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Flexibility in Marketing & Sales Interfacing Processes

Preliminary insights in the marketing literature indicate that flexibility is important in marketing and sales processes and interaction. However, to date marketing and sales management literature lacks an understanding of what flexibility in marketing-sales interfaces looks like, its potential organizational consequences, and potential boundary conditions. Using data from interviews with marketing and sales managers, this study explores the nature, outcomes and facilitators of flexibility at the marketing-sales interface. This study conceptualizes marketing-sales interface flexibility (MSIF) as a process of flexible cross-functional resource exchange and finds that MSIF has positive organizational outcomes (both in terms of performance and relationship quality); that MSIF is essential for firms when dealing with exigencies in turbulent environments; and that the utility of MSIF is conditioned by the speed with which MSIF is implemented. The research contribution is twofold. At a theoretical level, the study defines the construct for the first time, revealing MSIF's conceptual composition for examination, and develops theory regarding MSIF's direct relationships with key business outcomes, as well as likely contingencies that shape its importance. At a practical level, the study's framework offers a tool that managers can use to help build organizational success through enhanced flexibility in their marketing-sales interfaces.

Keywords:
Flexibility; marketing and sales interface; strategic flexibility; intra-organizational; cross-functional; marketing and sales resources.

1. Introduction

Marketing and sales functions in B2B organizations are often structured as separate departments, reflecting the specialisms that are required to operate in increasingly competitive and demanding business environments (Dewsnap & Jobber 2000; Vaid, Ahearne, & Krause 2020). Research into the interactions between these interdependent (Dawes & Massey 2006) yet differentiated organizational sub-functions (Workman, Homburg & Gruner 1998) indicates that there are potential performance benefits for firms that can effectively promote marketing-sales cooperation (Homburg & Jensen 2007). Correspondingly, less-well aligned marketing-sales interfaces represent opportunity costs on the one hand, and may also have negative implications for organizational outcomes if poorly aligned (Strahle, Spiro & Acito 1996; Homburg et al. 2017). The challenges to marketing-sales coordination – for example, a silo mentality and associated functional (marketing *or* sales) rather than marketing *and* sales superordinate identity and goal focus (Dewsnap and Jobber, 2002) - stem from their representing two, very different domains or "thought worlds" in respect of basic orientations, competences and knowledge bases (Homburg & Jensen 2007). However, despite making significant progress in terms of building an understanding of how to improve marketing-sales integration (e.g. Dewsnap & Jobber 2002, 2009; Johnson, Matthes, & Friend 2019; Kotler, Rackham & Krishnaswamy 2006; Le Meunier-Fitzhugh & Piercy 2007, 2010, 2019), the issue of the relationship between marketing and sales functions has yet to be examined through a strategic flexibility lens.

A strategic flexibility perspective holds great promise in this context, since interdependencies between functional areas within the firm, *relational* resources, *relational* exchanges and *relational* resource flows, and "coordination between the constituent parts of an organization" (Sanchez 1997, p. 75) are inherent in the strategic flexibility concept (Sanchez 1995). Indeed, research focusing on sales units recognizes that *intra*-functional flexibility is "a unique form of relational flexibility" which shapes organizational outcomes positively (Micevski et al. 2019, p. 553). Examining marketing-sales integration using a strategic flexibility platform may help extend knowledge and lead to a better understanding of the marketing sales interface, and the opportunities, challenges, and potential costs facing businesses as they seek to manage the interactions between these two functions.

Accordingly, there are several key issues that require attention. First, at the most basic level, research into what it might mean for firms to be flexible at the marketing-sales interface is missing. As a result of this, there is little by way of understanding of what flexibility in the marketing-sales interface consists of, and so scholars are limited in the guidance they can provide practitioners regarding the development of marketing-sales interface flexibility. With the latter construct remaining rhetorical – its conceptual boundaries undefined – business managers have no structured insight into the main features of flexibility at this interface, and so are hindered in their efforts to develop flexible organizations for themselves. Putting flesh onto the bones of flexibility in the marketing-sales interface is therefore a necessary preliminary step.

Second, assuming that the question of the definition and the composition of marketing-sales interface flexibility is resolved, scholars and practitioners still have no insight into whether businesses *should* invest in increasing the flexibility between marketing and sales departments. Accordingly, there is a clear imperative to gather evidence regarding the potential outcomes for firms that have lower or higher levels of marketing-sales interface flexibility, and to develop theory regarding the potential causal impact of building higher levels of flexibility. Empirical evidence and conceptual logics demonstrating the potential for flexibility to shape organizational outcomes positively can motivate organizational action as well as guide future research efforts.

Third, building flexible interfaces between functional areas that are inherently silo-oriented, and often strongly identity-based (Dewsnap & Jobber 2002), may require significant resource investments, and as a result, managers may also need to know whether existing internal resources can be combined with flexibility to enhance their effectiveness, and whether there are external environmental and business conditions where flexibility building efforts are most needed. In short, simply knowing that flexibility is generally a 'good thing' may not be enough, since it may be that flexibility is most beneficial under particular conditions. Accordingly, it is important that research into the potential outcomes of marketing-sales flexibility attend to these situational matters in order to ensure that our understanding of flexibility is fine-grained enough to be of utility to practitioners.

The current study investigates these key issues. Given that the marketing and sales interface flexibility is not well understood, we take a phenomenographic approach. A strength of this interpretive method is that it helps generate a deep understanding of phenomena, and as a result, we use it to shed light on what it means to be flexible in marketing and sales interfacing processes, and to explore the organizational outcomes and contingencies of such flexibility. The culmination of the method, in the case of the current study, is the development of a conceptual model of the nature of, and potential outcomes of marketing and sales interface flexibility, combined with a propositional inventory to guide future research and practice.

We organize the paper as follows. We begin by examining the importance of flexibility between marketing and sales departments, and drawing from the literature on inter- and intra-organizational flexibility, highlight the potential consequences of such flexibility. We then summarize the current state of the literature examining flexibility at business interfaces to provide initial theoretical guidance for our study – an in-depth, qualitative study. Following an outline of the methodology used, we report the in-depth findings and develop a conceptual framework. Concluding the paper, we outline the implications for research and practice and identify areas for future research.

2. Background

2.1 Marketing and Sales Interdependence

While focusing on their respective functional specialisms, differentiated marketing and sales groups are interdependent (Kotler et al. 2006). As such, to achieve both their respective, functional objectives and the organization's broader objectives, each requires the other to provide resources in the shape of functionally-specific skills and knowledge, information, and tangible outputs (Dawes & Massey 2006). In turn, this requires an effective and collaborative intergroup interface (Biemans, Makovec-Brenčič & Malshe 2010; Dewsnap & Jobber 2000; Claro & Ramos 2018). In conjunction with the more integrative marketing-sales interface needed to deal with an increasingly demanding business-to-business customer (e.g., Dewsnap & Jobber 2000; Malshe & Sohi 2009), marketing and sales coordinative processes should also incorporate the capacity to tackle the dynamics of the business environment in a more flexible way (Malshe 2011). This necessity stems from the fact that for today's businesses, market environments are unstable, highly competitive and increasingly globalized, product life cycles are shrinking, and technological advances are accelerating (e.g., Cuevas 2018; Day & Schoemaker 2020; Johnson et al. 2019). An ability to deal with and respond to such challenges would be reflected in marketing and sales processes that can accommodate deviations from originally agreed functional plans (Malshe 2011); in other words, the ability to be flexible.

A flexible approach, considered a strategic imperative (e.g., Sanchez 1997), offers a firm the ability to respond to changing market conditions and customer requirements (e.g., Duclos, Vokurka & Lummus 2003), and, correspondingly, in order to achieve optimal performance, the ability to improvise and to adapt (Moorman & Miner 1998). In support of this, Malshe and Sohi's (2009) qualitative investigation finds that the ability to embrace an ability to modify and adapt marketing plans, and the flexibility and willingness of marketers to accept modifications to agreed plans, are determinants of successful strategy making processes for marketing and sales.

