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Customer Centricity as a New Trend in the Development of International Trade Theory

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Abstract:

Purpose: *International trade theory has evolved over the centuries, with considerations ranging from the macro level to the meso level and finally to the micro level. At each stage of the discussion on international flows of goods, authors addressed issues related to costs, and later stages paid increasing attention to efficiency, production equipment, and, finally, innovation. However, given the development of the economic environment in the 21st century, it is important to recognise the growing importance of a clear understanding of customer needs in trade. It is customers and their specific circumstances that influence interest in products/goods, which can determine the development of international trade. Therefore, could a thorough understanding of customer needs constitute a new research trend in the development of international trade theory? This aspect has not been widely addressed in the literature on international trade, but has been more a subject of marketing research. It is therefore crucial to understand consumer needs as a key factor shaping international trade and to determine which individual customer factors can be considered when adapting products to specific consumers in foreign markets, often with diverse cultural conditions. The aim of this article is therefore to answer these questions and explore the practical aspects of effectively adapting products to target markets.*
Design/Methodology/Approach: *The author initially used a literature review-based research methodology, followed by observations of a group of Polish entities cooperating with him in the internationalisation of business. In the former case, the authors analyzed aspects of product adaptation to target markets, as well as the contemporary approach to creating value that is interesting to customers. The author has applied this knowledge to international trade through his scientific and business experience, as well as his market observations from close daily cooperation with entities engaged in international activities. Based on these analyses, the author developed a research scope for entities considering or developing international operations.*
Findings: *The author identified groups of demographic, psychographic, cultural, marketing and sales, economic, and geopolitical characteristics/factors, the analysis of which is important for understanding the behaviour and needs of customers in foreign target markets. For each of these groups, the author identified aspects whose understanding could help present goods to the target market that meet consumers' needs and expectations, thereby stimulating growth in foreign sales.*
Practical Implications: *Companies developing their foreign sales can, based on the indicated groups of characteristics, conduct marketing research in potential target markets*

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before launching sales in a given market. Implementing such activities may reduce the risk of failure in this expansion, thereby reducing financial, time, and image losses.
Originality/Value: *The literature on international trade has so far addressed issues related to product adaptation to target markets. However, beyond general considerations in this area, no studies have been identified that specify which aspects should be examined. This article addresses this research gap, and the author has attempted to identify the characteristics/conditions of consumer behaviour in foreign markets, which should serve as a prelude to conducting analytical research before commencing foreign sales.*

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1. Introduction

The theory of international trade has evolved over the centuries, with considerations ranging from the macro level to the meso level and finally to the micro level. At each stage of the discussion on international flows of goods, authors raised the cost-related issues. In later stages, they increased their attention to issues of efficiency, production equipment, and, finally, innovation. It was only in the new theories of trade that a group of ideas emphasising the important role of consumers emerged more prominently. These were supply-and-demand theories, dominated by the doctrines of similarity of preferences and product differentiation.

The theory of product differentiation held that a product's country of origin was one of the factors influencing consumer decisions, and that these effects could be due to political or psychological factors, among others. In this context, we can refer to economic patriotism, which is firmly rooted in Norway, for example, and which causes consumers to choose certain goods over others. The psychological aspect can also be linked to brand loyalty. This theory was linked with consumers' love of variety, as described by Krugman (1980), among others.

However, looking at the development of the economic environment in the 21st century, one should note the growing importance of understanding customer needs in international trade. It is customers and their specific circumstances that influence interest in products/goods, which may determine the development of international trade in goods.

Therefore, could a thorough understanding of customer needs constitute a new research trend in the development of international trade theory? The consumer needs aspect is all the more important because it has not been widely addressed in the literature on international trade, but has instead been the subject of marketing research.

Therefore, it is important to understand consumer needs as a key factor shaping international trade and to determine which individual customer factors can be taken into account when adapting products to specific consumers in foreign markets, often with diverse cultural conditions. It is important because existing theories of international trade have mainly analysed the costs of the processes involved in the production of goods or their efficiency. At the same time, the product itself has not been given sufficient consideration.

