively leverage their existing resources and capabilities to engage in product development and/or adaptation to meet changing needs in foreign markets (Ciszewska-Mlinarić *et al.*, 2024). In a study of fast fashion brands, Kannappan (2020) found that such capabilities can enable international businesses to amend their marketing practices rapidly and resiliently to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasingly, it becomes apparent that international firms need to develop IDMCs to be able to formulate marketing skills that are critical to identifying, assessing and seizing international opportunities during adverse external events (Buccieri *et al.*, 2020), including pandemics. IDMCs are also highlighted as critical to younger and smaller firms, which are often resource constraints (Adomako and Ahsan, 2022; Petrou *et al.*, 2020). IDMCs can enable INVs and international SMEs to swiftly modify their constrained resource base, often through entrepreneurial bricolage (Ding *et al.*, 2022; Donbesuur *et al.*, 2023), to address changing customer preferences and develop new value propositions in the face of environmental disruptions (Buccieri *et al.*, 2020).

Contributions to the special issue on “Covid 19: advancing international marketing theory and guiding practice”

This special issue consists of eighteen articles. In the following sections, we will examine the individual contributions.

Leonidou *et al.* (2023) aim to explain the role of effectively managing the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to stimulate inter-partner creativity. Their findings suggest that satisfaction with the working relationship can be enhanced by improving communication and cooperation, as well as by

keeping conflict and opportunism at low levels. They found that satisfaction with the working relationship is a strong predictor of inter-partner creativity, although less pronounced under high levels of relational distance and rigidity. Further, [Salunkhe et al. \(2023\)](#) offer a strategic framework for handling a crisis that is largely unanticipated and whose duration and impact are unpredictable. The results show that by deploying critical business transformations, firms can ensure firm survival in a pandemic by fostering engagement with customers, employees and resources. Additionally, this study identifies the moderators that influence the relationships between (1) management response and critical business transformations, (2) consumer response and critical business transformations, and (3) critical business transformations.

[Schlegelmilch et al. \(2023\)](#) examine the scope and challenges of using computer-aided content analysis to capture consumer sentiments about COVID-19 from different tweets. The authors have concluded that extracted consumer sentiments and associated emotions show substantial differences across countries. This analysis highlights opportunities and challenges inherent in using multi-lingual online sentiment analysis in international marketing. [Ghosh and Islam \(2023\)](#) explore how “homefluencers” sponsored posts on millennial consumers’ purchase intention can be impacted in the new normal by drawing on source credibility, parasocial interaction (PSI) and persuasion knowledge model (PKM) theory. According to their findings, advertising recognition strongly mediates purchase intention with the indirect effects of expertise and trustworthiness rather than attractiveness.

[Niros et al. \(2023\)](#) propose marketing strategies for global FMCG brands to survive in the turbulent environment created by COVID-19. The authors investigate the indirect effects of consumer ethnocentrism (CET) and consumer confidence (CC) on customer equity drivers (CEDs) effectiveness in influencing repurchase intention (RI) for global FMCG brands. Their results suggest that CET and CC weaken the positive relationship between certain CEDs and RI of FMCG brands. [Khan \(2023\)](#) takes a new compositional-based theoretical perspective and examines the phenomenon of how emerging market firms can differentiate their offerings in advanced export markets in order to achieve a better strategic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The author concludes that compositional collaboration capabilities positively influence the differentiation strategies and marketing performance of emerging exporting firms conducting business in advanced host markets.

[Griffith and Yalcinkaya \(2023\)](#) looked at the influence that nation-states can have on the engagement of international marketing activities and concluded that heterogeneity in nation-state formal and informal institutional elements affects international marketing activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Zahoor and Lew \(2023\)](#) examine to what extent the strategic flexibility of international strategic alliances (ISAs) affects the export performance of emerging small- and medium-sized enterprises (ESMEs) via international marketing capability in crises. Their findings suggest that the strategic flexibility of ISAs positively affects the export performance of ESMEs in crises, while international marketing significantly mediates the relationship between the strategic flexibility of ISAs and the export performance of ESMEs.

