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Impact Pathways:

A home for insights from relevant and impactful Operations and Supply

Chain Management research

Abstract

Design/Methodology/Approach

This commentary provides a brief overview of the IJOPM's Impact Pathway (IP) section, taking stock of the contributions that have been published so far, analysing their topics, methodologies, insights, and impact.

Purpose

IJOPM's IP section has been launched in 2020 to host short contributions grounded in current managerial practices and/or policy development, challenging established operations and supply chain management (OSCM) knowledge, and highlighting innovative and relevant research directions. This commentary reflects on the achievements of the section, delineates the key features of IP papers, and stimulates further development.

Findings

The 18 contributions published over the last 3 years have dealt with a variety of emerging topics, ranging from the COVID-19 response to additive manufacturing, leveraging on key evidence from managerial practice that challenges consolidated knowledge and theory, providing clear research directions, as well as managerial and/or policy guidelines.

Originality/Value

The commentary reflects on the importance of phenomenon-driven research that seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, thus increasing the impact and reach of OSCM research. This is a call for contributions from scholars, business leaders, and policymakers to develop further impact-oriented research.

Keywords: *Impact, impact pathways, research, industry, policy, research agenda, practice, theory*

1. Introduction

With technological, social, economic, and wider societal changes happening all around us at a faster pace than ever, operations and supply chain management (OSCM) scholars face the critical task of remaining relevant as well as impactful and influential to business, government, and society in the research they conduct. The focus of the International Journal of Operations and Production Management's (IJOPM) Impact Pathways (IP) section, founded in early 2020, is to capture those changes in industry, policy, and society that are vital for OSCM scholars and advance our understanding, thinking, and practices. IP represents a category and type of article that differs from the traditional empirical or conceptual research articles that comprise the majority of IJOPM's published outputs. IP articles are brief thought-pieces that clearly position and explain a contemporary issue, problem and/or challenge that business leaders or policymakers are facing, and which we, as OSCM engaged scholars, should bring to the attention of the journal's readership.

OSCM has been conceptualised as a field encompassing traditional internal operations management and connected relationships with suppliers and customers at multiple tiers of supply chains and networks (Voss, 1995; Cooper et al., 1997; Van Hoek et al., 2001; Srari and Gregory, 2008). It has a range of distinct features - such as its roots in practice, its research methodologies, and its theoretical underpinnings - that allow its researchers to study the various challenges faced within and outside a firm and across multiple levels (Srari et al., 2020; Harland and Roehrich, 2022). OSCM research studies are often deeply embedded in individual behaviours, organisational, supply chain or network practices and challenges, they build on a wide range of theoretical underpinnings, and they are conducted by deploying a range of methods, including in-depth case studies, surveys, ethnographic, action research studies and experiments (e.g. Voss et al., 2002; Choi et al., 2016; Coughlan and Coughlan, 2002).

While OSCM studies often build on, test, elaborate, or develop theory (e.g. Meredith, 1998; Walker et al., 2015), the focus of the IP section in IJOPM further zooms in on the relationship between theory and practice. This relationship is important for management scholars in general,

and for OSCM scholars in particular, as *“management theory provides the basis for management practice, and the practice in turn helps to reinforce the development of management theory. [...] Management practitioners and professionals are in the vanguard of management practice, and their practice provides the opportunity for reviewing existing management theories and even developing new ones”* (Inyang, 2008: 124-125).

Management scholars (e.g. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Van Maanen et al., 2007), alongside OSCM scholars (e.g. Binder and Edwards, 2010; Walker et al., 2015), have repeatedly emphasised the relationship between the validity and power of a theory and its empirical reality. It is widely recognised that the empirical nourishes the conceptual, as data provide evidence to support, refine, elaborate, or develop a theory (Van Maanen et al., 2007), and thus improve our understanding of and insights in the managerial reality. The practice of many OSCM scholars to engage with practical problems in their research reveals avenues for theories to emerge, to be elaborated and to be tested (Tate et al., 2022).