All of this is more important in view of the widespread processes of globalisation, alongside a growing countertrend: regionalisation. The source of this process may be the widespread differences in cultural, political, or socio-economic conditions across individual countries and their inhabitants. Explaining these issues is important because, in today's world, market success (both in the domestic and foreign markets) is primarily determined by understanding customer needs and adapting to them.

2. Literature Review

In the context of foreign expansion, the literature offers two approaches to introducing products to new markets: standardisation, which is considered from a globalisation perspective and involves offering products with similar characteristics in new markets, and the opposite approach of adapting the product to a given market.

From the perspective of this article, the author, in reviewing the literature, focused on the adaptive approach as the one that, in a broader sense, pays attention to the needs of consumers in target markets.

The literature indicates that most products fail in international markets due to insufficient adaptation. Therefore, Kotler and Armstrong (2008) introduced the concept of an adapted marketing mix, and the reasons for its application were indicated as better satisfaction of consumer needs, striving for product differentiation, enabling competitive advantage, and the legal and political conditions of a given country.

Vrontis and Thrassou (2007) also pointed out that companies developing their international activities use a mixed approach to sales in foreign markets, combining, on the one hand, the use of standard marketing mix tools and, on the other hand, the adaptation of solutions to the unique conditions of a given target market. They noted that differences in consumer behaviour, both between and within markets, result from specific combinations of collective and personal parameters. Therefore, standardisation and adaptation are not mutually exclusive.

The reasons for adapting a product to a given market included cultural conditions, market development, competition, law, economic differences, sociological aspects, differences in consumer perceptions (in terms of taste, lifestyle, needs and desires), consumer beliefs and practices; physical environment, motivational factors for purchase and use, required standards, consumer purchasing patterns, purchasing motives, flexibility in meeting ambiguous consumer needs and requirements, technological aspects, political environment, degree of customer similarity, marketing infrastructure and differences in physical conditions.

On the other hand, among the aspects specific to the product/service most subject to adaptation to a given market, pre-sales services, product/service differentiation, design, functionality, delivery, and assembly were identified. They also noted that international companies should not treat the world as a single market, but should research and consider the needs and desires of consumers, as well as their problems (Vrontis and Thrassou, 2007).

The various needs and desires implied by the adaptive model were also discussed in the context of preferences and differences in socio-economic conditions in target markets (Hussain and Khan, 2013), but also in terms of intense competition forcing product differentiation, the need to adapt to requirements in terms of, for example, packaging, legal aspects, consumer conditions and lifestyles, the level of literacy of the population or its income level. In this context, it was emphasised that an individual approach is key to understanding each consumer's needs and preferences (Bennet, 2008). The influence of local behaviours, tastes, attitudes, and traditions on a given market was also discussed more broadly in relation to food products (Barbu, 2011).

It was noted that these are sensitive to local tastes and habits. It was added that durable consumer goods are subject to more homogeneous demand and predictable adjustments, while industrial products are less exposed to cultural differences. This adjustment may concern, for example, packaging (with different interpretations of its colour and form across countries). In addition, consumer characteristics in developing markets may indicate a tendency to buy expensive, high-quality products to signal their growing purchasing power.

Thirteen categories have also been identified as the main arguments for adapting products to target markets (Eze, Inyang, and James, 2024), i.e., cultural differences, legal and regulatory environment, economic differences, competitive landscape, consumer behaviour and preferences, differences in distribution channels and infrastructure, differences in political and social factors, exchange rates and inflation, risk management, customer trust and loyalty, differences in technological progress, and discrepancies in social and ethical values.

Before implementing a glocalisation strategy in companies, international marketers should conduct in-depth market research to understand local consumer behaviour, preferences, cultural nuances, and economic conditions. This data can help them tailor their product strategy, promotion, pricing, and positioning to the specific needs and expectations of the target market.

It was assumed that products must be adapted to the unique requirements and preferences of the local market, which may involve modifying their features, sizes, or functionality to suit local tastes. In addition, they must consider factors such as language, labelling, and compliance with local regulations. Glocalisation is now a new area of research in international trade, combining adaptation and standardisation factors.

