



Distributor Whistle-blowing Deterrence: A Review and Prospects

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Abstract. In channel marketing, the phenomenon of distributors uniting, or "banding together for warmth," serves to consolidate their voice in advocating for collective interests and bolstering market presence. However, this excessive cohesion may foster detrimental competition within the channel, adversely affecting overall performance. Internal whistle-blowing among distributors emerges as a crucial mechanism to mitigate opportunistic behaviors. Nevertheless, in societies where relationships (GUANXI) prevail⁴, the costs of promoting internal whistle-blowing significantly surpass its advantages for the distributor network. Consequently, this study suggests harnessing the deterrent impact of internal whistle-blowing to diminish channel management expenses while concurrently obstructing the spread of opportunistic practices among the cohesive distributor collective. Although deterrence perception has undergone thorough investigation in psychology and related fields, it remains underexplored within the realm of marketing channels. This paper, therefore, delves into the theoretical underpinnings of deterrence perception, delineates the interplay between distributor whistle-blowing and collective deterrence effects, and underscores the pivotal role of deterrence in shaping future inquiries in channel marketing.

Keywords: Distributor whistle-blowing; the dealers' "banding together"; Perceived deterrence; Network Intensity

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, to address the challenges posed by the capital "winter" and heightened market competition, distributors across several provinces in China have moved away from their traditional "closed-door" business approach towards strategic collaboration and the formation of distributor consortia. This shift has led to an increasing trend of distributors "banding together for warmth," uniting their voices in competitive yet cooperative relationships with manufacturers to advocate for their interests, prompting manufacturers to offer concessions and compromises, thereby securing a stronger market presence. For instance, within the liquor, real estate, and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industries, distributors have formed consortia as a means to improve their negotiating position in partnerships^{1,3}. Another case in point is the 2022 interview by the China Supply and Marketing Cooperative Network with a general manager from

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Qufu's Nongdeli Fertilizer Distribution Center, who emphasized the importance of agricultural distributors "grouping together for warmth." He argued that the current market conditions are unfavorable for going it alone; manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers must closely collaborate to collectively succeed in the market².

The trend of distributors "banding together" has emerged as a key tactic to collectively address market uncertainties and enhance profits. This strategy promotes cooperation and support among distributors, reducing harmful competition and improving overall channel performance¹¹. However, it may also lead to alliances forming against manufacturers⁹, potentially harming their interests²⁶. As distributors increasingly unite, their excessive solidarity allows for the creation of distinct channel norms. This situation fosters opportunistic actions within the channel, challenging manufacturers and disrupting established norms for higher benefits.

In channel management, fostering lasting and close partnerships requires more than just fulfilling contractual duties (i.e., in-role behaviors); it also demands engaging in activities beyond these duties, known as extra-role behaviors (Wuyts, 2007). These behaviors are crucial for improving relationship quality, building trust, reducing transaction costs, and boosting overall performance and satisfaction (Wuyts, 2007; Autry et al., 2008). Originating from organizational behavior research, the study of these behaviors extends the traditional understanding of channel dynamics. Wuyts (2007) introduced the idea that extra-role efforts by channel members, going beyond mere contract compliance, significantly contribute to enhancing both individual and collective channel outcomes. Whistle-blowing, an inter-organizational behavior, is widespread in various industries^{1,3,7}, particularly within the FMCG sector, where distributor misconduct is often reported. Misdeeds range from cross-regional sales (Kashyap, 2017) and misusing manufacturer funds to deceptive practices like falsifying information. Such whistle-blowing acts deter unethical behavior, fostering a culture of integrity as peers' actions influence workplace norms through moral identification¹⁰. This study explores the role of whistle-blowing in preventing excessive distributor collusion in marketing channels, according to channel behavior theory. It specifically examines the reactions of bystander distributors to whistle-blowing events¹⁸. Notably, companies like the Guizhou Moutai Group encourage whistle-blowing with incentives for reporting counterfeit activities among distributors.

In this channel system, distributors navigate a balance of competition and collaboration, distributing products from the same manufacturer and ensuring mutual interests through vigilant interaction. Recent research primarily explored the binary manufacturer-distributor dynamics to reduce opportunism via relational and contractual measures, aiming to boost channel performance. However, new studies have ventured into "manufacturer-wholesaler-retailer" triadic networks^{2,19}, assessing manufacturers' "cross-bridge" strategies through structural hole theory. This paper focuses on the manufacturer-distributor axis, especially on how whistle-blowing affects distributor solidarity. It examines the response of bystander distributors to whistle-blowing by Distributor A (the whistle-blower) about Distributor B (the reported entity) to the manufacturer (the regulatory body), and its deterrent impact on collective cohesion.