2.2 Flexibility

Researchers from a range of academic disciplines study flexibility, and as a result, there are numerous conceptualizations of strategic flexibility, all differing depending on the scope, levels of analysis and the situational context of the research (see Sanchez 1997). For instance, much of the early research on strategic flexibility deals with issues related to manufacturing flexibility and supply chain flexibility (e.g., Gerwin 1993; Vickery, Calantone, & Droge 1999). However, it is in the channel management literature that we see some interesting developments, specifically in terms of presenting the idea of 'relational flexibility' as a relational, norm-based dimension of strategic flexibility (Kumar et al. 2006; Lummus, Duclos, & Vokurka 2003; Sánchez & Pérez 2005). Relational flexibility is most commonly defined as the willingness of the parties involved in a trading relationship to modify the rules of exchange without necessarily engaging in formal contractual renegotiations (e.g., Ivens 2005; Omar et al. 2017; Wang & Wei 2007; Young, Sapienza, & Baumer 2003; Yu, Cadeaux, & Song 2017). As such, in the specific context of inter-organizational interactions and relationships, relational flexibility can be thought of as being embedded in a bilateral expectation of the willingness of both parties in the relationship to make adjustments in their ongoing relationships (Heide & John 1992). (See Table 1a for a summary of research on flexibility in an inter-organizational context; in this research [predominantly focused on supply chain relationships], the notion of relational flexibility is a central theme).

Insert Table 1a and Table 1b here

Research also recognizes intra-organizational forms of flexibility, drawing extensively from the strategic flexibility literature to define different types of intra-organizational flexibility. Intra-organizational facets of strategic flexibility are most commonly conceptualized in accordance with the definition proposed by Sanchez (1995) as the ability of an organization to reconfigure and reallocate its resources and processes, and modify its strategies to cope with changes in its external environment. (See Table 1b which summarizes how the notion of strategic flexibility has been applied in the context of intra-organizational research). This notion of flexibility denotes the role of resources, and in a bid to achieve competitive advantage, the need for them to flex in a dynamic marketplace (Zhou & Wu 2010). According to this approach, strategic flexibility serves as an ''organizing principle for structuring and coordinating various resources and functional units'' (Zander & Kogut 1995, p. 79). Research distinguishes two main components of strategic flexibility –

resource flexibility and coordination flexibility. Both aspects focus on the role of resources, albeit from differing perspectives. Whereas resource flexibility reflects a firm's ability to obtain resources with diverse uses and refers to the width of use of existing resources (Li et al. 2017), coordination flexibility assumes a firm's ability to generate new, innovative combinations and uses of resources through internal (intra-organizational) coordination procedures (Wei, Yi, & Guo 2014).

Intra-organizational strategic flexibility studies tend to focus on either, a) company-wide flexibility (e.g. Li et al. 2017; Yang et al. 2020), or b) single functional unit flexibility (Cadogan et al. 2012; Micevski et al. 2019), leaving the specific issue of strategic flexibility at the inter-functional interface unaddressed. This limits our understanding of intra-organizational flexibility in cross-functional working relationships. Patently, departments do not operate in vacuums and their actors' roles are performed within social environments (Weeth, Prigge & Homburg 2020; Wieseke et al. 2008). Hence, in building a preliminary understanding of flexibility at the marketing and sales interface we revisit the theoretical framework of strategic flexibility as put forward by the intra-organizational approaches to strategic flexibility, and combine these with the relational flexibility notions prominent in inter-organizational research. In defining relational and strategic flexibility, a consensus across different academic disciplines exists on the resource-based nature of flexibility (Sanchez 1995; Schroeder, Bates, & Junttila 2002). This argument is based on the recognition that static deployment of resources, whereby resources deployed are essentially sunk costs, leads to inertia (e.g., Choquette 2019), which adversely affects organizational performance, especially in fast changing environments (Nerkar & Roberts 2004). Combining the two flexibility approaches, relational and strategic flexibility, and acknowledging their resource-based nature, marketing and sales cross-functional flexibility emerges as an issue of flexible resource management. Accordingly, since this flexibility is embedded within the working relationship between two departments, to underpin our investigation we follow the inter-organizational research tradition, and use the most prominent approach to relational exchanges – social exchange theory (SET) (Blau 1964).

2.3. Marketing-Sales Interface Flexibility and Social Exchange Theory

Blau's (1964) social exchange theory (SET) presents a grounding platform from which to examine strategic flexibility in the context of the inter-functional relationships between marketing and sales, and the associated exchange of resources between these functions. Specifically, strategic flexibility's behavioral aspects map neatly on the core features of social exchange theory's two main pillars, resource inter-dependencies and related resource exchanges. Social exchange theorists maintain that exchange relates to interaction processes among interdependent parties that encompass reciprocal and mutually beneficial acts (Blau 1964). In such exchange processes, the parties involved affect each other in relatively enduring ways, with each party willing to continue to interact and reciprocate so long as both perceive the exchange relationship as an attractive alternative (Homans 1958). Marketing and sales collaborative and coordinated co-working implies the two departments working together for mutual benefit (Le Meunier-Fitzhugh & Piercy 2010). By coordinating resources to create customer value, each functional party involved in the process will perceive benefit by cooperating with each other (Mohr & Spekman 1994).

As the parties involved face changing business conditions, adaptation is also an important feature of any on-going relationship (Hallen et al. 1991). Under SET, exchange relations are far from static, uniform processes; on the contrary, they involve continuous resource modifications in line with the changing needs of the other party (Newcomb et al. 1952). According to the norm of reciprocity (Blau 1964), once these adaptations are made by the exchange partner, the receiving side will also engage in acts of reciprocal adaptation (Hallen et al. 1991). Hence, exchange and adaptation are essential requirements for relationships that operate in unstable market environments. For this reason, flexibility at the marketing-sales interface is grounded in mutual expectations of resource adjustments to one another (Heide & John 1992). Such flexibility, where they adapt and accommodate each other's needs implicitly communicates their commitment to their cross-functional relationship (Johnson 1999).

This ability to flexibly generate new, alternative combinations of their existing resources, what Kogut and Zander (1992, p.391) refer to as "combinative capabilities", is a result of their joint efforts and knowledge, and the ability to do this within the constraints of their existing resources. By being flexible, marketing and sales would engage in an ongoing creative process of effective resource utilization, relinquishing less productive use of resources in favor of finding alternative, novel resource combinations. Thus, by recognizing strategic flexibility's grounding in SET, we are able to pinpoint and define the two key aspects of marketing-sales interface flexibility (hereinafter, MSIF): 1) the flexible exchange of resources between the two departments and 2) the coordination of these resources. Our in-depth study explores this theoretical view of MSIF, and the research methods used to guide the investigation are outlined in the next section.

3. Methodology

In order to explore the manifestation of flexibility at the interface between marketing and sales, and to understand its possible links to organizational outcomes, we adopt a phenomenographic approach (Sandberg 2000). This methodological approach is deemed appropriate when there is limited understanding of a phenomenon, and it is used in a number of domains, including management (Blomberg, 2004) and marketing (Bolander, Werr & van der Valk 2018; Caic, Odekerken-Schröder & Mahr 2018). The aim of the phenomenographic approach through in-depth interviews as used in this study, is to dig deep into respondents' lived experiences of the phenomenon in question (Patton 1990; Remenyi et al. 1998). On this basis, respondents' various interpretations and takes on a phenomenon are seen to offer "a fundamental guide to action" (Schembri & Sandberg 2002, p. 197); it is how respondents understand something that is seen as significant.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

To gather data for this study we used theoretical sampling, a non-random sampling technique that is often used in marketing studies (e.g., Johnson & Matthes 2018). The basic characteristic of theoretical sampling is that researchers are free to select participants based on their knowledge of the research topic of interest (Corbin and Strauss 2008). This purposeful sampling approach was adopted in order to secure respondents with the appropriate functional role and experience of interfacing with the corresponding marketing or sales function. Similar to previous studies (e.g., Johnson & Matthes 2018), we used several sources to recruit respondents such as, multiple business advisory boards, the research team's personal contacts, referrals from academic colleagues and previous interviewees, as well as suitable candidates identified from executive teaching. Great care was taken to ensure a diverse sample of perspectives while limiting the choice of respondent company to those that had distinct marketing and sales functions, and to interview only respondents from those companies that had personal experience of interacting with personnel from the counterpart marketing or sales group. The final sample covered a range of marketing and sales managers employed by B2B companies operating in different industries (such as pharmaceuticals, automotive, heating, FMCG manufacturing, publishing); this diversity offered a greater confidence in the robustness of the data (Creswell 2007). Insights were obtained from respondent companies ranging from 20 to 10,000 employees, which also proved a diverse sample in terms of company size. Respondents operated across different hierarchical levels in the organization, from middle manager to director. Our sample was also well balanced in terms of gender, and reasonably well-experienced (8.7 years' experience on average); this corresponds to similar B2B research (e.g., Limbu, Jayachandran, & Babin 2014). Descriptive information on the respondents is presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin 1990) was achieved at 28 interviews (corresponding to 17 organizations), exceeding a suggested minimum of 20 respondents (e.g., Sandberg 2000). The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions (Blomberg 2004). Using a semi-structured interview protocol, informants were first invited to describe working relationships between marketing and sales, with specific reference to how resources are exchanged, the objective of the exchanges, and how exchanges are managed as part of their working relationship. Following this, questions were asked to secure a deeper understanding of MSIF, of the context in which it manifests and the triggers for it, and also to gauge an understanding from the participants of how such flexibility might affect relevant marketing and sales performance outcomes (e.g., product listings, distributor cooperation/collaboration, optimizing sales revenue opportunities). Finally, the context in which a firm might consider such flexibility were investigated. Participants were encouraged to elaborate through probing and prompting. The interviews, which were face-to-face, and were held at locations convenient to the respondents, lasted between forty minutes and two hours, with a typical length of one hour; all were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author conducted all the interviews. This allowed for consistency, scope and depth of questioning.