Due to technological developments, the importance of e-commerce is growing rapidly. In this regard, references to consumer needs are also highlighted (Liu, 2024). The influence of cultural factors on cross-border trade in the e-commerce channel has been recognised, playing a key role by influencing consumers' purchasing decisions and transactional behaviour.

When discussing cultural factors, reference was made to language, religion, values, and social customs that may influence consumer needs and preferences for products and services. For example, some cultures place greater emphasis on gifts and etiquette, and therefore, such societies are more generous when buying gifts and holiday products.

On the other hand, other cultures may place greater emphasis on brand and quality, preferring to purchase so-called high-end products. Cultural factors also influence consumer trust and sense of security, as in some cultures, trust-based relationships and social credit are very important, and consumers prefer to buy from sellers they know and trust, which means that building trust and providing reliable customer service are crucial to attracting them.

Therefore, the adaptive school is dominated by the belief that customer requirements and expectations need to be researched. On the other hand, apart from general categories of characteristics, no specific aspects related to this have been identified regarding the conditions that determine consumer attitudes, needs, and expectations.

Additionally, as technology advances, the emphasis in such studies is on the e-commerce sector, which does not represent the entire global trade but only a specific, albeit very important, segment of it. These factors have created a research gap at the intersection of international trade theory and marketing strategies, warranting further investigation.

The customer-centric approach is also supported by the evolution of management systems used in enterprises, which is taking place alongside a dynamically developing economic environment and causing methodologies that place the customer – the consumer – at the epicentre, as the one who de facto ensures the functioning of a given business model, to play an increasingly important role.

In this context, there can be a reference to two methodologies, namely Design Thinking, popularised by IDEO, but whose origins can be traced back to, among others, the design approach (Simon, 1996; McKim, 2017) and Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2012). Their application may prove crucial for foreign expansion by enabling adaptation to consumer needs.

The first of these methodologies is an innovative approach to creating a human-centred offering that meets consumer expectations and satisfies their needs. This approach is based on a thorough understanding of the customer, which is achieved through a stage called empathising. The result of this approach is the creation of solutions that meet customer needs to the greatest extent possible. The essence of this approach is also to verify the solution created by the entity at subsequent stages by referring to evaluations from specific consumers.

Thus, the involvement of recipients and their evaluation of the solution materialize at subsequent stages of creating such an innovative solution. From this point of view, there is an ideal combination of factors based on empathy, creativity, and a pragmatic approach to customers' actual expectations. Taking this approach into account in the creative process makes it possible, on the one hand, to develop solutions that will meet actual demand. On the other hand, due to its complexity, it minimises the risk of possible failures.

The second methodology, i.e., the Business Model Canvas, is a concept for gaining competitive advantage based on a key understanding of the organisation's customers and the market. It is this detailed knowledge of the customer that determines the organisation of the entire enterprise, its processes, and its operating model, in order to provide the customer with an offer that not only surpasses the competition but also enables the organisation to sustain this advantage in the long term.

The organisation of enterprises in relation to this methodology takes into account nine key elements, which can be divided into revenue-generation and cost factors. From a revenue perspective, the key elements are customer segments, the value they receive, the channels used to reach them, and the relationships maintained with them. From a cost perspective, the key elements are the primary resources, activities, and partners required for the model to function.

According to this concept, it is the customer who determines how a given company is organised. Each business model can be targeted at several customer segments, but because of their specific characteristics and expectations, the elements that deliver the expected value will differ. That is why it is so important not only to understand customer needs, but above all to identify their characteristics that influence their expectations of the market. This identification is important because women may have different needs and expectations than men, young people other than older people, etc.

The life factors that have influenced these customers since their early years, such as the environment in which each consumer grew up, may also differ. A mass customer will have different expectations than a so-called niche customer, and thus, different decision-making factors will arise in each case.