Deploying ‘gap spotting’ and ‘problematization’ (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011), it is common for OSCM researchers to identify and challenge assumptions and spot gaps in current OSCM thinking and practice. Based on this, researchers formulate research questions (RQs) and hypotheses to then leverage empirical evidence to formulate, test and refine (OSCM) theory and thinking. This then leads to the development of new insights, and new or expanded theory. IJOPM’s IP section is part of a movement towards further emphasising a problem-driven empirical scholarship, complementing conceptual and theory-driven developments.

We advocate here that IP submissions should be phenomenon-driven (derived from practice and/or policy), and should aim at closing the gap between OSCM theory and practice/policy. This may further ensure that the development of our field is grounded in practices, processes, and policy. Thus, IP articles are based on frontline insights whereby business leaders and policymakers, through their interactions with scholars, help to identify future problems, questions, and directions for fruitful investigations. The IP section expects high quality, succinct and focused writing that shows engagement from and interaction with practice and/or policy, that

produces original and researchable insights, and that identifies pathways for future research and impact.

Since its inception in early 2020, the IP section has published 18 manuscripts and we, as (consulting) editors, believe that it is time to not only take stock of what has been achieved with this timely initiative, but to also provide further guidance and a clear outlook for future contributors.

2. Taking stock

This section provides a brief history of the IP section in IJOPM, followed by an overview and discussion of the IP manuscripts that have been published in the period from 2020 to mid-2023.

2.1 A brief history of IP's initial motivation and development¹

There is a rich tradition of special tracks and workshops at past EurOMA (and other OSCM) conferences - facilitated by distinguished academics - focused on the impact, relevance and reach of OSCM research. This has motivated a small team of OSCM scholars to meet with IJOPM's Editors in Chief to discuss new ideas for publishing impactful and relevant research. The meeting took place in November 2019. After a careful review of top OSCM journals which were operating more interventionist and developmental papers, the team proposed to set up IJOPM's Impact Pathway section.

The IP section focuses on contemporary and relevant work, aiming to become a seedbed for catalysing future OSCM scholarship. We want to provide OSCM scholars (and their co-authors from practice, policy, and other fields) an opportunity to disseminate timely insights on pressing topics and issues (e.g. COVID-19 during 2020) in an accessible (i.e. using clear language), concise (up to 3,000 words) and time-sensitive manner (published in a shorter timeframe than regular

¹ A podcast is now available on the IP section: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_85R9Kjpr8

IJOPM submissions), while retaining the critical elements of authenticity and scholarly rigour for submissions to one of OSCM's premier journal outlets. Thus, we ensured to align IP submissions with IJOPM's goals in four ways by: (i) spurring new and exciting research informed directly by practice and policy challenges; (ii) providing unique insights from scholars, business leaders, and policymakers making a valuable contribution to future research debates; (iii) acknowledging that manuscripts are shorter and less theoretically informed than 'typical' IJOPM manuscripts; and (iv) achieving fast "time-to-market" for timely and strategically important thinking to kickstart viable and impactful OSCM debates and practices.

Our motivation was for the IP section to enable authors to be recognised more quickly, in comparison to regular academic submissions, by the OSCM community as (developing) experts in a particular sector, research area, theme and/or emerging topic that is highly relevant to and timely for OSCM. We were keen for authors who successfully publish their latest research in the IP section to benefit from a significantly enhanced reputation as experts in a specific topic at the cutting edge of OSCM practice and/or policy. Thus, we aim for timely and insightful manuscripts that are well-written, mostly grounded in interactions with individuals, teams or organisations that are directly involved in relevant OSCM challenges, impacting the OSCM community by advancing our collective knowledge.

Our initial announcement of the IP section - published in early 2020 - called for manuscripts meeting the following key characteristics:

- 1) interesting to read and advancing the field of operations and supply chain management (OSCM) by suggesting directions for future research;
- 2) creating scholarly and wider (business or policy) impact for IJOPM;
- 3) creating opportunities for further development into full empirical research submissions (e.g. offering a liaison with organisations and providing an opportunity to co-author with industry and government); and

- 4) outlining which methods are used to identify the problems or challenges, gather data, and develop actionable solutions.