3.3 Analysis and Reliability

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data (Patton, 2002). First, we employed a process of phenomenological reduction with the interview transcripts (Sandberg 2000). The preliminary analysis of each transcript was undertaken by the first author, with a focus on identifying within the scripts the respondents' conceptions of flexibility and in particular, their understandings of their exchange relationship with 'the other' function. In this respect, the themes and questions guiding this preliminary analysis were: How does the marketing (or sales) respondent view and articulate instances of resource exchange? What does resource exchange mean to them? How does it occur? In what contexts does a respondent outline such flexibility occurring? How does the respondent describe what happened as a result of such flexibility? At the next stage, the goal was to identify similarities and differences in how respondents outlined their experiences of MSIF, and inductively generate manifestations of the central MSIF study concept. The preliminary data and thematic structure emerging from the analysis was then subjected to an iterative process of examination, reflection, critique, and modification by the other authors, who used their own interpretations of the data to question the emerging understanding, and to build deeper insights, as well as to cross-check and corroborate the findings. Cross-checking of the study's interpretations in this way by the research team is an important step in the phenomenographic approach, and is used as a form of validation of the eventual understanding and deciphering of the phenomenon that the research actors come to (Marton 1986). The outcome of multiple readings and iterations was the development of a data structure.

Next, iterative coding supported by the QSR-NVivo 8 qualitative software package led to the identification of recurring categories. Categories were further grouped into first-order themes identified from thematic analysis, and then the aggregate second-order manifestations related to these themes. The second-order manifestations provide the foundation for the conceptual framework. Illustrative representative quotations that substantiate the first order category and hence the second-order manifestations are included in Figure 1. For example, marketing informants' discussion of the willingness to engage in closer interaction with customers (that is usually considered the task of salespeople) is classified into the 'marketing redeploy people and expertise to sales' first-order category, and then classified into the second-order 'marketing to sales interface flexibility' manifestation of MSIF.

Insert Figure 1 about here

4. Results

Analysis was based on seeking to explore in detail the constituents, context and consequences of MSIF. The iterative process of cycling between data analysis and literature insights led to the grounded model of the MSIF construct. The interview study supports the presence and approach to flexibility at the SET-grounded relational level of the marketing and sales relationship (e.g., Young-Ybarra & Wiersema 1999); specifically, it supports an interface flexibility based on the flexible exchange and management of their functional resources. Our findings align with Heide's (1994) stance that highly collaborative behaviors are best demonstrated in the way that the exchange parties flexibly adjust to each other's needs and requests. In this sense, the expectation of the willingness of marketing and/or sales to make adaptations as circumstances change is implicit in the examples discussed here. According to our insights gathered and analyzed in this section, flexibility at the marketing and sales interface is, (a) created by the combined effects of marketing and sales having resources at their disposal that can be managed in a flexible way, and (b) their ability to jointly influence how these resources will be used and configured within their relationship. In this regard, our study substantiates and adds richness to the literature-based notion of MSIF presented earlier (the flexible exchange of resources between the two departments, and the coordination of these resources). Notably, the research insights generated allow us to contextualize this definition to a more specifically marketing and sales variant. To this end we explicate the specificities surrounding the notion of flexible exchange of resources and provide an explicit, fine-grained definition of MSIF as: *"marketing's and sales' flexible reallocation of their available resources, and coordination in using these resources".*

More specifically, over the course of their interfacing, both marketing and sales departments exhibit flexibility that is directed toward the other and/or exhibited through the joint efforts of the two. The phenomenographic analysis reveals the identification of three, qualitatively different experiential manifestations of MSIF. These emergent themes suggest a MSIF concept at three levels: 1) marketing to sales interface flexibility, 2) sales to marketing interface flexibility, and 3) sales and marketing interface mutual flexibility. A critical part of the phenomenological approach to analysis employed here is the identification and assessment of differences between the respondents based on their very different company situations and contexts. On this basis, it is notable that the nature of the flexibility at the marketing and sales interface does not differ significantly across industries, company sizes and/or respondent roles in the organization. Following this identified three-form conceptualization of MSIF, the next sections outline the specifics in terms of the situations and manner in which each was recounted in the research.

4.1. MSIF: Marketing to Sales interface flexibility.

The interview findings reveal that the marketing to sales interface facet of MSIF involves marketing redeploying and reallocating to sales their time and people, knowledge, expertise and budgetary resources in order for an organization to seize market opportunities, and to address existing and/or potential performance issues.

Support from marketing to makes sales calls *is a form of resource redeployment that is mentioned by several respondents. The example statement below, taken from the interview transcriptions, provides justification of this redeployment:*

> *"use the expertise of both…So the salesperson might be great at introducing and having contact with a customer, but they don't have the product expertise, and so will call us (marketing) in …so we're helping them get a sale"*
>
> (R11, Automotive)

The automotive industry is not an isolated case here. In the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, a key account manager (R5), outlines how, when required, they can call ad hoc upon marketing resource to co-present at their sales meetings/negotiations with *retailers*. This helps enhance the effectiveness of the key account manager's sales negotiations and sell-in of the proposition to the benefit of both marketing and sales; for example, aside from the beneficial perspectives marketing could deliver in the customer meeting, marketing's co-presence with the retailer customer led to their offering tailored advertising for the retailer.

Resource reallocations are not necessarily time-limited. A marketing manager in a publishing company explains how marketing people fill empty sales territories, and act as sales reps in the absence of salespeople, calling on potential customers and seeking business. Therefore, resource reallocations can be longer term if this is in the company's greater interest. As one marketing respondent explains.

> "*....we might take that salesforce headcount position for 6 months. It really did impact on performance, because actually this year we are on target, and feedback from the customers and the doctors is phenomenal, and representatives are really enthusiastic as well"*
> *(R20, Pharmaceutical)*

A *marketing manager from the pharmaceutical industry explains how solutions to customer-based issues emerge from unplanned work with the sales function. During one such instance where marketing flexibly give resource to their sales colleagues to attend a customer meeting, they secure a greater understanding of medical practitioners' prescribing behaviors, knowledge which is subsequently used by both parties to help "to get sales back on track". Marketing expertise and knowledge is also used on an ad hoc basis for training at sales meeting, and marketing time is reallocated to deal with sporadic requests for market research information and for entertaining customers at social functions.*

Marketing is sometimes asked to flexibly redirect support activities (e.g., create additional promotions, conduct additional market research, design creatives) to under-performing sales regions. The example statement below comes from the marketing manager in a publishing company:

> *"So… if we get halfway through the year and sales say, we need more of this particular brochure, we'd like something else produced to help with sales. We would do that...that would be money that we reallocate from within the marketing budget*"
> (R16, Publishing)

M*arketing resources can also be redeployed to help new salespeople develop their business networks, as in this example statement:*

> *"...what we did was, for the new sales people, we did two things, the first thing we did was to provide them with a little bit of funding so they could do their local campaigns…What we also did was to use the resource to make appointments for them; we changed the emphasis to make appointments for the new people..."*
> (R28, Gas Supplies)

4.2. MSIF: Sales to Marketing interface flexibility.

Our findings show that interface flexibility from sales to marketing involves the flexible sharing of people/knowledge/expertise and resources and outputs. Such interface flexibility might be predicated on the desire to seize an identified market opportunity, or as we observe in the data, may simply be part of the two functions' *modus operandus.*

