

**An Empirical Research  
Investigation into Construction  
of Distribution Channels for  
Japanese Traditional Craft  
Manufacturers**

**-For Continuous Selling to Overseas-**

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## **Keywords**

1. Japanese traditional craft manufacturers 2. Continuous selling to overseas 3. Continuity of channel 4. Influence on channel

## **Outline**

Our research focuses on the construction of distribution channels for Japanese traditional craft manufacturers. Although some manufacturers are trying to expand their business overseas against a general background of decline in traditional craft industries, only a few have achieved success.

Using information obtained from interviews with the Association for the Promotion of Japan Traditional Craft Industries and the Assessment Report of Raising Support for Japan Brands Project, we generated five hypotheses regarding key factors that influence the ability of craft manufacturers to construct distribution channels and engage in continuous overseas selling.

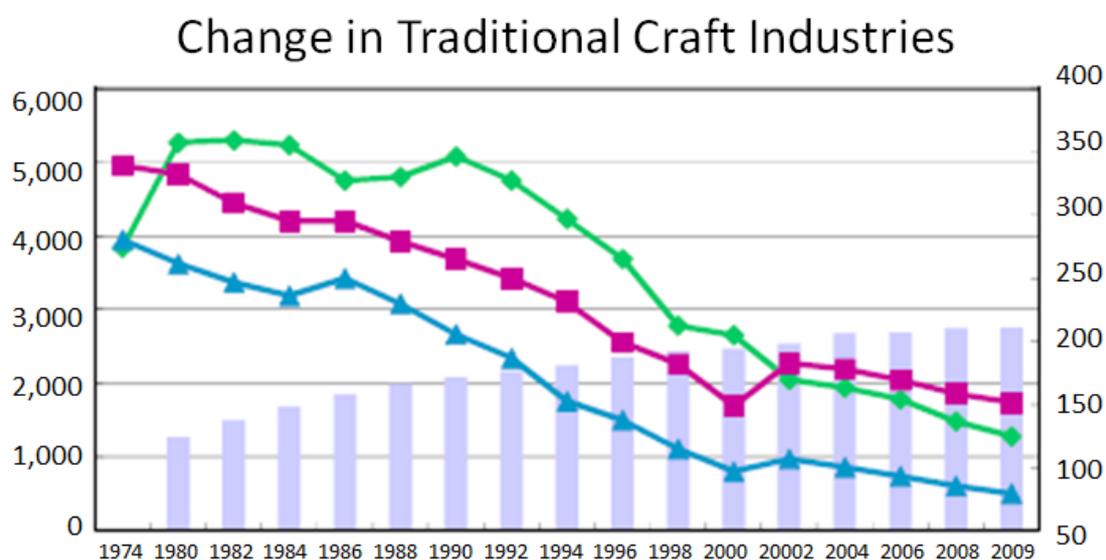
Using the results of surveys of 21 craft manufacturers, we apply simple linear regression analysis to test the influence of each factor on the construction of the distribution channel. Our work suggests several important implications for the future direction of traditional craft manufacturers that engage in business overseas.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *Section 1: The Decline of Traditional Japanese Craft Industry*

In present-day Japan, there are 215 items identified as Traditional Crafts (as of March 2013). In this thesis we define ‘traditional crafts’ as laid down in the ‘Law Pertaining to the Advancement of Traditional Craft Industries’ (promulgation in 1974, last revision in 2001) as follows: 1) objects that are mainly used in daily life, 2) the essential elements of the manufacturing process are handmade, 3) produced using traditional skills and techniques, 4) produced using traditional materials, 5) produced within a particular region. Traditional crafts are created according to the techniques passed down to the present day from expert artisans of a region’s particular history and culture. However, as a result of the period of rapid economic growth post-WWII, the introduction of foreign techniques and large-scale production of everyday items created from new materials caused the need for handmade craft items created from natural materials to decline.

**Figure 1 : Change in Traditional Craft Industries**



The Association for Promotion of Japan Traditional Craft Industries (2011)

Looking at the overall picture of change in the traditional craft industries, (Figure 1), production value saw an increase from 1970 to the mid 1980s, before entering a slight decline. Although a small correction occurred in 1990, the period following saw a sustained fall. The number of companies and the number of employees also decreased

greatly between 1979 and 2009. In summary, the traditional craft industries entered a sustained period of decline in the period following 1990.