2.2 Overview of IP manuscripts and their wider impact

Since the official launch of the IP section in early 2020, there has been a steady flow of manuscripts on topics such as, but not limited to, digital transformation, 3D printing, and the vaccine supply. We are thankful for all authors to have submitted their timely and impactful research for consideration at IP. Table 1 provides an overview of the published IP manuscripts and their key insights. Given that the early stages of the IP section coincided with the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic - an unprecedented event of continuous waves of supply and demand disruption that was evolving rapidly (Van Hoek, 2020) - OSCM scholars were keen to explore the range of challenges that came with it. Not surprisingly, this has led to eight IP manuscripts offering different OSCM perspectives on how to address COVID-19-related challenges.

Across the published IP manuscripts, authors have used a variety of research methods and data collection instruments, with case studies and interviews (sometimes combined with secondary data) being most frequently deployed. Some manuscripts rely on data collected through workshops and roundtables with leading decision-makers. The IP contributions have in common that they leverage recent and relevant empirical evidence. This evidence is either stemming from a single, case or from observations of multiple managers, firms and institutions, challenging existing knowledge and consolidated model and theories. The manuscripts demonstrate that new research is required to understand and explain new phenomena, or to find answers to new challenges. They also provide some preliminary proposals for new explanations, models, and theories, which of course need further empirical investigation and theoretical refinement. As such, they are paving the way for new and relevant research.

< Please insert Table 1 about here >

Table 2 shows some metrics for assessing reach and impact of the published IP manuscripts. For IP manuscripts, both the number of citations (a metric subject to the typical delay of the publication process), and the number of downloads are high, indicating that IP publications attract significant attention. The Altmetric indicator - capturing the dissemination in non-academic outlets such as news outlets, blogs, and social media –shows that the reach beyond the academic community is so far rather more limited.

< Please insert Table 2 about here >

Feedback received from authors of IP manuscripts – albeit anecdotal – indicate the wider impact of their work, for example through engaged discussions on social media (e.g. LinkedIn and Twitter), referrals and invitations for workshops with business leaders and policymakers, and further research opportunities, as exemplified in the following quotes:

“... my digital transformation Impact Pathway piece is generating a lot of interest - not only from academics, but also from many business leaders and consultants. I am already receiving requests from businesses [...] to give talks to senior leaders.”

(Professor Feng Li, Head of Technology and Innovation Management, Bayes Business School, UK)

“My LinkedIn post on the Impact Pathway research paper has attracted 6,000+ views in 24 hours and many researchers are commenting publicly or directly that they are going to use the paper – thank you for the opportunity.”

(Professor Remko van Hoek, Professor of Supply Chain Management, Walton College of Business, University of Arkansas, USA)

3. Dissecting IP manuscripts and charting a path ahead

Having discussed the IP manuscripts that were published since the launch of the IP section, we will now provide some insights for authors interested in submitting their research study to

IJOPM's IP section. We do not seek to be prescriptive and limiting future contributors who seek to publish their timely and impactful work in IJOPM's IP section, but rather to provide some guidance and tips for shaping future submissions for the benefits of the wider OSCM community.

We remind the reader that the IP section offers a home for manuscripts written and organised in an accessible (e.g. simple and clear language; logic flow of argumentation) and concise (up to 3,000 words) manner, while retaining the critical elements of authenticity and scholarly rigour for submissions expected for IJOPM. Also, the structure of the submission ideally meets the following criteria. The introduction to the IP submission clearly positions (What are the study's boundaries?) and motivates (Why is this topic/challenge important, timely and relevant for the OSCM community?) the IP manuscript. A condensed theoretical background section briefly synthesises and critiques what we know about a specific topic or challenge, and where the gaps are in our current thinking and understanding (What have prior studies not considered?; What is new to the OSCM community?). This is supported by (a condensed list of) references as evidence that the work builds on prior research in OSCM. The IP manuscript clearly states its contribution to the advancement of a specific area within OSCM.

