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**THE PROBLEM OF AMBIDEXTERITY  
IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONALIZATION**

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**PROBLEM *AMBIDEXTERITY* W KONTEKŚCIE  
INTERNACJONALIZACJI**

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**Summary:** The paper refers to the problem of ambidexterity in the international context. The purpose of this paper is to examine how ambidexterity enhances the process of innovation in international business. The problem has been analysed with the application of organizational performance measures including economic performance, innovation performance and international performance. The author used a systematic review of the literature as a research tool. The research was conducted based on the papers included in the international databases contained in international and domestic research papers. The tests included six digital databases (EBSCO, PROQUEST, ELSEVIER, EMERALD, JSTOR and WILEY) with most of the digital publications including words: “internationalization”, “innovation” and “ambidexterity”. The main research result was thus identified. The set of 19 research studies was the object of analysis. The author presented the general limitations of the research studies which created the possibilities of future projects’ development.

**Keywords:** innovation, ambidexterity, internationalization, performance.

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł dotyczy problemu *ambidexterity* w kontekście internacjonalizacji. Jego celem jest ustalenie, w jaki sposób podejście *ambidexterity* do organizacji wpływa na proces innowacji w zinternacjonalizowanym biznesie. Problem został przeanalizowany z uwzględnieniem zmiennych efektywnościowych, takich jak sprawność organizacyjna, sprawność innowacyjna i sprawność internacjonalizacji. Wykorzystano technikę systematycznego przeglądu literatury. W artykule zidentyfikowano wyniki głównych badań dotyczących problemu *ambidexterity* w kontekście internacjonalizacji. Przeanalizowano zbiór 19 opracowań. W tekście zaprezentowano najważniejsze ograniczenia dotychczasowych badań i wskazano przyszłe możliwości badawcze.

**Słowa kluczowe:** innowacje, *ambidexterity*, internacjonalizacja, sprawność.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, academic interest in the subject of internationalisation of firms has continued to grow. A significant part of the research concerns such organizations as high-technology or technology intensive firms (including the IT industry) which operate in the international environment. Most of the studies related to international entrepreneurship focused on determining the antecedents of the speed of internationalization in diverse countries and under multiple conditions [Monferrer et al. 2015]. Significant research has recently identified innovation ambidexterity as a key determinant of international success, which caused a large number of studies on ambidextrous firms, characterized as those that balance explorative and exploitative innovation activities in the international context [Atuahene-Gima, Murray 2007]. The purpose of this paper is to examine how ambidexterity enhances the process of innovation in international business. The author summarized the research studies related to the problem of organizational ambidexterity in the international context.

## 2. The role of ambidexterity and the performance issues in an innovative business environment

The simultaneous pursuit of, and balance between, exploitation and exploration is referred to as organizational ambidexterity [Tushman, O'Reilly 1996; March 1988; Hsu et al. 2013]. Another interpretation of ambidexterity emphasizes mutually-enhancing relationship between exploitation and exploration and focuses on the performance effects [Gupta et al. 2006; Jansen et al. 2006]. Exploitation refers to the refinement and extension of current knowledge, leading to incremental innovation. Exploration refers to the development of new knowledge leading to more radical innovation [Derbyshire 2014].

There are two competing approaches to the ambidexterity problem. The first is structural ambidexterity which refers to the development of structures to jointly conduct exploration and exploitation activities. The second approach refers to organizational ambidexterity, which creates an organizational setting that combines performance at operational level with organizational objectives (alignment) and incentives for creativity (flexibility). In this case, depending on their needs and their perception of the environment, individuals are free to decide to spend their time on activities related to either exploration or exploitation [Tushman, O'Reilly 2004].

Structural ambidexterity leads to balanced (and mutually-enhancing) combination of exploitation and exploration by distinguishing responsibilities for exploitation and exploration between different business units [Tushman, O'Reilly 2004]. However, in some cases, organizations design award systems to enable the simultaneous achievement of exploitation and exploration within the same organisational unit [Raisch, Birkinshaw 2008; Gibson, Birkinshaw 2004].

Although many studies show a correlation between organizational ambidexterity and the survival of organizations, some other studies focus on the problems of performance and greater competitiveness [Alpkan et al. 2012; Derbyshire 2014, p. 574].