Requests to marketing for sales colleagues' time (manpower/functional expertise) are a common trigger for exhibiting this type of interface flexibility. Our respondents often indicate how sales can reallocate their own time to assist marketing in problem solving, idea implementation or provision of support to customers. *A* marketing manager in a publishing company describes that, if they feel that a book has good potential in a particular sales area, they can ask sales managers to keep an eye on their sales representatives in this area, to ensure that the representatives make the necessary extra calls/visits to their customers. Similarly, a marketing manager in the heating industry outlines how sales can reallocate some of their time to help marketing out at organizing unplanned trade shows. Mutual benefits are the end result, since sales can very often secure new prospects from such flexibility. In the same way, *in the automotive (trucks) sector, marketing know that they can call on sales' flexibility to:*

> *"…borrow a couple of people to help us sort out at a conference…and vice versa as well, because they (sales) might have some function on."*
>
> (R11, Automotive)

Salespeople can be redeployed on an ad hoc, as-and-when-required basis, to offer their knowledge and insight to working with marketing at head office. This might be sales providing input into marketing's design of material to support product launches. The example statement below, taken from the interview transcriptions, demonstrates a variety of reasons for redeployment of salespeople to marketing:

> *"And the situation could be for example that one of the salesforce roles can be covered by somebody else [in sales], so that the salesforce had the counter position and could come to the office and work on medical education programmes…perhaps to disseminate some new fresh clinical data".*
>
> (R19, Pharmaceutical)

Referring to sales' refocus of their own time resource to concentrate on a new product launch, one of the respondents explains how they expect to help marketing deliver their objectives, to the benefit of the company's overall objectives, even if this means suffering an immediate opportunity cost for their existing, key account sales plans:

> "*This was the gold launch, so everything else had to be put on hold. There were definitely missed (sales) opportunities (elsewhere in sales) because we [re]focused on this".*
>
> (R9, FMCG)

So, this refocusing of sales resources is perceived to be for the greater good, and the opportunity cost to sales is lower than the cost to the company overall, should the sales function not demonstrate flexibility with their time. The same key account manager similarly talks about reallocating her diary time and acting for marketing as-and-when-required, as the *"voice of the customer"* in marketing's project meetings.

4.3. MSIF: Marketing and Sales Interface Mutual Flexibility

Both categories of MSIF we outline above predominantly focus on one function giving resources to the other – they are unilateral manifestations of MSIF. However, the research uncovers a more mutual form of marketing and sales interface flexibility. Such flexibility is related to joint activities (Josi & Campbell 2003; Johnston et al. 2003); it is a form of collaborative behavior which in the present context enables marketing and sales to jointly achieve value. The informants characterize joint flexibility in moving resources from one use to another as: a) the shared ability to restructure marketing and sales resources to derive solutions to complex customer- and market-related issues or opportunities, b) the sharing of restructured resources within their functional exchange relationship, and c) the mutually-coordinated implementation of restructured resources. *Our findings indicate that this manifestation of inter-functional MSIF is essentially the* co-redeploying of marketing and sales resources to address and/or exploit existing and emerging environmental opportunities and challenges. *Specific triggers for using this form of flexibility include: ailing performance* *owing to a poor economy, a competitor product launch or price decrease, falling market share, and customer objection/non-receptiveness.*

In one example, the firm seizes the high ground in the face of a slow competitor's response to a customer's expressed need, with marketing and sales quickly co-designing a new product proposition (a bespoke, custom book). *A key account manager explains that joint flexibility regularly facilitates an effective response to rumored/anticipated competitor product launches. One example includes marketing reconfiguring resources to step outside of their accepted product development and launch lead times to co-work with sales colleagues, who also flexibly leveraged their own resources, to expeditiously launch a new product as an unplanned counter to a competitor launch that sales identified they should jointly look to address:*

> *"…sales shifted all their efforts into selling this product and it was a big success".*
>
> *(R5, FMCG)*

Likewise, another example (R4, Heating Industry) involves a situation in which a distributor is not receptive to listing or selling the firm's more innovative products. To fix the problem, marketing and sales agree that, for the sake of achieving short term sales targets, they will realign their joint resources (time, focus, and plans), and redirect their focus away from originally planned innovative products to their mainstream, core product range. In one of the pharmaceuticals companies, the trigger for marketing's unplanned co-working between marketing and sales is a competitor price decrease. Marketing's presence enables the company to avoid matching the competitor's price decrease and, instead, gives sales additional reassurance and knowledge. Sales use these skills and knowledge when they return to skeptical customers to re-present their brand proposition – reassuring customers of the product's core benefits and values:

> *"So what we did, we didn't just lower our price, we made sure that the reps (and customers) were absolutely clear and aware of... our own strategy, which is based on other (non-price) values...".*
>
> (R19, Pharmaceuticals)

The ability to reconfigure - ad hoc - promotional funds based on reviews of one-year operating plans is seen as central in one multinational, as this FMCG respondent explains:

> *"… as you go through the year as things are not happening or changing, then the money moves depending on what's giving the best return… So if you're a sales guy looking after (major grocery retailer X) and you're hoping to show 10% growth and actually you're only seeing 6%, how do you plug that gap? What marketing activities can you use in order to help close that gap to hit your target?.... So sales and marketing will sit down then and say, you know, we've got a gap on this brand. We've got a gap on this account. What can we do together?"*
>
> (R10, FMCG)

4.4. MSIF's importance for performance

In support of the literature, the in-depth findings from this qualitative study suggest how flexibility shifts the focus from areas in which available resources are not used to their full potential towards areas in which such resources can be more effectively used (Kolodny 1979; Ford & Randolph 1992). The insights also show how increased levels of flexibility enable more adaptability of marketing and sales to market demands. When flexibility is high, specific competencies residing in marketing and sales are combined in a way to leverage the creative and novel strategies required to capitalize on the identified market opportunity (Cadogan et al. 2012; Georgsdottir & Getz 2004; Håkansson & Ford 2002; Rangarajan et al. 2004).

Our empirical data provides examples of the potential impact of MSIF on a range of performance outcomes in situations where: sales are not hitting their targets; performance is poor and needs to be elevated, and business needs to be stimulated; customer-based problems need to be solved; competitors are threatening the company and/or opportunities exist to steal business from the competition; or market share is lost, and must be regained. *The insights detailed above regarding marketing's and sales' flexibilities in redeploying their resources – either one to the other and/or jointly – demonstrate that, at the heart of MSIF, there is a drive to enhance one or more facets of the firm's performance. Furthermore, all three manfestations of MSIF are instrumental in giving the organization the boost it needs to achieve its goals. Accordingly, we advance the following global research proposition, applicable to all three facets of MSIF:*

P1: MSIF (marketing's and sales' flexible reallocation of their available resources, and their coordination in using these resources) positively impacts marketing and sales performance.

Findings from our study confirm the central role that the flexible management of resources plays, not only within the marketing and sales relationship, but also in successful organizational functioning. This finding is in accordance with the acknowledged prominence of flexibly managing marketing resources (e.g., Yuan, Zhongfeng, & Yi 2010), as well as the key role the two departments play in managing these resources (Dawes & Massey 2006). The insights from our qualitative study indicate that when flexibility between marketing and sales exists, solutions to emerging problems are more readily found and implemented. These relationship investments in the form of interface flexibility send strong signals to each party regarding the other's willingness to invest in and develop their relationship and, ultimately, result in a more stable and productive relationship between the two departments (Rusbult & Farrell 1983). All our respondents connected flexibility with the perception of a positive, healthy and effectiveness relationship between the two functional groups.

By exhibiting flexibility jointly and towards one another, marketing and sales implicitly also communicate goodwill intentions and commitment to their relationship (Johnson 1999). The relational contracting literature points to flexibility as one of the relational norms characterized as a good faith relationship adjustment which strengthens the connections and mutuality of the parties involved (MacNeil 1980; Noordewier et al. 1990). On this basis, it is likely that flexibility at the interface will also lead to more subjective, relational performance outcomes (e.g., Dewsnap & Jobber 2002). In respect of the interface, the following proposition is therefore advanced:

P2: Greater levels of MSIF (marketing's and sales' flexible reallocation of their available resources, and their coordination in using these resources) leads to higher levels of perceived relationship effectiveness between marketing and sales.