2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH ON DISTRIBUTOR WHISTLE-BLOWING AND DETERRENT EFFECTS

1. Distributor whistle-blowing

Whistle-blowing within organizations is the act of employees reporting peers' misconduct to authorized bodies for corrective measures (Miceli & Near, 1984), serving as a crucial preventive tool against undesirable behaviors (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). It's categorized based on target and impact, distinguishing reports against senior management or the entire organization from those against colleagues (Trevino & Victor, 1992), and splitting into internal (to organization leaders) and external (to outside entities or regulators) whistle-blowing (Miceli & Near, 1984). This process exposes issues, aiding in the correction of wrongful acts and promoting ethical standards, thereby playing an essential role in internal governance and bolstering organizational health and integrity¹⁰. Beim et al. (2014) expanded whistle-blowing to inter-organizational levels within marketing channels, addressing illegal, unethical, or non-compliant behaviors. Members report such issues to appropriate entities (other members or departments) for corrective action, marking it as channel whistle-blowing. This approach transcends individual organizational boundaries, involving multiple channel entities and extending beyond ethical issues to include business ethics, economic performance, and industry standards. Channel whistle-blowing aligns with the collective interests of the marketing channel, aiming to maintain its integrity and efficiency. It not only addresses immediate concerns but also promotes long-term, sustainable inter-organizational relations, enhancing the overall health of the marketing channel.

Social network theory suggests that individual behaviors within a network are influenced by both direct relationships and the wider network environment (Brass D.J., 2004). Wang (2013) et al. discovered that harsh penalties from manufacturers deter speculative behaviors among distributors, with the perceived fairness of penalties enhancing trust in the manufacturer^{19,23}. Xiao (2019) found that punishment's intensity impacts speculative behaviors in an inverted U-shape^{14,15,24,25}. Empirical evidence shows whistle-blowing by distributors reduces opportunism among peers. Yet, in the current trend of distributors "banding together" for greater profits⁵, collective actions increase their influence and manufacturers' dependence on them. Establishing whistle-blowing channels addresses the root issues by increasing the costs for distributors who choose to unite¹⁹.

Existing research on distributor whistle-blowing has predominantly examined its motivations and effects, largely overlooking how diverse whistle-blowing approaches can generate different psychological impacts within distributor networks¹⁸. In examining inter-organizational trust, especially within Chinese contexts, scholars have identified stark contrasts between Chinese firms and their Western counterparts, noting that trust in Chinese businesses heavily relies on personal connections²². Fang Tony (2003) highlighted the paramount importance of interpersonal over organizational trust in China, as distributors often perceive the conduct of supplier boundary staff as reflecting their company's culture, ethics, and incentives⁶. Respectful treatment by manufacturer

boundary personnel towards distributor counterparts fosters trust that can encompass the whole manufacturing entity (Yao et al., 2021). Accordingly, this research follows prior academic insights to differentiate whistle-blowing channels into formal inter-organizational processes established by channel managers and direct interpersonal disclosures to company managers or staff. It examines whether distributors, amidst prevalent "banding together" behaviors for mutual benefit, might reassess their collective actions upon seeing varied whistle-blowing tactics by peers, particularly when such behaviors might incur higher punitive costs¹⁸.

2. Perceived deterrence

Deterrence theory, integrating insights from economics, law, sociology, and social psychology²⁶, has broadened its application, illustrating how anticipated risks and punishments modify behaviors. Primarily, it seeks to compel adversary compliance via deterrence strategies (Downs, 1989), widely applied in both military and international arenas, and to prevent criminal acts within the legal domain. In marketing, it addresses grey market issues. It manifests in two forms: specific, preventing reoffense among criminals, and general, deterring public misconduct through penalties (Homel, 1986; Askers 1994). At its core, deterrence is a conditional behavior, relying on the actor's rational anticipation of consequences, thus emphasizing the importance of the actor's subjective expected utility judgment (SEU) over the deterrence policies themselves (Jervis, 1989).