Innovative performance is an aspect of organizational performance and it is also present in the research studies on ambidexterity [Benitez et al. 2018; Lee et al. 2017]. Performance, in the innovative context, refers to new product development "to the operational aspects of organizational performance such as adherence to customer need fulfilment and quality management" [Lee et al. 2017, p. 254]. The term innovation performance also refers to the quality of the innovation process, but the multiplicity of approaches generates a unique need for the design of an innovation performance measure [Mazur, Inków 2017].

### **3. The essence of international ambidexterity**

The assumption that the gist of internationalization is the exploitation of a firm's competitive advantages in overseas markets is present in numerous studies (for instance: [Caves 1971; Hsu et al. 2013; Hymer 1976]). Many authors argue that "a firm's internationalization is not only driven by its exploitation of existing advantages, but also its desire to explore and capture resources in overseas markets that strengthen corporate global competitiveness and long-term performance" [Hsu et al. 2013, p. 58]. This indicates the need for conducting "ambidextrous" management which allows simultaneous exploitation and exploration [Hsu et al. 2013; March 1988]. Such a management style, the so-called "international ambidexterity" exists when "firms strive to integrate exploitative and explorative strategies during the internationalization process and thus acquire an enhanced position to survive and compete against global rivals" [Hsu et al. 2013, p. 58].

The alternative approach, called the organizational vacillation approach, focuses on "dynamically achieving high levels of both exploration and exploitation by temporally and sequentially alternating between organizational structures that promote either exploration or exploitation, respectively" [Boumgarden et al. 2012].

Some authors suggested that organizations should go beyond a "local search" to engage in high degrees of exploration to avoid such disadvantages as: organizational myopia resulting from overemphasizing exploitation which reduces learning new capabilities [Radner 1975], the possibility to become "core rigidities" of the firms' core capabilities [Leonard-Barton 1992] or "competency traps" [Levitt, March 1988].

Amongst many studies on organizational ambidexterity, only a few of them refer to international conditions of operating. There is a term "international ambidexterity" introduced by C.-W. Hsu, Y.-C. Lien and H. Chen, who stated that "aside from organizational structure, contemporary multinational enterprises also show a significant tendency towards international ambidexterity in their strategic decisions. In

cases where firms strive to integrate exploitative and explorative strategies during the internationalization process and thus acquire an enhanced position to survive and compete against global rivals” [Hsu et al. 2013, p. 58]. The concept was followed by M. Karafyllia and A. Zucchella who also added a context of synergy [Karafyllia, Zucchella 2017].

The research studies about ambidexterity considered performance problems, including international performance. This type of performance in a general context has attracted some attention among researchers but there is no common valid operationalisation of this concept except distinguishing the objective and the subjective approaches to this measure. Some authors include in this case such indicators as the degree of internationalisation (in terms of foreign turnover/total turnover or upgrading the export venture outcome) [Jantunen et al. 2008; Martin et al. 2017].

Literature review of studies related to ambidexterity in the context of internationalization

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to realize the goal of the research in which six digital databases were analysed (EBSCO, ProQuest, Elsevier, Emerald, JSTOR and Wiley) with most of the digital publications including the words: “internationalization”, “innovation” and “ambidexterity”. Initially the author reached 165 studies. After excluding doublets and strictly conceptual papers, only 19 studies were left for further analysis (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The research reviews

Authors	The context of internationalization	The performance or competitiveness aspects of analysis	Research type	The research contribution
1	2	3	4	5
[Barlatier, Dupouet 2015]	MNE	Business-unit performance	Qualitative research	An analysis of the experiences of multinational firm showed that a community of practice (as a form of social network) at business unit level can serve as a knowledge platform for the organization. The study also offered conclusions about leveraging knowledge collaboration and spanning organizational boundaries (including the limits between exploitative and explorative functions).
[Boumgarden et al. 2012]	MNE	Organizational performance	Qualitative research	Ambidexterity and vacillation are complementary with respect to performance, albeit through different mechanisms.
[Bresciani et al. 2017]	MNE	Ambidexterity performance	Qualitative and quantitative research	The research delivered the evidence that MNEs need to develop knowledge management

Table 1, cont.

