

The Exercise of Power Sources in Distribution Channels: A Synthesis Study

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The exercise of power sources is central to the management of channel relations. To help researchers and managers to improve the effectiveness of their efforts, available empirical articles on the exercise of power sources from the period 1974-2014 are synthesized in a meta-analysis. The relationships between different exercised channel powers are generalized. Coercive and legitimate powers are strongly correlated, whilst there are strong relationships among reward, referent, expert, and information powers. Thus, the research proposes that the most reasonable classification of the exercise of channel powers is its dichotomization into coercive power (i.e. coercive and legitimate) and non-coercive power (i.e. reward, referent, expert, and information).

Keywords: meta-analysis, channel power, coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, expert, information

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Introduction

Distribution channels are one of the most important components of any value chain, which significantly contribute to the economic outputs of a nation (Krafft et.al. 2015). Within the distribution channel literature, both academics and managers agree on the central importance of the exercise of power sources in managing the relationships among channel members (Zhuang et.al. 2010). For better execution of its marketing strategies and achieving desired performance, a channel member (i.e., the source firm) initially exercises its power sources to influence the decision variables of another channel member (i.e., the target firm) (Rawwas et.al. 1997). The source firm designs channel influence strategies or tactics based on its power sources, and chooses the most appropriate influence modes/patterns for managing its business relationships (Chang and Huang 2011). At the same time, the target firm is also assumed to want control of the channel to avoid being bound by the source firm's determined strategies.

Generally, researchers categorize power sources into six forms: coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, expert, and information bases (Zhuang et.al. 2010). These power sources can be exercised simultaneously or separately. The exercise of each power source has both its benefits and costs, and certain power sources might hinder the effectiveness of the exercise of other forms (Gaski 1986). Thus, the combination of different power sources should be executed with caution. An extensive review of the channel literature starting from the seminal article of Hunt and Nevin (1974) to 2014 reveals that the most controversial issue is how the various power sources should be combined. So far, there is no consensus on the way to classify power sources and the exercise of power sources. In the marketing channel literature, power sources are usually dichotomized and some most popular dichotomies include coercive vs. non-coercive, mediated vs. non-mediated, and economic vs. noneconomic, and so on. However these dichotomies are considerably different in grouping of the six power sources, and according to Rawwas et.al. (1997), by combining power sources into two groups, much useful information is lost. Moreover, despite the plethora of research on power sources, there is only little attempt to establish a generalization about the classification of exercised channel powers. Given the importance of channel power sources in channel management, a meta-analysis to quantitatively synthesize and systemize all available research evidences and investigate the inter-relationships between different exercised channel powers is worthwhile. This study contributes to the channel power literature by proposing a reasonable dichotomy of the exercise of the different channel powers.

Literature review

Channel power sources

Channel power has been consistently defined as the ability of the source firm to influence the decision variables of marketing strategies of the target firm at a different level in a given distribution channel (Hunt and Nevin, 1974; Zhang et.al. 2010). The power of the source firm over the target firm depends on the power sources (i.e., coercive, legitimate, reward, referent, expert, and information) that are perceived by the target firm (Brown et.al. 1995; Zhuang et.al. 2010). Coercive power originates from the target firm's perception that the source firm has the ability to mediate punishments. With legitimate power, the source firm has a legitimate right to influence the target firm and the target firm is obliged to accept this influence. Reward power is based on the target firm's perception that the source firm can grant rewards for any compliance. Reference power is based upon the target firm's identification with the source firm or upon the target firm's desire to be closely associated with the source firm. Finally, information power refers to the source firm's ability to provide or interpret information that is meaningful and beneficial to the target firm.

Several scholars consider power influence strategies as the exercise or usage of the six power sources, i.e., coercive, legitimate, reward, referent, expert, and information (Brown et.al. 1995; Gaski 1986; Gaski and Nevin 1985). On the other hand, several scholars categorize influence strategies into threats, legalistic pleas, promises, requests, recommendations, and information exchanges (Frazier and Summers 1986; Kale, 1986). These influence strategies are equivalent to the exercise of the aforementioned six power sources (Johnson et al. 1993). Threats means the source firm communicates to the target firm that failing to comply with desired actions will result in negative sanctions. A legalistic plea strategy suggests that the source firm requires the target firm's compliance by formal agreement. Promises refer to the source firm pledging to extend specific rewards contingent on the target firm's compliance. A request strategy refers to the scenario when the source firm informs the target firm of actions it would like the target firm to perform without mentioning specific sanctions or rewards. A recommendation strategy contends to the source firm's suggestions that the target firm should follow some specific actions to improve its profit. Finally, information exchange means the source firm discusses general business issues and broad operating philosophies without making specific statements about what it would like the target firm to do.