## ***Section 2: The decline of traditional craft industries due to globalization and recent trends***

As we have stated above, traditional craft industries are in decline recently. We have surveyed the reasons why they are declining. According to the METI (2011) <sup>1)</sup>, the problems traditional craft industries are facing are the depression of demand, inability to engage in mass production, insufficiency of employees and successors, sustained decline in the tools of production (e.g. materials, equipment for production, etc.), the change of the manufacturers' lifestyle and sense of value, and lack of information.

However, according to Prof Takuya Urushibara, (2004) <sup>2)</sup> “when we attempt to grasp the traditional craft industries, or when we think about how to support them, we shouldn't just look simply at the superficial layers of “decreased demand”, “lack of employees”, “lack of resources”, but we should also pay sufficient attention to the homogeneity of culture and lifestyle that accompanies globalization.” Moreover, “from the perspective of Japan's traditional craft industries, there is a large effect resulting from the flow of cheap foreign goods into the country.”

It is surely right that the traditional crafts, born in the particular history and culture of each region, should be affected by this post-war influx of cheap, foreign-made goods along with the uniformity of lifestyle and culture, which has led to a decrease in demand.

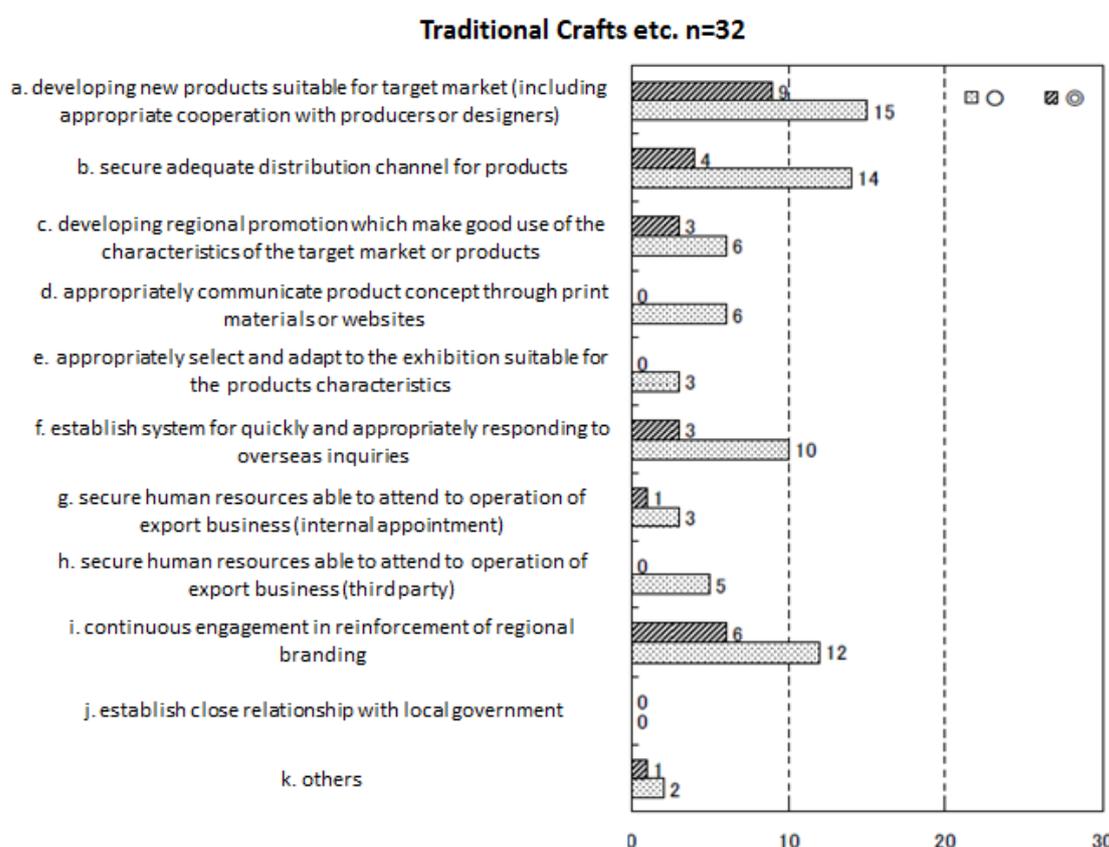
In response to this inflow of foreign goods to Japan, there has not been a comparable attempt by Japanese craft makers to sell their goods overseas. “Within Japan's traditional craft making industry, there is a strong view that, because it's traditional, that ‘traditionality’ should be protected. Furthermore, we can add the point that they don't have enough resources to do business overseas,” stresses Prof Takuya Urushibara (2004) <sup>3)</sup>, indicating that Japanese traditional craftsmen have rarely even tried to trade internationally.