1	2	3	4	5
				The research delivered the evidence that MNEs need to develop knowledge management capabilities combined with ICT capabilities to obtain greater ambidexterity performance at the project portfolio level. It highlighted that KM (knowledge management) capabilities enhance alliance ambidexterity indirectly through firms' ICT capabilities.
[Han, Celly 2008]	INV	Superior performance	Quantitative research	The study demonstrated the opportunity for INVs to achieve superior performance and, through this competitive advantage. INVs can build their dynamic capability by developing strategic ambidexterity organically. INVs can gain trade-offs, achieve competitive advantages (time and cost), and build long-term sustainability.
[Hsu et al. 2013]	FDI	Economic performance	Quantitative research	Firms with a balanced ambidextrous configuration of exploitative and explorative FDIs outperform other companies. The integration of exploitative and explorative FDIs promotes firm performance in global competition. The contextual factors in the depth and breadth of a firm's overseas expansion significantly diminishes the performance effect of international ambidexterity. The research results reveal that speed of foreign expansion is related to a firm's performance of international ambidexterity.
[Hughes et al. 2010]	INV	Export venture performance	Quantitative research	There is an interplay between competitive strategies and innovation ambidexterity in creating positional advantages. Independent competitive strategies exhibit a positive impact on the corresponding positional advantages, but the relationship between competitive strategy and positional

1	2	3	4	5
				<p>advantage is partially mediated by innovation ambidexterity. The mutual impact of competitive strategy choices, innovation ambidexterity and positional advantages is an important performance factor. The research results contribute to the debates in marketing and management on innovation ambidexterity and reveal a basis to understand dysfunction (breakdown of ambidexterity) and mediocrity (inadequate generation of ambidexterity).</p>
[Jantunen et al. 2008]	Born globals	International performance	Quantitative research	<p>This paper contributes to the literature on born globals by introducing the concept of strategic orientations into this domain. The findings indicated that strategic orientations are related to a firm's international performance. This relationship is moderated by its international growth strategy.</p>
[Karafyllia, Zucchella 2017]	International ambidexterity, international performance	International performance	Qualitative research	<p>This study examines the significant yet unclear role of domestic market activities for internationalizing firms through the theoretical lens of exploitation and exploration. The research unveiled the six idiosyncratic combinations of exploitation and exploration that manifest between and within domestic and international markets.</p>
[Li, Gao 2017]	MNE	Competitive performance	Qualitative research	<p>The authors presented three contradictory points needing to be balanced and according to which three paradoxes emerge: exploitation from a similar knowledge base and innovation from a complementary knowledge base, efficiency and flexibility, as well as profit and breakthroughs. The authors theorized how paradoxical integration helps to manage these interwoven tensions. Further, the assimilate-integration-apply (AIA) path suggests a new behaviour logic and path choice for Chinese companies when they follow an ambidextrous strategy.</p>

Table 1, cont.

1	2	3	4	5
[Martin et al. 2017]	Born globals	Export venture performance, positional advantage	Quantitative research	The authors developed and tested the framework exploring the role of a balanced innovation approach, the ambidextrous innovation of born global firms.
[Mashahadi et al. 2016a]	Internationally operated HbSMEs.	Survival in a highly competitive international business environment	Quantitative research	The market orientation positively affects the establishment of technological and non-technological innovation ambidexterity in the context of internationally operated HbSMEs.
[Mashahadi et al. 2016b]	International business activity	Internationalization performance	Quantitative research	The result indicated that only strategic non-technological innovation ambidexterity is significant to explain the internationalization performance.
[Monferrer et al. 2015]	Born globals	International performance	Quantitative research	The study considered three specific knowledge-based dynamic capabilities analysing their interrelationship considering their exploration/exploitation duality: BG's adaptation capability, BG's absorption capability, and BG's innovation capability. The results of the research confirm that network market orientation facilitates the development of dynamic, exploratory capabilities (adaptation and absorption capabilities) in born globals. They also indicated the influence of born globals' capacity to exploit knowledge through innovations, thereby obtaining higher performance.
[Nielsen, Gudergan 2012]	International strategic alliances	Alliance performance, innovation performance, upstream performance, downstream performance	Quantitative research	The empirical study analysed the ambidexterity argument and demonstrated that exploration and exploitation are separate strategies with different antecedents and performance consequences