John Ball (1955) emphasized the need for more empirical evidence to solidify deterrence theory, highlighting that punishment's true deterrence relies on its certainty and that its effectiveness is shaped by the violator's expectations rather than punishment's inherent characteristics. He noted, "A law holds no power if unknown to its potential violator." Gary Becker (1968) argued against viewing crime as a result of abnormal psychology, suggesting it's a rational choice based on cost-benefit analysis, with the likelihood of punishment being more critical than its severity. Research by Ehrlich (1973), Blumstein and Nagin (1977), Wolpin (1978), among others, confirmed that the predictability and harshness of sanctions dictate their deterrent value. Adding to this, later studies introduced enforcement speed as a determinant, asserting that deterrence hinges on the "certainty," "severity," and "speed" of punishment (Homel, 1986; Vingilis, 1990). Since Greerken and Grove introduced the perceptual theory of deterrence, the focus has shifted to viewing deterrence as a social psychological concept, emphasizing threat communication's role in influencing behavior via individual cognition^{13,22}. This perspective sparked ongoing research, expanding deterrence's application beyond traditional legal sanctions to include the broader, indirect effects of punishment's threat on deterring crime. By the mid-1980s, Williams and Hawkins (1986) advocated for a comprehensive view of deterrence, incorporating both direct and indirect effects of legal punishment threats on behavior. They distinguished between penalties linked to criminal acts and those arising from legal responses. For example, avoiding drunk driving might be motivated more by fear of social repercussions than legal penalties, illustrating how social stigma and the potential for personal loss, like diminished respect from significant others, contribute to deterrence. This enriched deterrence theory by considering various deterrent factors, including social disapproval and the personal

costs of guilt or job loss, emphasizing the role of legal and extralegal deterrents in shaping behavior.

In essence, human behavior is guided by self-interest, weighing the costs and benefits of actions. This rational evaluation influences decisions, prioritizing actions that offer maximum net benefit or utility. Deterrence theory portrays humans as inherently rational, suggesting a universal inclination towards opportunistic actions if benefits outweigh costs (Taylor et al., 1973). Thus, criminal behavior parallels other actions, distinguished only by individuals' cost-benefit assessments (Lattimore & Witte, 1986). Similarly, within marketing channels, distributors inclined towards opportunism when potential rewards surpass risks. The "banding together" strategy, however, spreads the repercussions of misconduct across the group, effectively lowering the deterrent effect of potential penalties. This dynamic facilitates a reduction in the perceived costs of opportunistic behaviors¹⁷, promoting such actions under collective strategies. This framework underscores the need for strategies that consider both individual rationality and collective dynamics in mitigating opportunistic behaviors within channels^{13,22}.

Nagin & Pogarsky (2001) refined deterrence theory by incorporating the principles of certainty, severity, and celerity of punishment, arguing that crime occurs when expected benefits outweigh expected costs. This aligns with the traditional view of deterrence theory, which holds that the uncertainty of punishment reduces its expected utility, particularly because benefits are often immediate upon committing the offense, while punishment is delayed. Therefore, the benefits of crime are seen as a present value, while the costs incurred from punishment are considered a future value. The delay in punishment effectively reduces the impact of sanctions over time, underscoring the significance of prompt punishment. Deterrence theory distinguishes between formal and informal sanctions: formal sanctions are enforced by authoritative bodies for violations of rules; informal sanctions, or social sanctions, are penalties individuals impose on others for observed behaviors^{13,22}, independent of formal legal entities (Armin Falk, Ernst Fehr, Urs Fischbacher 2005). The role of social sanctions in deterring norm or legal breaches (Paternoster 2010) is dual: firstly, informal sanctions can bolster the deterrent impact of formal sanctions (Zimring, Hawkins 1971; Zimring, Hawkins 1973; Tittle, Logan 1973; Williams, Hawkins 1986); secondly, a negative relationship exists between informal sanctions and crime rates (Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls 1997). Consequently, even among closely-knit distributor groups, opportunistic behaviors that undermine the interests of other channel members¹⁷, like parallel importing, can invoke informal sanctions such as group ostracism and condemnation. Furthermore, when distributors perceive the likelihood of facing precise and harsh punishment via various whistle-blowing methods¹⁸, along with a swift reaction from the entire channel, whether through formal penalties from the manufacturer or exclusion by peers, the manufacturer's channel's deterrent effect is realized. Therefore, this research assesses the deterrence perception among observing distributors influenced by differing whistle-blowing activities, focusing on three aspects of deterrence cognition: perceived severity¹⁸, perceived certainty, and perceived celerity.

3.the dealers' "banding together"

A social network consists of numerous actors and their interrelationships (Brass D.J., 2004). According to social network theory, the behavior of entities within a network is

shaped not only by their immediate dyadic relationships but also by the wider social network context (Choi T.Y., 2010). The concept of network embedding divides into relational embedding, focusing on the nature of relationships between network actors, and structural embedding, highlighting the positional characteristics of actors within the network. Researchers have investigated, from a social network perspective, how the phenomenon of distributors "banding together" influences manufacturers' implementation of contractual governance, specifically the detail and comprehensiveness of contracts⁸. They assessed the degree of distributors "banding together" using the metric of network density among distributors and discovered that manufacturers¹⁹, in reaction to this collective action, are inclined to negotiate more comprehensive contracts with distributors. This approach aims to mitigate conflicts and avert the confrontational dynamics that might arise from distributors "banding together."