Emerging from our qualitative insights is the idea of time as scarce resources (e.g., Covin & Slevin 1989) "*that is constantly ticking away"* (R5, Sales, FMCG). Further, our respondents were also in agreement with scholars who assert that the demand for speed in markets is increasing (e.g. Jones 1993), as managers are facing frequently changing, high-velocity environments (e.g. Li, Easterby-Smith & Hong 2019; Wilden & Gudergan 2015; Wirtz et al. 2007). Our qualitative findings suggest that while MSIF is important for success, it is conditioned by speed: *"flexibility, yeah, but quick speed of flexibility…it's how quick you can turn it around*" (R1, Sales, Heating). This was supported by other respondents from the FMCG industry, in this case a key account manager: *"Usually it takes us years to develop products. But that time … instead of 6 months or a year they (Marketing) did it in a few weeks. Marketing was concentrating on the product, sales shifted all their efforts into selling the product and it was a big success* (R9, Sales, FMCG). The negative consequences of the counter situation was expressed by this same respondent when lamenting the company's slow MSIF: *"to reallocate resources and to make that decision quickly it would be really important* *for a sales company like (ours) I would need the decision that day…If the buyer and I spot an opportunity…(the buyer) is not going to wait for me to make that decision. But, very often, marketing needs a long time to make a decision"*. We learn here that if resource reallocation, reconfiguring and redeployment are too slow, the chance to capitalize on an opportunity may be lost. But not only that, a lack of MSIF urgency or MSIF inertia by one party (in the latter case, on the part of marketing), may be seen by the other party (sales) as being thoughtless, or even as a deliberate effort to harm, and may result in reduced perceived relationship effectiveness (e.g., Menon et al. 1996), As a result, we propose that:

P3: The positive impact of marketing's and sales' flexible reallocation of their available resources on a) marketing and sales performance and b) marketing and sales relationship effectiveness, is greater when marketing's and sales' coordination in using these resources is quicker.

4.5. The role of environmental dynamism

A respondent in the publishing industry (R18, Sales) explains how a competitive environment demands flexibility. In this context, the firm can *"take advantage of (their) flexibility, (to) move quickly and (to) deliver quickly"* to develop a new product. In another example, the firm seized the high ground in the face of a slow market competitor's response to a customer's expressed need, with marketing and sales quickly co-designing a new product proposition (a bespoke, custom book). Thus we see the emergence from the data of potential environmental moderation – in this case, dynamism in the operating environment.

To accommodate such dynamism, we examine the conceptual framework with contingency theory (Donaldson 2001). In the latter, organizational performance is deemed a function of the organization's congruence with its environment (Duncan 1972). This includes the need to adapt to a changing environment; in other words, to be *flexible*, in order to survive and prosper (Dreyer & Gronhaug 2004).

As all three manifestations of MSIF are expected to enable marketing and sales to focus their interface efforts to capitalize on existing and emerging opportunities and to address challenges presented by the environment, it is expected that all will have a direct, positive effect on firm performance. Existing empirical results support the view that in more dynamic environments, flexibility will predict performance more positively (Anand & Ward 2004; Grewal & Tansuhaj 2001; Nadkarni & Narayanan 2007). A key characteristic of the marketing-sales environment in which organizations operate is uncertainty caused by changes in customer preferences and competitor activity (Cespedes 1994; Dreyer & Gronhaug 2012). High levels of uncertainty diminish the effects of traditional organizational responses (Barnett & Pratt 2000). Instead, and in order to reduce uncertainty, organizations (can) incorporate flexibility (Evans 1991). In such environments we posit that marketing and sales teams will be required to exhibit higher levels of flexibility in managing and coordinating their resources. This is corroborated in the data which show that the firm's operating environment often acts a trigger, notifying the respondents that there is a need for a response of some sort, which is best dealt with via MSIF. Therefore, rooted in contingency theory and the notion that company: environment congruence is positive for performance (Duncan 1972), and also following the findings of Grewal and Tansuhaj (2001), it is anticipated that in highly dynamic environments, greater MSIF is required. Thus, in such environments we expect that all forms of MSIF will have a greater impact on performance. The following proposition is therefore also advanced:

P4: The positive impact of MSIF (marketing's and sales' flexible reallocation of their available resources, and their coordination in using these resources) on marketing and sales performance is greater when dynamism in the marketing environment is greater.

Figure 2 synthesizes the insights gathered in this research to present a conceptual framework of the MSIF concept. The findings corresponding to the broad interrelationships proposed are presented above, first in relation to MSIF's proposed relationship with performance outcomes, and then on the basis of how key internal and external factors might moderate this relationship.

Insert Figure 2 about here

5. Conclusions

It is suggested that the empirically established need for a collaborative marketing-sales interface should also reflect the ability to be flexible. However, empirical research has not yet addressed in detail the importance of flexibility at the operational interface of marketing and sales (MSIF). This study presents a first step in addressing this opportunity. Using a rigorous qualitative research methodology, the main objective was to answer questions relating to the nature, operating context and outcomes of MSIF. The sub-objective was to develop a conceptual framework of MSIF to aid future empirical research. In meeting these objectives, we provide the following contributions to theory and practice.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Our study of MSIF in a business-to-business context delivers several important contributions to theory. Most importantly, this is the first study that investigates explicitly and in detail flexible resource management issues in a key inter-departmental interface. Furthermore, we focus our attention at what is claimed to be a critical interface within turbulent organizational settings: marketing and sales (LaForge, Ingram, & Cravens 2009). Previous research on interface flexibility in enhancing business performance has not taken into explicit consideration the potential flexibilities of all functional actors involved, focusing instead on the flexibility only of marketing and in a quite superficial way (e.g., Malshe & Sohi 2009). Our study closes this gap by pointing to the critical role that marketing's and sales departments' coordinative processes and activities play in the flexible management of their resources. Furthermore, such flexibility represents a valuable capability that ultimately results in business performance improvement.

Secondly, this research makes an important contribution at the conceptual level. We conceptualize MSIF as an ability that allows a company to reshape and redeploy its marketing and sales resources to create competitive advantage, and to address the opportunities and threats from dynamic environments. In advancing a conceptual model of MSIF, we identify and explicate three manifestations of MSIF. Inter-functionally, we suggest that MSIF might usefully embrace resource flexibilities from marketing to sales and from sales to marketing, and also mutually. In this way we add to the literature by differentiating between these different, flexible resource flows. Explicating the MSIF construct in this way allows for similar investigations of flexibility in other inter-departmental relationships, such as, for example, the sales-logistics interface or the marketing [sales]-customer service interfaces. The third key theoretical contribution relates to the study's theoretical grounding in the two, complementary social exchange (SET) and contingency theory perspectives to offer an explanation of the importance of the flexible management of resources at the marketing-sales interface.

5.2 Managerial implications

In terms of managerial implications, the key takeaway for managers is that performance could be positively affected by encouraging flexibility in respect of the three sub-facets of the marketing and sales interface. Such flexibility removes the boundaries of free resource flow between marketing and sales, and suggests to managers that the marketing-sales interface should not only be collaborative, but should also reflect flexibility in the exchange of their functional resources, and the ability to coordinate the implementation of those resources.

Managers are advised to perform regular (e.g., annual) assessment of all three sub-facets of MSIF within the company. When doing so it will be important to assess the ability of functional units to reallocate and reconfigure people, expertise, and knowledge, and financial resources and operating plans. This initial assessment would further help managers to take steps to improve their current situation or to realize the importance of further nurturing the abilities of marketing and sales in flexible resource management at the interface. Based on the assessment of MSIF capabilities within the firm, managers can develop key interventions for improving MSIF and as such, exploit the available resources residing in the two departments in more efficient and effective ways. These interventions could target improvement within different aspects of MSIF, such as redeploying people, knowledge or resource exchange, depending on resource availabilities. Intervention can include development of interest groups that would meet in non-working environments from time to time to allow marketing and sales employees to informally share knowledge and expertise. In this way members of the interest group will establish an open communication, a practice that we found enhances MSIF. After interventions are performed, management can select particular marketing and sales employees to act as champions for MSIF. Beyond the above-mentioned interventions, managers can also increase MSIF by providing a supportive culture and necessary instructional support to MSIF. Cultural aspects of the organization such as openness to internal mobility and establishing roles that are culturally conducive to flexible redeployment should be encouraged to enable MSIF.

Hiring managers can also include assessment of an individual's flexibility in the interview process by having future marketing and sales applicants answer questions based on a hypothetical MSIF scenario. In this way, hiring managers can assess whether the applicant is likely to engage naturally in cross-functional flexible interchange of people, knowledge, skills, expertise and resources.

Taking into consideration the multidimensionality of our model, managers should be aware that both marketing and sales managers will play an important role in assessment and later, in building and nurturing interface flexibility together. Marketing and sales managers need to develop and implement all three manifestations of flexibility, thus creating a system and harmony of capabilities and flexible resource sharing across the interface.