[Wei et al. \(2023\)](#) address the impact of the source of the content in social media and the content distribution intensity on consumer-based brand equity dimensions, and how this will eventually impact purchase intention during the pandemic. The results of their study show that emotional-based brand equity dimensions (brand association and brand loyalty) influence purchase intentions, while there is no association between attribution-based brand equity dimensions (perceived quality, brand trust and brand awareness) and buying intentions. [Ahmad et al. \(2023\)](#) investigate empirically the role of in-kind charitable contribution in creating an attribution of CSR to intrinsic motives. This study provides novel insights into how consumer behavior differs across two significantly different cultures with regard to COVID-19-related CSR. The findings illustrate that retailers’ in-kind charitable contribution is a significant driver of consumers’ attribution of CSR to intrinsic motives, and

attribution of CSR to intrinsic motives has a positive effect on consumer brand-self connection. Both the cultural values, self-transcendence and conservation, moderate the relationship between the attribution of CSR to intrinsic motives and brand-self connection.

Priporas and Vellore-Nagarajan (2023) aim to identify new-normal uncertainty considerations stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic to consider transaction-cost analysis for pharmaceuticals. They conclude that uncertainty is different now in the new-normal business environment for pharmaceuticals and boils down to the acute shortage of knowledge and information impact to make an appropriately informed decision. Therefore, pharmaceuticals need to be able to undertake market entry with vaccines and medicines by way of IoT. Dineva *et al.* (2023) address the sources of consumer-to-consumer conflicts and gain insight into the corresponding conflict moderation strategies that international brands adopt. The authors identify five C2C conflict sources (brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, brand skepticism, brand contention and brand defense) and several moderation strategies (non-engaging, automated, bolstering, asserting [direct, indirect]) and informing (factual, empathetic and apologetic), which are broadly categorized into two levels based on their passive versus active approach and authoritative versus cooperative orientation.

Matarazzo and Diamantopoulos (2023) examine the relevance of reactance theory for modeling consumer responses to COVID-19 restrictions. The analysis demonstrates the shortcomings of the intertwined model of reactance in its current/traditional form and draws attention to other model specifications that provide just as good statistical fit and offer promising alternative ways of modeling reactance in a COVID-19 context. Chatterjee *et al.* (2023) explore the role of artificial intelligence integrated with social customer relationship management in MNEs toward international relationship management under social distancing conditions. This study highlights the importance and means of adopting AI-integrated social CRM by MNEs, in the context of international relationship management, under the COVID-19 social distancing conditions.

Farmaki *et al.* (2023) analyze the CSR communication of the Fortune top-100 companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors examine the messages of international companies' CSR communication to customers, focusing particularly on the companies' posts on Twitter. The results indicate that COVID-19-related CSR responses of international companies are driven by commitment to organizational values, attainment of recognition for timely response to COVID-19, altruistic motives to combat COVID-19 and congruence with social movements. Jeong *et al.* (2023) look at the experiences of firms that have been impacted by a prior disruptive force and offer five theoretical lenses for framing such events. The results indicate that external forces can bring both opportunities and threats to firms' strategies. The authors found that two strategies help firms cope with managerial issues during a crisis: (1) leveraging opportunities presented by the pandemic through the successive introductions of new products and (2) the expansion of both the domestic and international markets.

Rezaee Vessal *et al.* (2023) investigate the enhancement of attitudes toward a brand through an alliance with a familiar cause and explain this relationship via attitudes toward fit in such an alliance. The results reveal a significant effect of cause familiarity on attitude toward the brand, wherein one's attitude toward fit in a cause-brand alliance serves as a mediator in this relationship. Talón-Ballesteró *et al.* (2023) aim to answer two major research questions: What is the revenue management (RM) role during the different periods subject to analysis? What are the RM strategies and measures implemented during this crisis in contrast with a non-crisis context? The authors propose a model, which considers the various RM strategies and measures implemented during COVID-19 in contrast to a non-crisis context. This model is the cornerstone for developing a graded contingency plan to face future crises.

Future avenues

Further development of international marketing theory in the context of global external crises, especially pandemics, is essential. It can assist marketing practitioners in becoming more prepared and proactive to face future pandemics and other disruptive events and help their firms remain resilient. Notably, while extant marketing studies explored a company's responses to international incidents, economic and product-harm crises at depth, international marketing knowledge regarding the effects and solutions to virus-related pandemic crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) is limited. Future research must address real-world scenarios linked to effective marketing strategies during times of high uncertainty (especially virus-related crises), advance international marketing frameworks and provide lessons from the COVID-19 crisis. In this paper, we highlight future research directions for international marketing scholars, which are linked to the five categories of COVID-19 pandemic shifts, which were identified and discussed earlier.