In channel marketing, channels are often conceptualized as "super-organizations" that include multiple enterprises (Jan B. Heide, 1994). For their efficient and smooth functioning, tight collaboration among all involved parties is essential. Channel governance plays a critical role in this process, encompassing the creation, upkeep, and discontinuation of the rules and frameworks governing transactional relationships²¹, along with overseeing the adherence to these regulations^{5,8,20}. This approach to cross-organizational governance casts participants within the channel as both regulators and the regulated, with the objective of nurturing stable cooperative relations, minimizing conflicts, and deterring opportunistic actions^{8,20,21}. Traditionally, channel governance has been categorized into contractual governance, which prioritizes the role of formal contracts, and relational governance, which underscores informal relations built on trust and shared norms. Companies selecting channel governance strategies typically balance these two approaches according to the particular situation at hand (Li, 2014). Additionally, some research endeavors compare the strengths and weaknesses of these governance models, along with their potential for complementarity or substitution. With a specific focus on distributor networks, Feng Chao(2019) investigated the effect of network structural characteristics on the intensity of contractual governance between manufacturers and distributors^{5,16}. Network density, denoting the frequency of communication and the extent of information sharing among distributor group members, not only highlights the closeness of member ties but also suggests a level of information transparency (Reagans, 2003). A higher network density indicates more tightly-knit connections and increased transparency among distributors, predisposing such networks towards adopting cohesive attitudes and actions against manufacturers¹⁹. Hence, grasping these distributor network traits is vital for the effective execution of channel governance strategies. Within the social network framework of channel marketing, earlier researchers determined the extent to which distributors "band together" based on network density, as it affects communication levels among distributors and their joint reaction to Whistle-blowing incidents. Consequently, this research evaluates the propensity of distributors to "band together" in response to different Whistle-blowing behaviors from a perspective of structural embedding.

3 SUMMARY AND PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

3.1 Conclusion

This study synthesizes existing research on channel Whistle-blowing, uncovering key insights. Research has largely delved into the motivations behind Whistle-blowing, with some analysis on its beneficial impact on channel performance. However, the literature lacks depth on the varied outcomes of different Whistle-blowing practices and their broader effects within the distribution network²³. Particularly, the interaction between whistleblowers and recipients has been viewed through a binary lens, neglecting the wider implications for bystander distributors. Moreover, while deterrence perception has been well-explored in marketing, especially concerning grey market deterrence, its application to understanding the influence of Whistle-blowing on distributor cohesion is novel and practically significant.

3.2 Prospects

Drawing on social network theory and the theory of deterrence cognition, this paper examines the impact of distributor Whistle-blowing behavior on the tendency of distributors to "band together." It suggests that future research could unfold in the following three directions:

First, investigate the spillover effects on channel members who are the subjects of Whistle-blowing after encouraging distributor Whistle-blowing behavior. Future studies could examine the impact of such behavior on the willingness of bystander distributor groups to "band together" in a one-to-many marketing channel setting post-Whistle-blowing.

Second, expand the categorization of channel Whistle-blowing by differentiating between inter-organizational Whistle-blowing established through formal procedures by channel managing companies and interpersonal Whistle-blowing directed at managers or similar personnel within the channel managing companies. Previous scholars have noted significant differences between interpersonal trust and inter-organizational trust in the context of China, suggesting that interpersonal trust has a more substantial impact on a wider array of channel relationship outcomes. In China, inter-organizational trust is primarily built upon interpersonal trust, hence categorizing Whistle-blowing based on the recipient can refine our understanding of its varied effects.

Third, this paper suggests further exploration of social network and deterrence cognition theories in channel Whistle-blowing. By incorporating deterrence perception, we aim to understand its influence on distributor cohesion. In sectors with complex manufacturer-distributor dynamics like automotive, real estate, and spirits, managing opportunistic behavior is *vita*^{12,19}. Future studies should examine how deterrence modifies distributors' perceived costs of opportunism, potentially reducing collective tendencies and limiting excessive unity. It's crucial for distributors to target Whistle-blowing effectively within channel governance, choosing recipients based on the need for immediate or stringent actions, to prevent opportunism disguised as unity.

In summary, future research could leverage social network theory and deterrence perception theory within a "deterrent presence—deterrence perception—deterrence effect" research framework, exploring from the perspective of bystander distributors how distributor Whistle-blowing behavior influences the inclination to "band together" through its deterrent effects.

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