Classification of the exercise of channel power sources

Generally, researchers dichotomize the six power influence strategies by a variety of schemata. The dichotomies can be coercive and non-coercive, mediated and non-mediated, economic and noneconomic, and so on (see Table 1). However, in general, coercive, mediated, and economic influence strategies have similar meaning as the source firm imposes harsh sanctions upon the target firm while non-coercive, non-mediated, and noneconomic influence strategies rely mainly on soft measures of granting beneficial assistance to the target firm (Gaski 1986; Hunt and Nevin 1974). The underlying reason for the source firm in a channel dyad to use coercive influence strategies is to change the target firm's beliefs, attitudes or behaviors by putting pressure on the target firm and causing adverse consequences when the target firm is not complying with the source firm's desires (Gaski and Nevin 1985). Thus, coercive influence strategies are the exercise of coercive and legitimate power sources, or the usage of threats, and/or legalistic pleas. On the contrary, the motivation for the source firm to exercise non-coercive influence strategies is to change the target firm's beliefs, attitudes or behaviors by providing the target firm with suggestion or benefits when the target firm is compliant (Gaski 1986). The exercise of reward, referents, experts, and/or information power sources, or the usage of promise, request, recommendation, and information exchanges are thus considered as non-coercive influence strategies.

Table 1: Major dichotomizations of channel power sources

Dichotomizations of power sources	Representative research
Coercive/non-coercive	Chang and Huang 2011; Lai 2007; Hunt and Nevin 1974; Shamdasani et.al. 2001;
Mediated/Non-mediated	Boyle and Dwyer1995; Brown et.al. 1995; Ke et.al 2009
Economic/Noneconomic	Brown et.al. 1983; Etgar 1978; Parsa 1999
Direct/Indirect	Frazier and Summers 1984; Kasulis et.al. 1979
Aggressive/Nonaggressive	Ganesan 1993; Johnson et.al. 1993
Contingent/Non-contingent	Schul and Babakus 1988
Hard/soft powers	Chinomona et.al. 2010
Authorative/Nurturing	Johnson et.al. 1993

Meta-analysis methodology

Collection and coding of studies

The key impetus for the channel power literature was Hunt and Nevin's (1974) seminal article, so this is why the literature search for this meta-analysis covered the period 1974-2014. Empirical studies appearing in the marketing or management literature and reporting on one or more of any pair of the six channel powers were identified by various electronic and manual searches including: (1) Searches from ABI/Global Inform, Business Source Premier, Dissertation Abstracts International databases for key words "power", "control", "influence strategy"; (2) A search of the Social Science Citation Index; (3) Manual shelf searches to review many journals such as the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *Journal of Small Business and Management*, *Journal of Operations Management*, *Journal of Marketing Channels*, so on; and (4) Consultation of the reference sections of all the articles retrieved in the previous searches to identify any studies that might have been overlooked.

Since zero-order Pearson correlations were selected as effect size metric for this meta-analysis, the decision rule to determine the retained studies was that the articles provided Pearson correlation matrices among different channel power sources, use/exercise of power sources or power influence strategies. After that, two independent coders, who were not familiar with the topic, used the definitions specified in this meta-analysis to code the articles, and any differences were resolved through discussions. Moreover, when a single article provided more than one effect size estimate for the same relationship, an average was calculated. In cases in which the multiple effect size estimates from the same article were independent, they were included as separate effect size estimates.

Analysis procedure

After a set of articles was identified, the sample size and correlations between channel powers were recorded. After that, the meta-analysis started with a calculation of the (sample size) weighted average correlation matrix among six channel powers (i.e., coercion, reward, legitimate, referent, expert, and information). Then, the weighted average matrix was input into the Structure Equation Modeling Statistics Software Package (LISREL 8.8). And, finally, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to test/validate the classification of the six channel powers.