Shifts in global consumer behavior: Recent studies highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic has altered global consumer behavior and purchasing patterns (Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023; Verhoef *et al.*, 2023). A lot of these changes, such as the shift to online shopping (Salunkhe *et al.*, 2023) and the preference for more health-conscious products (Jeong *et al.*, 2023), will remain in place. International marketing research, however, has yet to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the shifts in consumer behavior associated with pandemics. Additionally, it still lacks sufficient understanding of what consumer changes are likely to be pervasive and/or enduring in the post-pandemic age. To address these gaps, future international marketing research should analyze in-depth the changes in consumer behavior brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic across national markets and facilitate comparative analyses to determine which changes are more widespread and which are likely to last. Preferably, this research should draw on qualitative cross-national investigations. This will allow examining whether changes in consumer behavior associated with the pandemic are universal or whether there are cross-national differences that matter (Sheth, 2020).

Further, the overwhelming majority of past studies on the COVID-19 pandemic are cross-sectional, and this did not allow the monitoring of changes in consumer attitudes and behavior at different phases of the development of this pandemic crisis or the comparison between the pandemic and post-pandemic consumer behaviors. Future studies could investigate these shifts in the context of future pandemics and other major crises by setting longitudinal studies to dynamically examine the changes in consumer behavior over time. Longitudinal studies would take into account various events/milestones in the course of a pandemic. Further, most of the international marketing studies on COVID-19 used a quantitative approach. Although the latter does shed light on the behavioral dynamics of consumers, qualitative research could provide additional interesting insights into this phenomenon. Future studies could set a series of qualitative case studies that would offer in-depth information about the transformations in global consumer behavior during extraordinary crisis periods such as pandemics.

Given these developments, future research could also consider consumer characteristics as factors influencing consumer attitudes and behavior during a pandemic. Consumer characteristics that have so far received minimal research attention are personality traits and individual cultural orientations. The construct of personality rests on the assumption that individuals possess inherent characteristics that are remarkably stable throughout life (McCrae and Costa, 1985). Personality traits reflect people's characteristic patterns of feelings and thoughts which are likely to play an important role in determining one's consumer behavior at the time of crisis. Similarly, culture might have a strong effect on consumer reactions to a pandemic. Hofstede's framework is the most established theory of cultural dimensions that accounts for the effects of a society's culture on the values of its members, and how these values relate to their behavior (Hofstede, 1980). Although Hofstede's

dimensions have been widely used at the country level, few past studies indicate that individuals in the same country also differ in their cultural orientations, which is related to the differences in how they assimilate the culture of the society to which they belong (Leonidou *et al.*, 2019). Thus, future research in international marketing could evaluate culture and its effects at the individual rather than the national level to capture cultural variations among customers in terms of buyer choices during a pandemic within the same country more accurately.

Digitalization and AI: While businesses have always used technology to process data in order to achieve their strategic marketing goals and respond strategically to external crises, more recent technological advancements related to AI, blockchain and the IoT, amongst other things, call for a deeper understanding of the adoption of data-driven approach. A data-driven approach can offer real-time information and the ability to make informed marketing decisions, which can help businesses deal with global crises like pandemics (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2024). This suggests that major avenues for future international marketing research are the identification of (1) the types of digital or emerging technologies that are instrumental in allowing organizations to adopt a data-driven approach to cope with external crises, and (2) the types of data to be harnessed by digital technologies to allow a company to develop and implement effective marketing strategies at the times of crisis.

Regarding the types of technologies, future exploratory studies could investigate which emerging technologies such as AI, ML, IoT, blockchain and AR/VR, need to be integrated together to enable businesses to harness the full potential of data and make informed marketing decisions during pandemics, which can allow them to address the changing consumer behaviors, optimize communication strategies and cope with other market challenges. Future studies might also explore the potential applications of generative AI (Kshetri *et al.*, 2023; Vaid *et al.*, 2023) in the analysis of large volumes of data from diverse markets to identify evolving consumer needs and preferences, as well as customizing international marketing strategies and offerings.

Concerning the types of data, future exploratory marketing research should focus on obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the various data types and data combinations that can be harnessed with the use of emerging technologies, to help organizations make informed marketing decision-making during pandemics. There are different types of data that can be used to address pandemics, such as real-time epidemiological data (e.g. infection rates), healthcare data, demographic data, socio-economic data and consumer behavioral data. Hence, future research should explore the optimal types, blends, and levels of data that are essential for effective international marketing strategies and strategic responses during pandemics. In addition to this, international marketing researchers should focus on determining the right blend of qualitative and quantitative data to allow international businesses to effectively address marketing challenges in foreign markets, as well as the advanced technologies that can be used to collect and analyze such data in an effective manner.