This is supported by a brief discussion of the methodology implications (What data has been collected and how?; What is the sampling logic for the team, organisation, industry, or other unit of analysis under study?). As IP manuscripts are not opinion pieces nor detailed literature reviews, empirical data are important. Authors should build on their data and provide clear insights from their data to show advancement of OSCM's thinking, understanding and practices (What are key insights from the data that the reader will learn?). We do not expect extensive data collections and sophisticated data analyses, nor full methodology sections as in regular manuscript submissions. For instance, exemplary cases, interviews with relevant managers or expert panels are sufficient, if they provide insightful and thought-provoking evidence. Findings should then illustrate key insights to set up the back-end of the IP manuscript. Bringing this all together, the manuscript's back-end provides a rich and insightful discussion to advance OSCM community's

understanding and thinking as well as identifies research opportunities and shape future research agendas (What can the OSCM community learn from this IP manuscript?; How can future research further develop our thinking, understanding and insights with regards to the topic or challenge under investigation?; What are the manuscript's pathways for future research and impact?).

< Please Figure 1 about here >

Through the IP section, we aim to build a community of scholars who produce high quality practice and applied work, and stimulate future relevant and impactful research. Figure 1 summarises the overall approach of the IP section. The figure suggests that the researcher works with the business leaders/policymakers to collaboratively formulate and re-formulate the research problem to be investigated (Philips, 2020). Then appropriate research methods need to be designed to intellectually bridge across from problem(s) to the discovery of potential solution(s). This bridging is achieved over time through the careful analysis and synthesis of the data collected by the researcher (Groop et al., 2017).

Also, the researcher continually shares findings with business leaders/policymakers who provide regular (re-) iterations into solution/insight formulation. Therefore, there are feedback loops in Figure 1 to show that the output of the process of (re-)iteration is then input back into the bridging and problem structuring step, causing new outputs from each part of the process. For instance, the design and adoption of a “human-centric” analytics forecasting system took three years to build through on-going interactions between researcher and client. The pharmaceutical company participating in the project sought to develop and improve the accuracy of forecasts to counter “bullwhip effects” in inventory caused by “cherry-picking” customer behaviour, in a complex product-market scenario (Phillips and Nikolopoulos, 2019).

We now briefly discuss some selected, but by no means all, possible future impact pathways. Our selection is considered to be representative, but not all encompassing. We call upon you, our OSCM colleagues, to work closely with business leaders and policymakers to explore

these, and many other, impact pathways. In Table 3, we outline some possible trends and future pathways which may be emerging over the next few years for both scholars and practitioners. We do not intend to restrict the range of topics and methods. Rather, we encourage authors to propose new and emerging ones, stemming from empirical evidence, and based on challenges that firms, institutions, and the society in general are facing. The IP section welcomes highly original impact pathways, in these as well as in other areas, that utilise frontline evidence to benefit and propel the development of OSCM.

< Please insert Table 3 about here >

We have entered an era of supply chain disruptions and unprecedented high levels of uncertainty such as Brexit, COVID-19, the Ukraine-Russia war, EU-China and USA-China trade wars. They have exposed the fragilities of the global supply chain model based on transactional economic efficiency. World trading organisations no longer provision free trade but implement tariffs and embargoes as pressure to unhook countries such as Russia from the global supply chain. The resulting fragmentation and shifting mental models (Gary and Wood, 2011) to deal with “de-globalisation” offer opportunities for researchers.

The area of geopolitical risks upon supply chains is still under-developed and we seek pathways breaking new frontiers and boundaries on policy making and its links with and impact on supply chains (Moradlou et al., 2020; Roscoe et al., 2022). For instance, reshoring supply chains and rejuvenating post-industrial areas to create new capacity in the EU, to reduce the strategic dependence from oversea, is a new challenge that requires high consideration. Several emerging supply chain risk sources, such as wildlife trafficking, illegal trading activities, modern slavery, etc. are under-investigated and lack conceptualisation and problematisation. New regulations are emerging at different levels, such as the EU Supply Chain Due Diligence Directive, creating new strict requirements that affect not only single firms, but also their supply chain, thus requiring new research on their impact and on how to make them really effective.