1	2	3	4	5
[Peng, Wu 2013]	Global production networks (GPN)	Operating efficiency, future adaptive capability	Qualitative research	The research revealed that: the key to successfully transferring from process and product upgrading to function or chain upgrading in GPN for the LCF is to establish its ambidexterity over time; LCF could achieve ambidexterity through creating diverse ties in GPN, namely develop diverse cooperative partners and patterns in different value functions over time; and the process of the LCF building ambidexterity in GPN is incremental, which needs the previous exploitation as a basis.
[Prange, Bruyaka 2016]	Ambidextrous internationalization strategies	Economic performance (sales)	Qualitative research	The first research goal was to use the concept of ambidexterity (here: inside-out and outside-in internationalization), which could explain the dual internationalization process. The second research goal was to explain in the ambidexterity perspective in the context of international business, how internationalization determines the nature of innovation. The study provided evidence that many Chinese firms follow an inside-out approach to internationalization and primarily focus on process innovation but those firms that implement ambidextrous internationalization strategies develop both product and process innovations and appear to exhibit higher performance.
[Xu et al. 2015]	MNE	Competitive performance	Quantitative research	The study revealed the mechanisms of international enterprises' market knowledge development and behavioural outcomes and it extended the ambidexterity theory. Contrary to the Uppsala model in the 1970s, the research contribution lies in revealing a strategic balance of marketing exploitation and exploration in relation to market adaptation for the success of overseas expansion.



Table 1, cont.

1	2	3	4	5
[Yang, Gabriellsson 2017]	High-tech business-to-business INVs	Competitive advantage	Qualitative research	The research revealed that due to the iterative, incremental, and co-creative nature of the process, marketing decision making in high-tech business-to-business INVs that is more effectual than causal, results in more entrepreneurial marketing. Entrepreneurs alternate causal and effectual marketing forms because of their ambidextrous entrepreneurialism, and variations in the internal uncertainty, technological uncertainty, and any market turbulence faced by the firm. The authors developed a dynamic model presenting the alternation between effectual and causal processes, and the feedback loop of entrepreneurial marketing.
[Zhou et al. 2016]	MNEs: export, outsourcing, foreign equity investment or foreign direct investment	Innovation performance: new product development, new product commercialization	Quantitative research	To examine the impacts of ambidextrous capabilities, explorative capability and exploitative capability on product innovation performance in the context of internationalization and cross-cultural environment; and to examine the moderating effects of CEO's preference of risks and opportunities in the international market on the relationship between ambidextrous capabilities and multinational enterprises' (MNEs) product innovation performance.

Source: own elaboration on the basis of the quoted studies.

The most often used context of internationalization was MNEs (multinational enterprises) which appeared seven times, while the context of international performance five times. The research studies also concerned INVs (international new ventures – three studies), born globals (three studies), but also FDI (foreign direct investment – one study), general international activity (one study), global production networks (one study), international strategies (one study), international strategic alliances (1 study) and general international ambidexterity (two studies). The research outcomes were published from 2008 to 2018, which means that the problem is still very important.

The research authors indicated some limitations and the direction of future analysis. The limitation of sample size and quality was indicated by a group of authors [Zhou et al. 2016; Yang, Gabrielsson 2017; Karafyllia, Zucchella 2017; Mashahadi et al. 2016b; Han et al. 2008; Bresciani et al. 2017; Boumgarden et al. 2012; Barlatier, Dupouet 2015]. This creates a promising field including:

- the role of personal networks in the work environment that enhances knowledge flows in multinational organizations,
- the competing roles of ambidexterity and vacillation in creating international performance,
- identification of ambidexterity enhancing capabilities and their impact on performance,
- the superior performance determinants of INVs' long-term sustainability,
- the analysis of efficient resources allocation to enable SMEs adopt ambidexterity in international business activity,
- the continuation of the research on the role of domestic market activities for the internationalizing firm, and combinations of exploitation and exploration that manifest between and within domestic and international markets,
- further development of a dynamic model presenting the alternation between effectual and causal processes, and the feed-back loop of entrepreneurial marketing,
- in-depth analysis of explorative capability and exploitative capability on innovation performance in the context of internationalization and national cultural differences.

Future studies could re-examine the effect of international ambidexterity from the subsidiary's viewpoint of FDI, not only from the parent firm's perspective, considering the configuration of overseas subsidiaries. Future studies should retest the effect of ambidexterity's level under different circumstances. Additionally, future studies could also explore the effect of the balance between a firm's ambidexterity in domestic and international markets and its link with the firm's dynamic capabilities [Hsu et al. 2013].