Disruptions in supply chains: Supply chain disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are making MNEs rethink their international marketing strategies (Behl *et al.*, 2023; Zahoor *et al.*, 2023). Although certain MNEs have adapted to these disruptions by shifting toward servitization and introducing hybrid products (Behl *et al.*, 2023), this is a strategic move that is yet to be sufficiently explored and understood. Future studies can look at how MNEs use servitization as a crisis-management marketing strategy or tactic in international markets. Additionally, they can explore the role of digital technologies in enabling servitization, the development of hybrid offerings, the adoption of service-centric approaches, and the ways in which servitization is facilitating adaptation in foreign markets during pandemics and other crises. Quantifying the effect of servitization on the marketing performance and resilience of MNEs can be aided by future quantitative research.

Furthermore, despite the fact that “certainty satiation marketing strategies” (Finkenzadt *et al.*, 2022; Handfield and Finkenzadt, 2023) have been found to be effective during supply chain disruptions, little is known about how this type of strategy can be applied and used in the event of a pandemic. Future qualitative research endeavors can explore this type of strategy further, with the aim of understanding how satiation marketing strategies can function as a means of educating consumers and controlling market demand amid supply chain disruptions resulting from pandemics and other major crises. Quantitative studies may contribute to the development and validation of satiation marketing strategy scales, laying the groundwork for subsequent investigations that may test the impact of this type of strategy on the international performance and resilience of MNEs during crises.

Communication and CSR: The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a significant shift in the communication practices and strategies of international businesses (Dineva *et al.*, 2023; Edelman, 2020). Recent studies highlight the heavy reliance of MNEs and global brands on social media and digital channels for communication with customers during the pandemic (Dineva *et al.*, 2023; Hesse *et al.*, 2021) and their emphasis on empathetic and socially responsible messaging during that period (Hesse *et al.*, 2021). While it was found that the COVID-19 pandemic had idiosyncratic effects on the customer communication of international businesses (Farmaki *et al.*, 2023), this is a phenomenon that merits further investigation. Hence, it is important that future research is directed toward gaining a deeper understanding of the communication patterns, strategies, and media that MNEs employ to communicate and engage with their customers during pandemics and other types of crises. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic led MNEs and global brands to concentrate their communication efforts on contemporary social issues, such as social inequality (Luiggi-Hernández and Rivera-Amador, 2020), racial discrimination (Woo and Jun, 2022) and poverty (Ataguba and Ataguba, 2020), future IM research must incorporate more theories and concepts from the sociology and psychology disciplines to explain how corporate communication strategies can effectively address critical social and psychological issues during crises, like pandemics. Simultaneously, it would be interesting to investigate how MNEs and global brands might integrate contemporary social issues into their communication strategies without being negatively perceived by consumers.

Moreover, comparing the results of different types of crises could be an intriguing direction for future research to ascertain how pandemics differ from other crises in terms of their effects on customer communication and how MNEs should adapt their communication strategies to account for the peculiarities of different crisis types. Concerning the use of social media for customer communication, sentiment analysis of social media data (Yue *et al.*, 2019; Zachlod *et al.*, 2022), such as Twitter/X posts (Valle-Cruz *et al.*, 2022), can assist international marketing researchers in examining the sentiment conveyed in customer tweets, replies, and shares by customers to understand their perceptions, requirements and concerns during the pandemic. MNEs may find this to have helpful ramifications on how to adapt their communication strategies to address the concerns and needs of their global customers during pandemics (Farmaki *et al.*, 2023). Yet, for analyzing and determining the sentiment expressed in social media data, marketing researchers must collaborate with researchers from other fields who are accustomed to using natural language processing tools like Python and training ML algorithms to better understand and classify customer sentiments.

Further, in the context of customer communication during pandemics, the issue of communicating social or responsible initiatives becomes crucial to MNE performance (Farmaki *et al.*, 2023). Limited research, however, has focused on MNEs’ CSR communication during pandemics and how consumers react to such communication messages. These gaps offer numerous opportunities for future research. Future research can draw on sentiment analysis of MNEs’ social media posts to better understand their CSR communication patterns and strategies, while also examining customer reactions and/or responses to such

communications. Future work can also compare the CSR marketing communication strategies of companies in different sectors and cultural backgrounds to determine cross-industry or cross-national disparities in MNEs' CSR communication in different contexts.