Results

As shown in Table 2, the literature search ultimately resulted in 21 independent samples reported in 20 collected articles, with a total of 5,072 surveyed target firms. From these samples, 250 pairwise correlations involving channel powers were combined to calculate the correlation matrix weighted by sample sizes.

Table 2: Review of classification of channel power sources used in past research^a

Study	Sample size	Dichotomization of power sources		Constructs in the research model
		Economic	Non-economic	
Brown et.al. 1983	93	reward, coercive, legitimate	information, expert, referent	economic power, non-economic power, dependence, conflict, power
Frazier and Summers 1984	184	Direct promises, threats, legalistic pleas, request	Indirect information exchange; recommendation	information exchange, requests, recommendation, promises, threats, legalistic pleas
Gaski 1986	238	Power sources: reward, coercive, expert, referent, legitimate.		expert, referent, legitimate power sources; exercised reward/coercive power; power; satisfaction
Kale 1986	51	Influence strategies: promise, threat, legalistic plea, request, information exchange, recommendation.		promise, threat, legalistic plea, request, information exchange, recommendation
Boyle et.al. 1992	686	Influence strategies: promise, threat, legalistic plea, request, information exchange, recommendation		promise, threat, legalistic plea, request, information exchange, recommendation; relationalism
Boyle and Dwyer 1995	314	Mediated promises, threats, legalistic pleas, request	Non-mediated recommendation, information exchange	supplier power, formalization, centralization; recommendation, information exchange, promises, requests, legalistic pleas, threats, supplier power; relationship performance
Brown et. al. 1995a	203	Mediated reward, coercion, legitimate	Non-mediated expert, referent, information	use of mediated power, non-mediate power; normative/instrumental commitment, supplier performance, dealer performance, power asymmetry, line, tenure
Brown et.al. 1995b	78	Mediated reward, coercive, legal legitimate	Non-mediated expert, referent, information, traditional legitimate	use of mediated power sources, non-mediated power sources, power attributions, conflict, satisfaction
Rawwas et.al. 1997	551	Power sources: coercive, reward, referent, expert, legitimate and opportunistic power sources		use ofcoercive/opportunistic/reward/referent/expert/legitimate power sources; use of power, constructive conflict, destructive conflict, satisfaction
Parsa, 1999	141	Economic coercive power and legitimate power	Non-economic information and referent power	economic sources of power; non-economic sources of power; type of implementation; performance, satisfaction,

^a Only research with correlation matrices among channel powers are listed.

Table 2 Cont'd

Study	Sample size	Dichotomization of power sources		Constructs in the research model
		Coercive	Non-coercive	
Shamdasani et.al. 2001	62	threats, legalistic pleas, promises	request, recommendation, information exchange	manufacturer's power; recommendation, request, information exchange, threat, legalistic plea, promise
Tikoo 2002	396	request/threat/legalistic plea	information exchange, recommendation, promises	dependence, experience, information exchange, recommendation, promises, requests, threats/legalistic pleas,
Bigne et.al. 2004	179	coercive	reward, expert, referent	market orientation, coercive power, reward power, expert power, referent power, satisfaction
Payan and McFarland 2005	256	threats, legalistic pleas, promises	request, information exchange, recommendation, rationality	rationality, recommendations requests, information exchange, dependence, threats, promises, compliance; dependence
Tikoo 2005	396	request/threat/legalistic plea	information exchange, recommendation, promises	information exchange, recommendation, promises, requests, threats/legalistic pleas, conflict; dependence
Lai 2007	156	threats, legalistic pleas	promise, request, recommendation, information exchange	hard coercive, promise, request, perception altered strategies; economic/non-economic satisfaction; Performance
Ke et.al. 2009	134	coercion, reward, legitimate	information, expert, referent	mediated power (sources); non-mediated power (strategies); organizational trust, coercive pressures, normative pressures, adopted intention; Firm size, mimetic pressures, dependence
Chinomona et.al. 2010	447		Soft powers Expert power. Referent power	expert power, referent power, trust, commitment, satisfaction
Nygaard and Biong 2010	225	coercive	reward, expert, referent, legitimate	coercive power, reward power, referent power, expert power, legitimate power, ethical values, commitment, performance (sale revenue, service quality); market uncertainty
Chang and Huang 2011	128	threats/legalistic pleas, promises	recommendation, information exchange	coercive/request/non-coercive influence; supplier delivery flexibility; trust; shared vision; manufacturer size; duration; industry