The analysis of innovation ambidexterity seems incomplete without some form of synthesis among innovation ambidexterity, competitive market strategy, and RBV [Hughes et al. 2010].

The findings of A. Jantunen et al. indicated that strategic orientations are related to a firm's international performance. This relationship is moderated by its international growth strategy, but additional analyses would be required because measures of strategic orientations reflected the current situation, whereas decisions related to international growth strategy have been made in the past, and a more longitudinal research setting would therefore be needed to capture the dynamics related to this process. The complexity and dynamics of the strategic orientations of born globals is likely to continue to be of relevance and interest for the foreseeable future [Jantunen et al. 2008].

The findings could stimulate further research on firms with different domestic markets and organizational characteristics. Further research in other firms, markets, industrial and geographical settings and scales could provide better generalizability of findings. Differences should be investigated, and comparisons should be made among firms in relation to firm age and size. The findings concerning the role of networks should be corroborated by evidence from all the partners involved. The results may be limited to those firms. This has not suggested a link between product exploitation–exploration and domestic-international market activities. Future studies should elucidate the value of product exploitation and exploration in the examination of synergies and tensions between and within domestic and international market activities.

Temporal effects existing among marketing capabilities, marketing communication, competitive strategy, and export venture performance are not accommodated within this empirical framework and need further research including longitudinal data to capture dynamic influences [Martin et al. 2017].

The model by D. Monferrer et al. represents a specific reference contribution based on which new effects can be proposed through the consideration of new factors and does not contemplate all the variables that could explain the dynamic capabilities of BGs. It is recommended to introduce other result variables into the proposed model, which will allow analysis of the consequences associated with the development of these capabilities by the BGs. It is also recommended to focus on the network market orientation construct and study the specific effects of the latter on the BG's internationalisation process, including an analysis of network affiliation and the firm's positioning in it in context of knowledge accumulation, experience and resources from network partners [Monferrer et al. 2015].

According to B.B. Nielsen and S. Gudergan [2012], competency similarity is conducive to upstream innovative performance. Prior experience with the partner is potentially damaging for innovation performance. Trust and cultural distance do not play significant roles for innovative performance. When the motive is efficiency and downstream market performance, prior experience with the partner instead is beneficial, as are high levels of trust and low levels of cultural distance.

Research using network ties is constrained by the limitations of considering direct ties from the perspective of an ego-centric network but indirect ties between partners also are significant conduits for the transfer of information and knowledge and can affect the ambidexterity. The integration effects of direct and indirect ties of the LCF (latecomer firm) in GPN (global production networks) are a promising area for future study. The research design is according to the criterion of a single case study strictly, a large sample empirical survey is necessary to test these propositions and enhance the results' generality in the future [Peng, Wu 2013].

The study by C. Prange and O. Bruyaka focused on understanding what drives different types of innovation. Applying an ambidexterity perspective to the context of internationalization strategy, it reconciled the need to implement both outside-in

and inside-out strategies and to achieve higher performance results. Further empirical research is required to confirm and generalize this study's findings [Prange, Bruyaka 2016].

The study by H. Xu et al. [2015] highlighted the importance of balancing marketing exploration and exploitation in shaping a firm's marketing capabilities and market adaptation in international markets, but it analysed only cross-sectional data. It is recommended for future research to conduct a longitudinal study to acquire an in-depth, process-oriented understanding of market knowledge development and marketing ambidexterity activities in international enterprises. Another recommendation for future research is to use multiple respondents from each firm or to use more rigorous measures to improve the validity of the research. The study showed that a balanced development of marketing exploration and exploitation influences marketing capabilities and market adaptation, which also needs further analyses.

#### 4. Final remarks

The analysis delivered several conclusions. There were no published research studies conducted in Poland. Some studies referred to emerging economies, but there is no systemic approach comparing different economic conditions as variables. Most research authors indicated the methodological limitations in their studies. This means that the research should be conducted with the application of the same problems and variables but it needs a bigger or more diversified sample. The authors also often recommended more advanced statistical methods to assess the causality in the future research. In this way, research can provide better opportunities for generalization. The role of ambidexterity in the international context is still a fertile field of research.

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