But, as we can understand from Small and Medium Enterprise Agency's establishment in 2004 of the Raising Support for Japan Brands Project, international trade is a hot issue with several enterprises proactively engaged in overseas expansion.

## ***Section 3: The focused problem of constructing distribution channel***

As discussed in the previous section, although enterprises and government are engaged in overseas expansion, there are no stand-out results. When traditional craft manufacturers attempt to expand overseas, what is posing an obstacle to their success? Table 1 is taken from the 2011 Assessment Report of Raising Support for Japan Brands Project, elucidating what concrete actions participant enterprises in the Japan Brand project felt they should be engaged in to achieve success.

**Table 1 : Concrete Actions for Achieving Success in the Japan Brand Project**



Agency for Small and Medium-Size Businesses, 2011 Assessment Report of Raising Support for Japan Brands Project

From this survey, we can identify the three topics “product development”, “establishing distribution channels” and “reinforcing branding” as most important.

In order to further distill the topics for research, we carried out an initial hearing with the Association for the Promotion of Japan Traditional Craft Industries <sup>4)</sup>. The Association informed us of numerous examples where traditional craftsmen were taking their traditional skills and applying new design concepts to adapt to overseas markets,

resulting in positive evaluations. However, these examples are single contracts which are not repeated, meaning sustainable growth does not result. Furthermore, as traditional craft manufacturers lack resources and employees, it is difficult for them to establish their own base of operations overseas. Many are unable to open overseas shops or carry out internally all elements of the overseas sales processes, such as customs procedures, target market language adaptation, adapting to business culture and so on. As a result, it is common to rely on trading companies and agencies for their distribution channel, as the traditional craft makers are unable to establish sustainable distribution channels for their products by themselves.

So, what actually is the current state of the overseas distribution channels? According to the Small and Medium Sized Business Agency's Report (2011) on the Actual State of Construction of Overseas Distribution Channels <sup>5)</sup>, although there are many examples of traditional craft makers getting positive evaluations and increasing awareness when they display at national or international exhibitions, when they come to make a one-time contract with a buyer, this contract is usually not repeated. In the above report <sup>6)</sup>, a craft maker states that they are able to make a single contract with a buyer for 2 to 3 million yen, but that does not lead to the development of their business. This illustrates the inability of such craft makers to establish sustainable distribution channels.

Faced with this reality, it seems to us that an important requirement for traditional craft makers to be able to sell their products sustainably is the establishment of overseas distribution channels. Regarding the construction of such channels, Kiyoshi Yamasaki and Shiro Takeda comment that "in global marketing activities, channel mix plays a fundamental and primary role" (Yamasaki & Takeda 1982). <sup>7)</sup> Furthermore, Prof Atsushi Hachikubo notes that "Companies which establish distribution channels by themselves see an increase in the proportion of direct sales, so in this way the distribution channel contributes to expansion of profits" (Hachikubo 2008). <sup>8)</sup> Hence we can see the importance of the distribution channel.

Nonetheless, even though many businesses are unable to achieve success in overseas expansion, there are some which have established sustainable overseas distribution channels. In this research survey, we focus on traditional craft makers who are entering overseas markets, including those success stories, by looking at the importance of the construction of the distribution channel and carrying out quantitative analysis on the factors that contribute to it. Our goal is to consider those results and the implications for traditional craft manufacturers.

## **Chapter 2: Setting up the hypotheses frame**

### ***Section 1 Factors which promote the construction of distribution channel for overseas markets***

In this thesis, when we choose what factors promote the creation of selling channel for overseas markets, we mainly referred to the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency's reports <sup>9)</sup> which surveyed the enterprises that have experienced overseas business, and interviews which we have done with the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries <sup>10)</sup>. These factors below are the ones that we expected to promote the creation of selling channel.