Our results further suggest that in order to have the maximum impact on organizational performance, MSIF needs to be exercised speedily and needs to be consistent with the environmental context. Therefore, the external environment should be continually scanned and monitored, and flexible adjustments among departments made with due speed.

5.3. Limitations and further research

The research has succeeded in delivering rich insights; however, it is not without its limitations. The small number of firms we used in our qualitative study is a limiting factor; this prevents our concluding whether our findings might be replicated and generalized. That said, to maximize reliability we based our interpretation of findings and conclusions on rigorous content analysis of responses and used multiple informants from multiple industry sectors.

We also recognize that our assessment of the sub-dimensions of MSIF and the causal inferences we draw to develop the conceptual framework (Figure 2) might be subjective. This is a small sample, qualitative piece of research and in identifying the three MSIF manifestations we are not claiming that firms embrace any one of the manifestations, but rather that there is a tendency to display these manifestations. Firms might exist in the wider population on some continuum of unilateral (marketing to sales, and vice versa) to mutual MSIF. Future quantitative research is therefore needed to see to what extent firms align with a unilateral form of MSIF, or mutual, or something in between.

In terms of presenting a more holistic conceptualization of MSIF, future study should consider the antecedents and outcomes of MSIF in a way that would provide broader generalizability. For example, following the precedent of previous research on marketing's intra-organizational interfaces (see Dewsnap & Jobber 2000 for a summary), antecedent factors for testing could include structural (e.g., decentralization, methods of organizing marketing), senior management-related (e.g., management values) and cultural (e.g., give-and-take) . Also, and as part of this, although relational *flexibility* is already at the core of our study of MSIF, future research could usefully consider the extent to which the integrative nature of the marketing-sales relationship (e.g., Rouziès et al. 2005) might be a key antecedent to flexibility at the marketing-sales interface and/or a moderator of the MSIF-performance relationships.

Further, the previously cited quote from a key account manager (R9, Sales): "*This was the gold launch, so everything else had to be put on hold. There were definitely missed (sales) opportunities (elsewhere in sales) because we [re]focused on this",* perfectly articulates the potential costs and downsides issue that could be yet another feature of MSIF which warrants further research. Future research could therefore usefully investigate this conditional effect of MSIF on performance outcomes by hypothesizing and testing a curvilinear relationship. In this, research should explore quantitatively if there is a possibility to "over-do" MSIF, particularly unilateral MSIF (i.e., sales to marketing or marketing to sales). For instance, at very high levels of unilateral MSIF, the functions providing the resources and coordination efforts may fail to attend adequately to the basics of their functionally-oriented 'day job', and so their own functional marketing or sales performance may be affected as a result of engaging in MSIF.

We acknowledge that in the way that the resource-based view (RBV) sets out how the resources required for organizational success are dispersed across functions, and relatedly, how RBV has been applied to cross-functional research (Homburg et al. 2017; Olson et al. 2001), it is an apposite lens through which to consider the flexible exchange of functional marketing and sales resources. Therefore, to complement the social exchange theory base of the present research, future studies should consider using the RBV to shine a different kind of lens on the theory of MSIF's development and implementation.

In exploring flexibility in marketing and sales, our focus of interest has been more narrowly focused on the operational interface of marketing and sales. Future research should build on this to investigate marketing-sales flexibility in its broadest sense to include both strategic and operational levels. For example, the notion of flexible access to resources to facilitate strategic 'options' in Sanchez's (1997) strategic flexibility might be very relevant when resources are allocated as part of marketing's and sales' strategic marketing planning processes.

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Table 1a. Flexibility in an inter-organizational context

Authors	Empirical approach	Flexibility form	Study focus	Flexibility definition
Harsasi 2017	Quantitative	Supply flexibility - supplier flexibility and supply network flexibility	Analyze the impact of supply flexibility (its two dimensions) on supply chain performance.	Supplier flexibility is defined as ability to be responsive in deploying specific supplier capabilities. Supply network flexibility is defined as a responsive ability, achieved by implementing collaborative capability to form supply network efficiency and effectiveness.
Yu, Cadeaux, & Song 2016	Quantitative	Logistics flexibility and relationship flexibility	The effect (under different environmental conditions) of logistics and relationship flexibility (of a focal firm) on logistics service quality and the firm's satisfaction in its relationship with its key downstream account.	Logistics flexibility is the ability of the organization to respond quickly to customer needs in delivery, support, and service; Relationship flexibility defines a bilateral expectation of willingness in a trading relationship to adapt, change, or adjust to new knowledge without resorting to a series of new contracts and renegotiations.
Ligthart, Oerlemans, & Noorderhave 2016	Qualitative single-case study design	Operational flexibility	Enablers and barriers of operational flexibility of inter-organizational project groups.	Operational flexibility- —the ability of the project to change day-to-day operations.
Han, Sung, & Shim 2014	Quantitative	Customer–supplier relationship flexibility	Antecedents to flexibility in industrial supplier–buyer relationships and its consequences on relationship quality.	Buyer asking for adjustments to existing agreements; a supplier's behavior is the most pertinent flexibility dimension.
Jin et al. 2014	Quantitative	Supply chain flexibility	Links among IT-enabled sharing capability, supply chain flexibilities and competitive performance.	Flexibilities in product development and production represent the capabilities of a manufacturer's management regarding new products and production processes; Logistics flexibility reflects the abilities of the firm's procurement system to accommodate various receipt and delivery requests accurately, quickly, and efficiently; Suppliers' flexibility is the

				ability of vendors to efficiently and effectively adjust their operations to cope with a manufacturer's requests for components needed to meet the final customers' demands.
Omar et al., 2012	Quantitative	Supplier flexibility	The impact of supply chain orientation on firm performance and the mediating effect of supplier relationship integration and Performance.	The manufacturer's perception of the supplier's ability to respond to changes in the environment, including changes in supply and demand or changing risk levels in the home country.
Schwab & Miner 2011	Conceptual	Partnering flexibility	Examination of learning opportunities and challenges of partnering flexibility in project-venture settings.	Partnering flexibility - the ease with which a project venture can change partners during the formation and execution of a discrete project task.
Liao, Hong, & Rao 2010	Quantitative	Supply flexibility - supplier flexibility and supply network flexibility	Examination of the relationships between supply management and supply flexibility, and extend the concept of supply flexibility in terms of supplier flexibility and supply network flexibility on relevant supply chain performance measures.	Supply flexibility is defined as the extent of responsive ability through the use of supplier-specific capabilities and the use of inter-organizational collaborative capabilities. Supplier flexibility is defined as responsive ability in deploying specific capabilities of the supplier. Supply network flexibility is defined as a responsive ability, achieved by implementing collaborative capability to form supply network efficiency and effectiveness.
Tachizawa & Gimenez 2009	Quantitative	Supply flexibility	The effects of supply flexibility sources on three dimensions of supply flexibility (i.e. delivery policy; supplier responsiveness; adaptability).	Supply flexibility is the ability of the purchasing function to respond in a timely and cost effective manner to changing requirements of purchased components, in terms of volume, mix and delivery date.
Wang & Wei 2007	Quantitative	Supply chain flexibility	The impact of interorganizational governance (i.e., relational governance and virtual integration) on value creation (i.e., information visibility and supply chain flexibility) in the supply chain context.	Supply chain flexibility represents the willingness and capability of trading partners to modify their initial arrangements to improve their adaptability to new changes and challenges in supply chains. Two types of supply chain flexibility, namely offering flexibility and partnering flexibility, are

				identified in the literature (Gosain et al. 2004). Offering flexibility refers to the ability of a supply chain to support changes in product offering with current partners, while partnering flexibility represents the ease of changing supply chain partners.
Sezen & Yilmaz 2007	Quantitative	Channel flexibility	Effects of dependence and trust on the three major relational behaviors of flexibility, information exchange, and solidarity in a long-term, contractual channel setting.	Flexibility involves making adaptations in response to the channel partner's requests as the circumstances change.
Ivens 2005	Quantitative	Flexibility in industrial service relationships (Inter-organizational)	The impact of service provider flexibility on customer satisfaction, trust and commitment.	Flexibility - flexible reactions an actor shows if his partner asks him to modify an existing agreement. Determinants of service provider flexibility: uncertainty, relationship-specific investments, mutuality, long-term orientation.
Giunipero, Denslow, & Eltantawy 2005	Qualitative/ Quantitative	Purchasing/supply chain management (P/SCM) flexibility	Development of an initial framework for P/SCM flexibility skill set (focus groups). Assessment of the extent to which P/SCM managers possess skills that are both entrepreneurial and flexible (survey).	P/SM flexibility skills as the degree to which purchasers act entrepreneurially in managing risk, making decisions, planning, using interpersonal communication, applying influence and persuasion, being internally motivated, and finding creative solutions to business problems.
Young-Ybarra & Wiersema 1999	Quantitative	Strategic Alliance Flexibility: 1) Modification flexibility; 2) Exit flexibility	Trust as an antecedent to strategic alliance, flexibility, and the outcome of characteristics of the alliance partners.	Modification flexibility- ability of partners to adjust their behaviors or the terms of the agreement in response to changes in the environment or to the needs of their partners. Exit flexibility – ability to exit a performing poorly alliance.
Johnston et al. 2004	Quantitative	Flexibility in coordinating activities	The effect of supplier's trust in the buyer firm on perceptions of the relationship's performance via inter-organizational cooperative behaviors (i.e. shared planning, joint responsibility for problem solving and flexibility in coordinating activities)	Flexibility in coordinating activities refers to willingness to vary from fixed contractual terms as conditions change.