Understanding these aspects enables tailoring the offer to these expectations, ensuring not only the functioning of a given model but also its long-term development. This is because the values expected by a mass customer (e.g., the price factor may play a key role here) will differ from those of a niche customer (e.g., greater emphasis on quality or other added value, such as functionality).

From this point of view, values can therefore be both quantifiable and objectively comparable, as well as unquantifiable, for example, based on a given consumer's experience with the offer received from the market or on aspects of subjective design assessment. Qualitative determinants may also arise in the context of customers for whom the brand or the opportunity to emphasise their social status is important. Therefore, understanding the needs of these customers will allow us to tailor our offer and highlight its unique features in order to ultimately interest the customer in taking advantage of our offer.

The two aspects above will influence the channel through which the customer expects to be reached, and thus how the opportunity to purchase is created for them, as well as how this process unfolds. Increasingly, these channels are automated, which is reasonable for some customers' expectations but not necessarily for others, given their expectations of greater "customer care". For example, wealthier customers want their social status emphasised, so their expectations focus on more personalised service, including from the distribution channel's perspective.

These aspects obviously also determine how relationships with individual customer segments are maintained. Moreover, as we have seen, mass customers do not expect advanced support, emphasising the price factor as the key one. On the other hand, customers who emphasise their status will want their service to be personalised exceptionally or uniquely. In addition, they would like to receive additional elements that effectively create a value chain. Therefore, customer service here will be more determined by factors aimed at providing additional attractions.

The four elements above influence how companies monetise their activities. In today's world, given the widespread digitalisation supported by innovative artificial intelligence solutions, as well as the trend towards the complexity of the solutions offered, there is a shift from generating one-off revenues towards recurring revenue, because they can generate greater long-term revenue than incidental sales. Recurring-revenue areas are becoming increasingly widespread, including the printing equipment sector, transport services (airlines), e-commerce, and brick-and-mortar retail.

The second part of the business model, in terms of the BMC concept*,* addresses the costs incurred by companies and builds on the assumptions of the global supply chain concept. There is probably no company on the market that would independently carry out all activities from design, through production, distribution, after-sales service, to disposal.

To organise the model in this way, it is essential to analyse the resources a given entity has, which it uses in its operations, and those that are necessary to deliver the value expected by customers. An analysis of one's own resources indicates the needs in this area that business partners can meet. Therefore, production resources that ensure the appropriate quality of manufactured goods and meet customers' delivery expectations are important here.

In addition, the quantity and quality of appropriate human resources, as well as the know-how that distinguishes a given entity on the market, are also crucial for the functioning of any organisation. Returning to the first part of the model, it is precisely the relevant customer segments and their expectations that will determine which resources are necessary for the model's functioning, which should be considered a priority, and in which direction they should be further developed.

Another aspect relates to key activities that are important from the point of view of customer expectations, and here we can refer, for example, to the sale of assets, or, looking at it in a more engaged way, to solving their problems, as in the case of IT solutions or consulting services.

As mentioned, for any model to function, it is necessary to create partnerships that supplement a given entity's resources with those that are lacking and that also lead to synergies, strengthening the solution's competitiveness. The specific nature of the enterprise sector clearly indicates that, despite market competition among entities, they can also find areas of cooperation that enable them to achieve benefits. The best example of this is Apple and Samsung, which have fought numerous so-called "patent wars" that have resulted in legal disputes.

At the same time, however, market realities have led Samsung to become an important supplier of components for Apple's flagship products. At the same time, such strategically important cooperation can occur between non-competitive entities operating in other markets, whether geographical or product-related.

The state of own resources, the amount of external resources required, the scope and quality of key activities, and partnerships all have a clear impact on the cost structure of such an organisation. It is the approach of a given entity and its strategic concept of operating on the market that determines the appropriate cost structure, which not only ensures the viability of the business model, but also correlates with the revenue side to ensure that not only will the latter be at a higher level, but also that this difference will continue to grow steadily in the long term.

Thus, this methodology has become a valuable tool for both analysing and designing business strategies for entities intending to enter foreign markets or expand their presence in them.