Recently, we have witnessed a shift in the supply chain policy landscape in reaction to the Ukraine-Russia war. For instance, Alexander et al. (2022) have argued for building OSCM research in what some have termed the “new normal,” including war and some of the repercussions stemming from it. Chipman (2016) has made a case for firms to have a “foreign policy”, implying that they have to consider the geopolitical context and decide how to position themselves, as demonstrated at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This will be more and more important in the future. Increasing attention has been given to the “weaponisation” of supply chains by governments (Srai et al., 2023). What is the nature and form of such weaponisation and what does this mean for future supply chain design, network reconfiguration, and supplier relationships? This offers opportunities for researchers to investigate the influence of international relations and geopolitics on supply chain management.

In terms of technology, the 5th generation wireless network (5G) is at the top of government and business leaders’ agenda as it holds the potential to stimulate economic growth through creating employment and business opportunities (Dolgui and Ivanov, 2022). A growing number of 5G studies have argued that it is a disruptive technology enabling smart, connected solutions and eco-systems as part of digital transformation (Li, 2020). However, we call for more empirical research into real-world practices (Choi et al., 2022).

OSCM solutions based on artificial intelligence (AI) are expected to be potent instruments to help organisations tackle the new challenges. They can be applied in, for instance, demand forecasting, product recommendations and customisation, dynamic pricing, real-time production tracking, prevention of order shipment delays and inventory shortages, customer feedback collection for product development, and supplier monitoring for procurement costs reduction (Fosso Wamba et al., 2022). There are gaps in our understanding of the development of appropriate theories, concepts and models for firms and supply chains to benefit from and manage the possible risks of AI (and other emerging technologies).

The radical changes that AI and automation are driving in operations will also affect human labour and employment, eliminating some low-skilled jobs while creating the need for new, high-skilled jobs. Workforce shortages in the supply chain have recently become a major problem in Europe, the USA, and other parts of the world. The warehousing and transportation sector suffers from shortages in skills and capabilities. Therefore, future impact pathway research may develop around human resources (HR) capacity and capability issues. HR management is largely an underdeveloped area of knowledge in OSCM and its role in the supply chain requires more substantive pathway development. While AI/automation might solve (some of) these labour shortages, research is emerging on its failure through the lack of “human centricity” in the design and adoption of digital technology in operations (Nguyen Ngoc, 2022). Human centric design is a concept that offers a fertile ground for researchers to explore OSCM systems that are built more in empathy with workers and managers.

Beyond what has been briefly discussed in this section, business leaders and policymakers have to grapple with other big and emerging “trends” that are ripe for investigation. This includes, but is not limited to, resilience or sustainability (especially climate change, deforestation, or biodiversity). We further encourage OSCM scholars to closely work with business leaders and policymakers to continue exploring future possible impact pathways, and to consider submitting their insightful work to IJOPM’s IP section.

4. Concluding thoughts

For OSCM research to be relevant and impactful and to further increase in reach, OSCM research needs to advance management theory, translate into teaching and interactions with students, and/or make a difference in business, policy, and society. IP manuscripts seek to enable and encourage OSCM scholars to work with business leaders and policymakers, to jointly present evidence and to showcase insights derived from data to develop insightful research agendas for the advancement of OSCM scholarship.

Authors successful in publishing their research insights in the IP section potentially enhance their reputation as experts for industry and policy relevance in a specific topic. This is evidenced to date by the comparatively high numbers of citations and downloads of published IP papers. Through the joint promotion (e.g. via social media) of IP insights by the publisher, editors, and authors, these insights can be disseminated to wide networks of not only academics, but also - increasingly - business leaders and policymakers. As the IP section matures and attracts a growing number of high-quality manuscripts, the reach and impact of IP insights will further expand. We will continue, as OSCM community, to provide a platform for disseminating timely and impactful insights for academics, business leaders, and policymakers, and thus create opportunities to further develop collaborative and impactful collaborations.

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