#### ***1. Funds***

Referring to the Report of Assessment for the Raising Support for Japan Brands (2010) <sup>11)</sup>, they say that the biggest problem after the Japan Brands project seems to be management of funds. It seems to us that for such manufacturers that are relatively small scale, the availability of funds have a big influence on expanding their business overseas.

#### ***2. Collecting information (about the local markets and the channels)***

Referring to the same report <sup>12)</sup>, one of the factors of the success of Yamanaka lacquer ware, known as one of the NUSSHA brands, is collecting information. Though the number of the small business enterprises who individually collect information through market research and price research is high, they lack high-quality information obtained from those measures because of their limited time and costs involved. Thus most of Japanese traditional craft makers ask public organizations such as the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency and JETRO to give support about the information of overseas markets. Actually, they say they would benefit from receiving information about the local distribution system, designers who have a wide network of overseas buyers, and local demand for products.

Besides, after starting their business overseas, though Japanese traditional craft makers would like to cultivate new relationships with agencies, many of them do not even know where to cultivate such relationships efficiently. If they ask JETRO, they can get rough information but it is inefficient because it is not certain that their products will be accepted before they meet and show them. It is also stated if a database listing agencies for each region were made, they would make good use of it.

### ***3. Spreading information***

#### 3. Spreading information

We assume that spreading information is an important factor which promotes construction of distribution channel. If manufacturers spread information, members in channels can obtain information of their activities. Consequently, manufacturers can attract members in channels and raise possibility to make contract to sell their products.

Besides, in an effort to bring our research up to date with present technological trends, we also decided to pose the question of whether spreading information by webpages or social networking sites, such as Facebook, would have an influence on construction of distribution channel. We were already aware of the existence of Facebook pages and websites for some Japanese craft makers, so we wanted to investigate how effective these information spreading strategies are. (This investigation also connects with the comments made by Yamasaki and Takeda above with regard to channel mix, and Hachikubo with respect to direct sales.)

### ***4. Business Connections***

According to the same report <sup>13)</sup>, as a whole it is difficult for traditional craft makers to have opportunities to find and contact with overseas buyers directly by themselves. But there are some examples in which craft makers find agencies at first, and then they could get chances to find and meet buyers through the agencies. In addition, those makers still keep in touch with buyers through the agencies. So to say, they overcame the difficulties by creating opportunities to find buyers. Thus we considered it plays an important role in constructing selling channel to have connections.

### ***5. Particularity about pricing, the amount of production, and designing***

A craft maker's particularities also should be one of the factors that influence construction of the selling channel. According to the interviews which we have done with the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries <sup>14)</sup>, in overseas exhibitions, even though the makers were able to negotiate with channel members, many of them were not able to make contracts in those negotiations. Posing particular problems for negotiations were the issues of price, the inability or unwillingness of the craft maker to produce the desired quantity, and the inability or unwillingness of the craft maker to produce the desired design.

## ***Section 2 Constructing distribution channel***

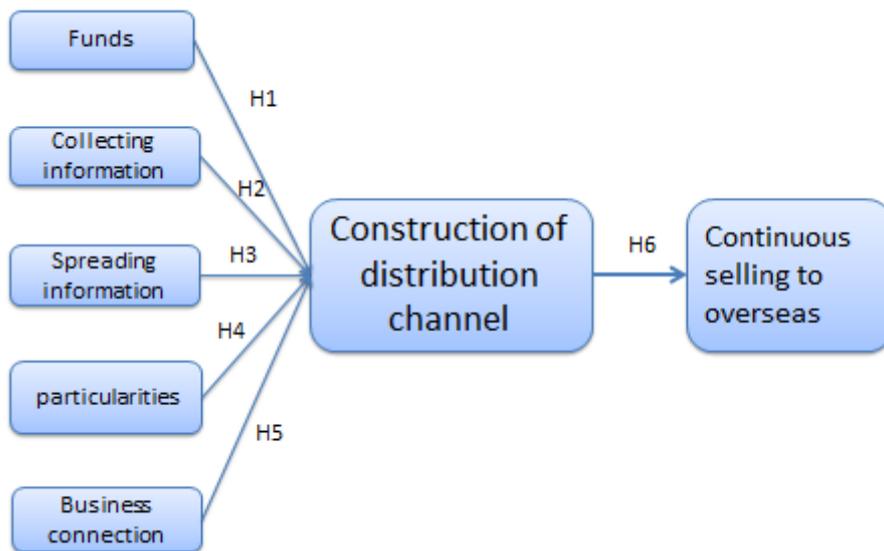
Considering from the preparatory interview with the Association for the Promotion of Japan Traditional Craft Industries <sup>15)</sup>, two factors are found that can indicate how well distribution channels are constructed. One is *continuity of channels* (in other words, continuity of the contracts with their channel members), and the other is *influence on channels*. The first one is necessary and indispensable to achieve the goal which we aim in this research. On the other hand, we question the latter one to know how much power the manufacturers have over their channels. It is argued that there are differences of resource power among channel members and the differences lead to different allocations of power to them. For instance, there is an obvious gap of power between a big manufacturer as a channel leader and a member in the channel, as argued by Hideo Takahashi (Takahashi, 1984) <sup>16)</sup>.