The aspect of meeting consumer expectations in terms of value is appearing more and more frequently in the literature, and one of the key concepts in this regard is the aforementioned concept of the value chain (Porter 1985). According to his assumptions, at each stage of a company's operations, there is an activity that enriches a given product offering and provides a source of benefit (value) for the customer, which determines its market reception and affects the product's cost. It was Porter who argued that the source of competitive advantage for a given offer is the value it delivers to its customers.

3. Methodology

The author initially used a literature review-based research methodology, followed by observations of a group of Polish entities cooperating with him in the internationalisation of business. In the former case, the authors analyzed aspects of product adaptation to target markets, as well as the contemporary approach to creating value that is interesting to customers.

The author has applied this knowledge to international trade through his scientific and business experience, as well as his market observations from close daily cooperation with entities engaged in international activities. Based on these analyses, the author developed a research scope for entities considering or developing international operations.

4. Research Results and Discussion

The literature review, when compared with the author's observations, indicates that, increasingly, a company's potential is the primary determinant of trade development, consistent with the assumptions of the new theory of international trade. At the same time, however, considering the contemporary approach to value creation, which takes into account the key aspect of understanding consumer needs, it is precisely

this aspect, as well as the alignment of the company's offer with those needs, that can not only cause international trade to occur, but also its development. In international relations, customer needs in target markets may stem from both internal and external factors.
The author's research identifies the characteristics/conditions of consumers in the context of foreign trade, which are key to understanding and concluding the adaptation of products/services for sale.

Concerning the individual elements of the business model, the author analysed which factors are important to consider to ensure the sale of goods on foreign markets from the perspective of end-user characteristics. The study indicated the following aspects, presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Unique consumer characteristics that need to be understood in target markets*

Characteristics	Issue
Demographic	• Age, including the age structure of the population, trends related to the ageing of the population, and the purchasing needs and preferences of each group • Age-related health status of the population (including, for example, food intolerance, combating diet-related diseases, or lifestyle and resulting preferences for ready meals) that may determine interest in specific categories of goods, such as functional or organic food • Gender as a factor relevant to the perception of market realities and decision-making priorities (e.g., technical features and design, etc.), as well as adequate interest in specific product groups • Education is important from the perspectives of quantitative and qualitative expectations, including awareness of purchasing power, which may also correlate with the wealth of the population • Marital status determines purchasing priorities in terms of both decision-making factors and funds allocated to a given purpose, including fertility-related factors, thereby indicating purchasing preferences in priority product categories • Level of literacy in society • Functioning diasporas within a given country and migratory movements
Psychographic	• Lifestyle resulting from the wealth of the population, leisure activities on offer, and geographical and territorial conditions, which translates into purchasing needs in this area • Interests resulting, for example, from natural conditions in target markets related to preferences for mountain equipment in areas with this type of terrain or for water sports in countries with wide access to water bodies • Consumer personality in terms of social characteristics, e.g., introvert and their preferred product range (taking into account,

	for example, their characteristics), or extrovert preferring more daring solutions due to their desire to stand out • Physical and emotional needs of consumers • Routine activities performed by consumers • Difficulties, frustrations, and challenges encountered in everyday life • Fundamental problems to be solved in everyday functioning • The consumer's immediate environment – what they see around them and on the market, and who they have around them • Life factors affecting these customers, which have conditioned their existence from an early age, such as the environment in which a given consumer grew up • Social status, the characteristics of which determine the expected product features (quality, image) that enable this position to be maintained or built
Cultural	• The brand of the supplier country and the perception of a given nation in target markets, including, for example, issues of prevailing stereotypes regarding given nationalities • The accepted system of values, norms, and behaviours in a given society, consistent with the canon appropriate for a given cultural circle, including issues related to the importance of family and family ties, religion and beliefs, etc. • Accepted consumer habits, including those related to holidays and customary occasions, especially those celebrated in a given market • Consumer perceptions in terms of taste and lifestyle • Reasons for choosing goods from another country over local products • Feelings when using foreign goods: curiosity, uncertainty, excitement, fear
Marketing and sales	• The digitisation of society determines the preferred distribution channels in terms of e-commerce purchases versus brick-and-mortar stores • The brand's communication style, including its language, must be adapted to the norms accepted in a given country, taking into account factors such as cultural aspects (e.g., white as the colour of mourning in China) • The expected level of customer care from the seller during the purchasing process • Purchasing patterns and motives • Expected flexibility in meeting ambiguous consumer needs
Economic	• Per capita income reflects the wealth of the population, indicating the possibility of generating prices for goods that are acceptable to them • The share of individual categories of goods in household expenditure, determining, on the one hand, the degree of prosperity of society in accordance with Engel's concept and, on the other hand, their preferred range of expenditure