Young, Sapienza, & Baumer 2003	Quantitative	Governance flexibility (supply-chain context)	Influence of flexibility in buyer – seller relationships on the productivity of knowledge.	Governance flexibility: Willingness of parties in a trading relationship to adapt, change, or adjust to new knowledge without resorting to a series of new contracts and renegotiations.
Wathne & Heide 2004	Quantitative	Flexibility in supply chain	The ability to show flexibility toward a (downstream) customer under uncertain market conditions depends on the governance mechanisms deployed in the (upstream) supplier relationship.	Flexibility describes the retailer's perception of the apparel company's flexibility in the focal relationship.
Cannon & Homburg 2001	Quantitative	Supplier flexibility	Factors affecting the buying firm's costs and intention to expand the supplier's share of business.	Supplier flexibility - ability to react to unforeseen (and unforeseeable) changes/ contingencies that could not have been predicted beforehand.
Johnson 1999	Quantitative	Flexibility in inter-firm relationships	Antecedents and consequences of strategic integration.	Firm's willingness to respond to changes and accommodate their partners as the need arises.
Vickery, Calantone, & Dröge 1999	Quantitative	Supply-chain flexibility: 1) Product flexibility; 2) Volume flexibility; 3) Launch flexibility; 4) Access flexibility and 5) Responsiveness to target markets	Dimensions of supply chain flexibility and their relationships with environmental uncertainty, business performance, and functional interfaces.	Product flexibility: the ability to handle difficult, nonstandard orders, to meet special customer specifications, and to produce products characterized by numerous features, options, sizes, and colors; Volume flexibility — the ability to effectively increase or decrease aggregate production in response to customer demand; Launch flexibility – the ability to rapidly introduce many new products and product varieties; Access flexibility – the ability to provide widespread or intensive distribution coverage; Responsiveness to target markets - the overall ability of the firm to respond to the needs of its target markets.
Bello & Gilliland 1997	Quantitative	Flexibility in Export Channels	Antecedents and consequences of coordination processes that govern the relationship between export manufacturers and their foreign-based distributors.	Parties' expected flexibility in response to changing channel circumstances.

Campion, Medsker, & Higgs 1993; Campion, Papper, & Medsker 1996	Quantitative	Member flexibility	Relationship between work group design characteristics and productivity, employee satisfaction and manager judgements.	Flexibility in job assignments (ability to perform each other's jobs within a group).
Gassenheimer, Calanotne, & Scully 1995	Quantitative	Flexibility in supply chain	Role of involvement and satisfaction in the dealer's supply selection process.	Bilateral expectation of willingness to make adaptations as circumstances change.

Table 1b. Flexibility in an intra-organizational research

Authors	Empirical approach	Flexibility form	Focus of the study	Flexibility definition
Yang et al. 2020	Quantitative	Strategic Flexibility – resource and coordination flexibility	How market orientation (MO) motivates firms to develop business model innovation and how such effects are moderated by strategic flexibility.	Strategic flexibility reflects the capabilities to identify major changes in the environment, to quickly commit resources to new courses of action in response to change, and to act promptly when it is time to halt or reverse such resource commitments.
Rialti et al. 2020	Quantitative	Strategic flexibility: resource and coordination flexibility	Exploration of the relationship between Big Data Analytics capabilities, knowledge management capabilities, ambidexterity (in the form of explorative innovation and exploitative innovation), and strategic flexibility.	Resource flexibility denotes an organization's ability to acquire resources with manifold uses, whereas coordination flexibility is the organization's propensity to generate innovative combinations of resources through internal coordination procedures.
Dubey, Gunasekaran, & Childe 2019	Quantitative	Organizational flexibility (OF)	Moderating effect of OF on Big Data Analytics capability – Supply chain agility and competitive advantage link Definition: OF - the degree to which an organization has a variety of managerial capabilities and the speed at which they can be activated to increase the control capacity of the management and improve the controllability of the organization.	Items: We can quickly change organizational structure to respond to demand and supply uncertainties; Our organization can cost effectively respond to sudden changes in the market; Our organization is more flexible than our competitors in changing our organizational structure.
Micevski et al. 2019	Quantitative	Sales intra-functional flexibility: resource flexibility; configurational flexibility	Sales department intra-functional flexibility (SIF) as an important driver of sales performance and customer satisfaction. SIF conditioning effect of salesperson role stress to firm performance and Customer Orientation moderating effect on SIF-Performance link.	Sales intra-functional flexibility - the extent to which salespeople are able to flexibly reallocate sales resources and then coordinate the use of these resources within the sales unit. Resource flexibility - the extent to which the sales department can shift resources from one use to another use; configurational flexibility - the extent to which salespeople have the ability to influence and shape how these resources are used.

Rofiq & Pramono 2019	Quantitative	Strategic Flexibility	Impact of environmental turbulence, strategic planning and strategic flexibility in shaping SMEs market orientation.	Strategy flexibility is defined as long-term flexibility that emphasizes the ability of a business to identify, formulate and manage various choices of strategies in the face of change and uncertainty.
Xiu et al. 2017	Quantitative	Strategic flexibility	Innovative HR practices as an important mechanism through which strategic flexibility affects firm performance, as well as the role of female leadership in this relationship.	Strategic flexibility is "the capability of the firm to proact or respond quickly to changing competitive conditions and, thereby, develop and/or maintain competitive advantage" (p.1337).
Fernández-Pérez, García-Morales, & Pullés 2016	Quantitative	Strategic Flexibility	CEOs' external social networks impact on cognitive factors (strategic schemas and self-efficacy in opportunity recognition - SOR) to affect strategic flexibility and organizational performance	Strategic flexibility is an organization's capability to identify major changes in its external environment, to commit resources quickly to new courses of action in response to change, and to recognize and act promptly when it is time to halt or reserve the commitment of such resources. Focus is on the managerial perspective proposed by Volberda (1996), in which strategic flexibility results from the combination of a great variety of managerial capabilities and provides the ability to activate them rapidly in the face of environmental change.
Li et al. 2017	Quantitative	Strategic Flexibility – resource and coordination flexibility	Interaction of resource structuring and strategic flexibility and their influence on radical innovation.	Strategic flexibility refers to the capability of a firm to reallocate and reconfigure its organizational resources and processes to manage high contextual uncertainty. Resource flexibility is defined as the special capability of identifying and acquiring the use of flexible resources that can offer strategic options for a firm to pursue alternative courses of action in responding to the shifts in its competitive context. In contrast, coordination flexibility is defined as the special capability to coordinate

				the use of resources to maximize the flexibilities inherent in the resources available to a firm.
Kamasak, Yozgat, & Yavuz 2017	Quantitative	Strategic Flexibility – resource and coordination flexibility	This study seeks to examine the roles of two contextual variables: environmental dynamism and strategic flexibility on developing knowledge process capabilities and innovation performance.	Strategic flexibility is the capability of recombining and reconfiguring the firm's resource stocks rapidly and executing the actions.
Günsel & Açikgöz 2013	Quantitative	Software teams flexibility	Relationships among software team flexibility, emotional intelligence, and software project outputs.	Two dimensions of software team flexibility: software team autonomy and software team diversity. Software team autonomy refers to the extent to which the team has the freedom to make its own project-related decisions and conduct its work the way its members deem fit without interference from senior managers outside the team. Team diversity refers to the composition of the team in terms of the backgrounds and functional expertise
Cadogan et al. 2012	Quantitative	Export flexibility: 1) export experience flexibility; 2) export decision-making flexibility; 3) export coordination flexibility	Impact of 3 types of export flexibility and export market oriented [EMO] behavior in export operations on export performance. In addition, the moderating role of EMO behavior and export environment with respect to the relationships between export flexibility dimensions and export performance.	Export experience flexibility: degree to which firms have accrued export experience provides exporters with flexibility when making export marketing decisions; Export decision-making flexibility – a form of internal entrepreneurship where managers are given more discretion to act upon information they have collected for themselves; Export coordination flexibility - coordinated decision-making regarding the choice of export market segments to target.
Zhou & Wu 2010	Quantitative	Strategic flexibility – resource and coordination flexibility	The role of technological capability in product innovation and the moderating effect of strategic flexibility.	Strategic flexibility is the ability of a firm to reallocate and reconfigure its organizational resources, processes, and strategies to deal with environmental changes. Resource flexibility - the inherent flexibility in resource allocations in pursuing alternative courses of actions; coordination flexibility – flexibility in coordinating the use of firm resources.