The weighted correlation matrix for the meta-analysis is presented in Table 3. The data showed that the correlations among channel powers varied significantly. The correlation between information and expert was the largest ($r = 0.464$). There were also considerable correlations between coercive and legitimate ($r = 0.398$), reward and expert ($r = 0.376$), legitimate and referent ($r = 0.347$), referent and expert ($r = 0.317$), and referent and information ($r = 0.327$). However, a low correlation value was found between coercive and information ($r = 0.030$), coercive and expert ($r = -0.065$), and coercive and referent ($r = 0.078$). This implied that the channel powers should be dichotomized into two groups, one including coercive and legitimate, and the other one including reward, referent, expert, and information.

Table 3: Weighted average correlation matrix for major studies examining channel power sources

	Coercion	Reward	Legitimate	Referent	Expert	Information
Coercion	1					
Reward	0.154 (n = 4484)	1				
Legitimate	0.398 (n = 3638)	0.262 (n = 3893)	1			
Referent	0.078 (n = 4625)	0.152 (n = 4484)	0.347 (n = 4034)	1		
Expert	-0.065 (n = 4328)	0.376 (n = 4328)	0.190 (n = 3893)	0.317 (n = 4519)	1	
Information	0.030 (n = 3276)	0.241 (n = 3135)	0.141 (n = 3020)	0.327 (n = 3276)	0.464 (n = 3135)	1

A CFA was then conducted to validate the above dichotomization of the six channel powers. The LISREL 8.8 software was used for the computations, and the analysis results were reported in Table 4. As can be observed, the model fit indices values were acceptable ($\chi^2/df = 24.04/8$, CFI = 0.90, IFI = 0.91, GFI=0.96, and RMSEA = 0.10). This lent support to the aforementioned dichotomy of power sources.

Table 4: Confirmatory factor analysis on weighted average correlations

Standardized Solution	
COERCION	= 0.18 F1 + 0.97 E1
REWARD	= 2.21 F1 - 3.87 E2
LEGITIMATE	= 0.46 F2 + 0.79 E3
REFERENT	= 0.49 F2 + 0.76 E4
EXPERT	= 0.46 F2 + 0.73 E5
INFORMATION	= 0.60 F2 + 0.64 E6
Correlation between Coercive (F1) and Non-coercive (F2) = 0.16	
Sample size = 184 (median value)	
Goodness of Fit summary	
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.10
Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI)	0.82
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.90
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	0.91
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.96
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)	0.89

Discussion

This study employs a quantitative method to integrate and synthesize the inter-relationships between different exercised channel powers and proposes a classification of the exercise of channel powers. The results of the meta-analysis suggest that coercive and legitimate powers are strongly correlated, whilst there is a strong relationship among reward, referent, expert, and information powers. Thus, the six channel powers can be reasonably dichotomized into coercive power (i.e. coercive and legitimate) and non-coercive power (i.e. reward, referent, expert, and information). However, by combining power sources into either coercive or non-coercive powers, much useful information/meaning is lost (Rawwas et.al. 1997). Thus, future studies can also choose to study each exercised power sources individually in addition.

Although this meta-analysis has several contributions, it also contains inherent limitations that provide avenues for future research. Firstly, the current research only calculated sample size weighted correlations. The observed correlations should also be corrected for the systematic artifact of measurement error, so the calculation of effect sizes would be more accurate. Secondly, future research should pay attention to the heterogeneity of effect sizes, this variability might be due to moderator variables. In a typical meta-analysis, some methodological characteristics are usually used as moderators. For instance, frame of reference, national settings, and type of industries are often reported as detrimental to the generalizability of meta-analysis results in the marketing literature. Finally, this synthesis of the extant literature only focuses on the relationships among the exercise of different power sources. Meta-analyses should expand to the antecedents and consequences of the exercise of power sources. The prominent antecedents that reported in the literature on power influence strategies include dependence, countervailing power, asymmetry power, bureaucratic forms, and relationship environment. As for outcomes, the most pervasive channel outcomes are attributed power, conflict, satisfaction, trust, commitment, and cooperation.

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