	• A country's level of technological development determines the preferred sales tools, including the appropriate payment methods • Population migrations, which shift demand from domestic to foreign markets, are exemplified by Poles migrating to the United Kingdom after accession to the European Union. In this context, there was a "following" of, for example, food products by their consumers, including the opening of shops selling Polish food on that market. Such issues are currently noticeable in Poland as a result of the influx of the Ukrainian population after the start of the full-scale war by the Russian Federation • The opening of shops selling Polish food on that market. Migration is also facilitated by the movement of people associated with scholarship or internship programmes, such as the Erasmus programme.
Geopolitical	• Armed conflicts and related sanctions and embargoes lead to a decline in interest in the products of the country on the other side of the dispute • Political views and attitudes towards goods from foreign countries • Attitude towards globalisation vs. regionalisation

Source: *Own study.*

The issue of adapting to customer needs can be illustrated by the stereotypical perception of goods manufactured in China as cheap and low-quality. However, the fundamental issue concerns the customer segment these goods are targeted to and their preferences. If customers expect goods based on price, they will choose low-quality goods and use platforms such as AliExpress, Temu, or Shein.

However, this stereotype does not fully reflect market realities, considering China as an economic powerhouse and one of the most innovative economies in the world, which, after years of being the world's factory, is now entering a phase of global innovation, as can be seen, for example, in consumer electronics and the automotive sector.

The essence of getting to know customers thoroughly is not to stigmatise them, but to understand them in depth, which should enable products to be tailored to their needs or, at a more advanced level, to create needs among them, which is particularly important when attempting to expand into culturally foreign markets.

Taking into account the literature review and knowledge of international trade theory, the author believes that the flow of determinants in foreign trade will be redirected towards product-related conditions that create unique values, ensuring adequate demand for products (not entities or their production factors).

In an era of intense competition between entities, the author believes that it is not cost or technological factors that will be key, but rather a better knowledge and understanding of the target customer that will ensure success. Hence, the importance of direct exports as a factor ensuring direct access to the target market, but above all to the consumers operating in it, may grow. One can use tools from the trend monitoring or big data processing areas here.

5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

Cost factors, natural factors, production equipment factors, and the implementation of innovative solutions continue to determine mainly consumer purchasing decisions in foreign markets.

However, in an era of perfect competition, it is crucial to look beyond price to stand out, which will increasingly be achieved through a thorough understanding of customers in target markets. In the author's opinion, the trend is clearly moving towards customer centricity and a good understanding of their needs and expectations, which will enable the offer to be tailored to these criteria. Cost does not always have to be the primary purchasing determinant.

Only a good understanding of the consumer allows us to offer them a product that takes into account the parameters they prefer in an individual approach, which, in the author's opinion, will be the primary determinant of international trade in the coming years. In this value-oriented model, aspects such as transport costs, organisation, or production costs will take a back seat when the customer receives a solution that fully reflects their needs.

This is evidenced, for example, by the failed expansion of the Lidl chain into the Norwegian market at the beginning of the century. In the author's opinion, awareness of this need may lead to a new trend in international trade theory, focusing on customer-centricity in international relations.

The characteristics/conditions of customers presented in the article should be further analysed by the researchers from the perspective of their essence and their implementation across different socio-cultural environments.

The specificity of each market worldwide means that the same factor will not always be equally important in all of them, which is why they should also be individually adapted to their conditions, which shows how important this issue is in international trade.

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