Dynamic capabilities: Research highlights that IDMCs become essential for MNEs to remain resilient and/or thrive during pandemic crises (Ciszewska-Mlinarić *et al.*, 2024; Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024b; Chatterjee *et al.*, 2024). However, research in this area is still embryonic, and more studies are required to shed light on the way international organizations can transform their marketing resources to build IDMCs that can meet changing international market requirements during pandemics and other crises (Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024b). Drawing on in-depth investigation, future qualitative research can delve deeply into the processes and practices that enable organizations to build and sustain IDMCs to cope with pandemics and other major external crises. IDMCs can also be tested more sufficiently in future quantitative studies, to understand their impact on outcomes such as international performance during pandemics, the antecedents driving their build-up, or even their moderating or mediating effects during major crises. Future studies at the intersection of IDMCs and pandemics/crises at the strategic, operational, analytical and/or value-creation levels can benefit from the framework developed by Pfajfar *et al.* (2024a). For instance, at the strategic level, future studies can research how digital marketing agility (Hadjielias *et al.*, 2022; Homburg and Wielgos, 2022) can enable international organizations to leverage digital technologies during pandemics to adapt digital marketing strategies to changes in online consumer behavior across the globe. The development of dynamic capabilities in digital agility by international organizations can be the subject of future exploratory research to better understand how to take advantage of the increasing global consumer use of digital channels during pandemics. Other dynamic capabilities that international organizations can nurture at the strategic level to overcome pandemics and other crises include networking (Alinaghian and Razmdoost, 2018; Mitrega *et al.*, 2018) and partnership capabilities (Chang *et al.*, 2015; Lokshin *et al.*, 2011). With the help of these capabilities, MNEs may make the most of their networks, form new partnerships in overseas markets, and adapt existing alliances to create foreign marketing strategies that are responsive to local demands. Future qualitative research can explore the ways in which MNEs might build and use networking and partnership-related dynamic capabilities during crises, and how these capabilities may influence their foreign marketing strategies. Quantitative studies can test the impact of networking and partnership-related dynamic capabilities on the marketing performance of MNEs in the face of unforeseen challenges and on the effectiveness of their marketing-related decision-making in foreign markets.

The above research directions can be extended to other types of crises outside pandemics, such as financial shocks (Carrigan and De Pelsmacker, 2009; Priporas *et al.*, 2019), environmental disasters (Silva *et al.*, 2022), wars and geopolitical conflicts (Korovkin and Makarin, 2023), in a word where multiple types of crises consecutively arise. Nevertheless, different crises have different characteristics including (among others) their scale (e.g. number of countries affected), scope (e.g. issues under crisis' influence), nature (e.g. financial, ecological, health and peace) and management (e.g. locally, globally or collaboratively managed). Future research on these characteristics is warranted, along with our suggested research directions, in order to develop comprehensive theoretical frameworks that can elucidate the ways in which different types of crises are likely to affect international marketing strategies and tactics. Future studies can also contribute to a more thorough theorization of the nuances of the five critical shifts we identified, across different types of crises and enhance their practical understanding for international marketing executives as they strive to consistently navigate across multiple crises.

Conclusions

With a focus on pandemics, this study aimed to support international marketing scholars, executives of MNEs and other international firms, and global brands in navigating, overcoming and learning from global crises. We addressed and analyzed the shifts brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and we developed a research agenda for international marketing that capitalizes on these shifts.

We advance two timely contributions to the field of international marketing. First, we identify five areas that embody significant contemporaneous shifts brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and are affecting international marketing practice. These include (1) shifts in global consumer behavior, (2) digitalization and AI, (3) disruptions in supply chains, (4) communication and CSR, and (5) dynamic capabilities. By connecting these shifts with international marketing literature, we shed light on their implications for international marketing strategies and tactics. Second, we set down an agenda for future research in international marketing that capitalizes on these shifts to enable a methodical exploration of the multifaceted impacts of pandemics on international marketing. A research agenda of this kind is essential to advance the theory of international marketing in relation to pandemics and to identify effective marketing strategies that MNEs and other international businesses can use to effectively respond to pandemics in the future.

Even though our findings and contributions are related to the COVID-19 crisis context, they may also be applicable to other types of crises such as financial shocks, environmental crises, wars and geopolitical conflicts. They can provide useful insights that can advance international marketing theory and practice in a world experiencing several crises on a consecutive basis.

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