McComb, Green, & Compton 2007	Quantitative	Team flexibility (project teams)	Role of flexibility in project team effectiveness.	Team flexibility – the means by which team members function in a dynamic project environment. Flexibility is seen as making entities capable of collectively assessing their behavior and structure and making any adjustments necessary to function effectively at the present time or into the future.
Li, Liu, & Duan 2008	Quantitative	Strategic flexibility: 1) Resource flexibility; 2) Capability flexibility	The effect of the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and different strategic flexibilities on firm innovation.	Resource flexibility - the range of alternative uses to which a resource can be applied; the cost and difficulties of switching from one use of the resource to another and the time required to switch one use of the resource to another. Capability flexibility - firm's ability to efficiently integrate and deploy internal and external resources by exploring ways to create much more value, rapidly seeking out new opportunities in uncertain environments to make extraordinary benefit, and to choose proactive strategies in new business areas to obtain competitive advantage
Yuan, Zhongfeng, & Yi 2010	Quantitative	Strategic flexibility: 1) Resource flexibility; 2) Coordination flexibility	Moderating effect of strategic flexibility on the relationship between product innovation and firm performance	Resource flexibility – the range of alternative uses to which a resource can be applied; Coordination flexibility - firm's capability to effectively and efficiently integrate and deploy internal and external resources by exploring ways to create greater value, and rapidly obtain extraordinary benefit and competitive advantage in an uncertain environment

Lee & Xia 2005	Qualitative/ Quantitative	Information systems development projects (ISDP) team flexibility: 1) Response extensiveness; 2) Response efficiency	Development of measurement scales of ISDP team flexibility	ISDP team's ability to effectively and efficiently respond to business and technology changes. Response effectiveness - is related to such scope dimensions as range and variety; Response efficiency - encompasses such efficiency dimensions as time, cost, and difficulty

Table 2: Respondent profiles

Respondent Company	*Product Sector*	*Respondent Code/Job Title (Function) S = Sales M = Marketing*	*Number of employees*
1	Heating	**R1:** Commercial Director (S) **R2:** Key Account Manager (S)	51-100
2	Heating	**R3:** Head of UK Domestic Sales (S)	51-100
3	Heating	**R4:** Marketing Manager (M)	>1000
4	FMCG*	**R5:** Sales Manager (S) **R6:** Sales Manager (S) **R7:** Key Account Manager (S) **R8:** Head of Customer Marketing (S)	>1000
5	FMCG*	**R9:** Key Account Manager (S)	>1000
6	FMCG*	**R10:** Logistics Manager	>1000
7	Automotive	**R11:** Marketing Manager (M)	51-100
8	Automotive	**R12:** Sales Manager (S)	101-250
9	Publishing	**R13:** Marketing Manager (M) **R14:** Senior Sales Rep (S) **R15:** Field Sales manager (S)	101-250
10	Publishing	**R16:** Product Manager (M) **R17:** Sales Manager (S)	251-500
11	Publishing	**R18:** Sales Consultant (S)	>1000
12	Pharmaceutical	**R19:** National Sales Manager (S) **R20:** Marketing Manager (M)	>1000
13	Pharmaceutical	**R21:** Marketing Manager (M) **R22:** Sales Manager (S)	>1000
14	Electrical Components	**R23:** Marketing & Sales Director (M) **R24:** National Sales Manager (S)	21-50
15	Steel Industry	**R25:** Marketing Manager (M) **R26:** Sales Manager (S)	>1000
16	Rail technology	**R27:** Business Development Manager (M&S)	251-500
17	Gas supplies	**R28:** Marketing Director (M)	>1000

* Responses of the respondents from the firms in the FMCG sector reflect the relationship between M&S in the context of a business customer (i.e., the intermediary, distributor retailer). Using these experiences is aligned with the view that (business-to-business) B2B refers to business that is conducted between companies, rather than between a company and consumers. Therefore, transaction between firms, such as one involving a manufacturer and an intermediary (wholesaler, retailer) as here, is considered B2B.

Figure 1

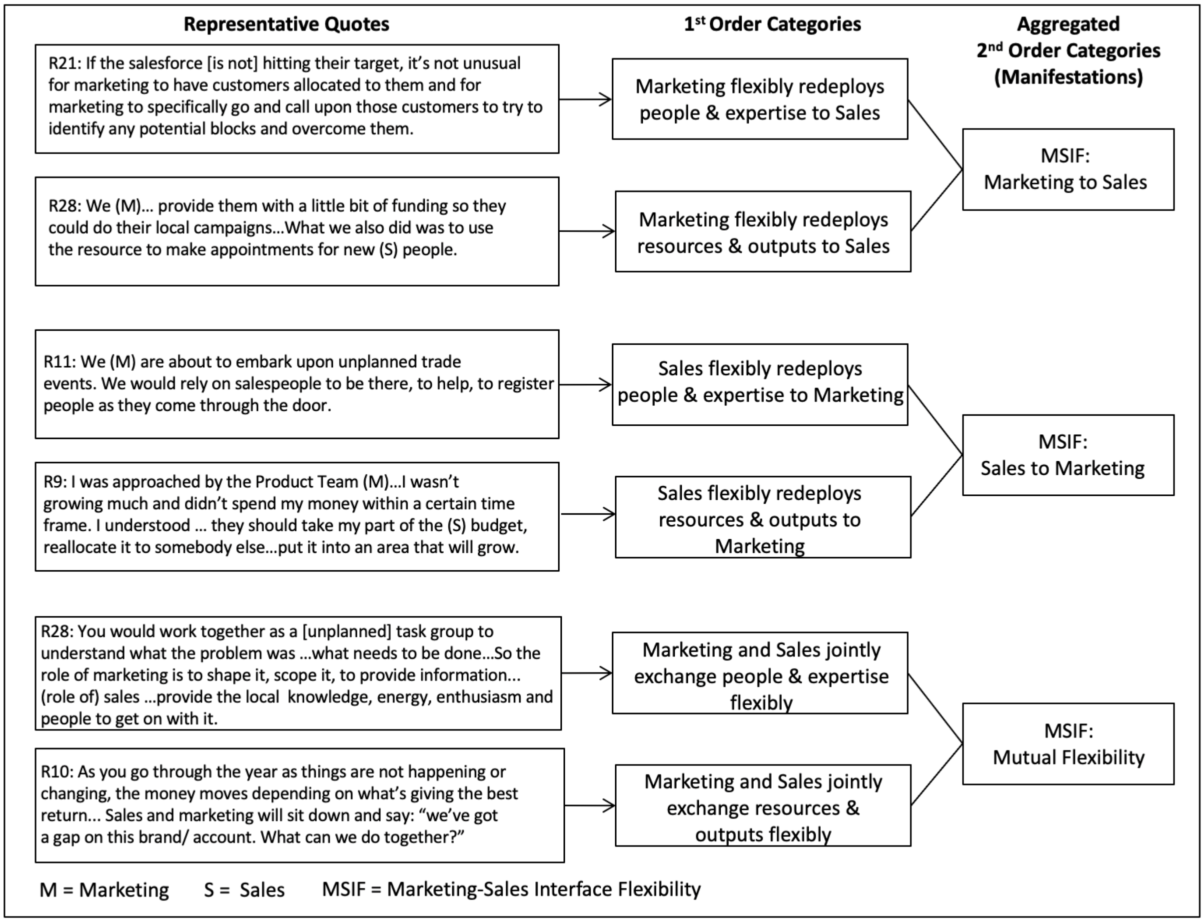

Figure 2: A model of marketing-sales interface flexibility