## **Chapter 3: Empirical analysis**

### ***Section 1: Hypotheses and analysis frame***

In this paragraph, we define our hypotheses and analysis frame to verify empirically as shown in the figure 2 below.

#### **Figure 2 : Analysis frame**



H1: *funds* has a positive impact on *construction of distribution channel*

H2: *collecting information* has a positive impact on *construction of distribution channel*

H3: “*spreading information*” has a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”

H4: “*particularities*” has a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”

H5: “*business connection*” has a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”

H6: “*construction of distribution channel*” has a positive impact on “*continuous selling to overseas*”

\*In this study, we analyze by using SPSS12.0J for Windows.

### ***Section 2: The target and the term of survey***

Referring to the Report of Assessment for the Raising Support for Japan Brands (2010)<sup>17)</sup>, we chose 102 Japanese traditional craft makers who try to expand their business overseas, and telephoned them to ask for their cooperation to answer our questionnaire. We started our questionnaire survey on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 and closed it on September 30<sup>th</sup> 2013. Thus the term of surveying was 2 months. We obtained 22 answers and 21 of them (20.5% of the candidate makers) were valid for analysis.

### ***Section 3: Survey questions***

Our survey is composed of seven questions, related to ‘Funds’ (Q1), ‘Collecting information’ (Q2), ‘Spreading information’ (Q3), ‘Particularities of the Craft Maker’ (Q4), ‘Business connections’ (Q5), ‘Construction of distribution channel’ (Q6), ‘Continuous selling overseas’ (Q7). Also we asked the ‘enterprise-size’. Table 2 below is obtained by extracting the elements of questions.

**Table 2 : Question items**

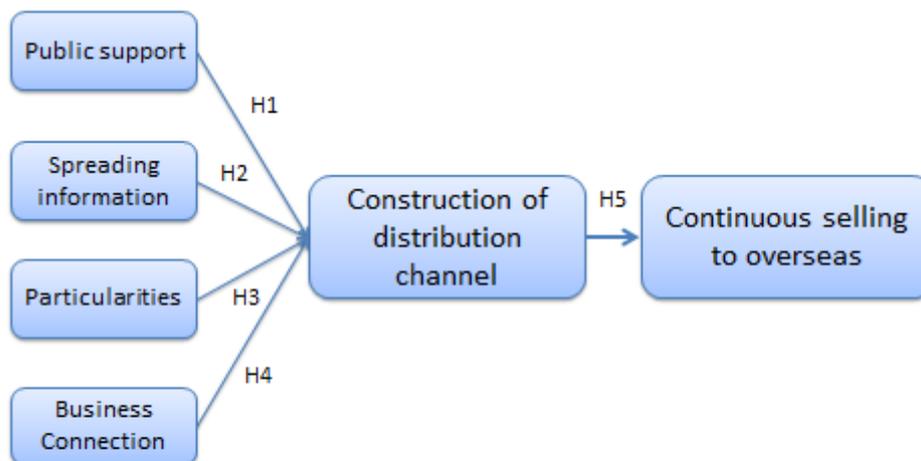
<b>Q1 Funds</b>	<b>Q3 Spreading information</b>
—①publicly supported funding	Release information onto the Internet
—②funds for overseas marketing	—①for domestic consumers
<b>Q2 Collecting Information</b>	—②for overseas consumers
Collecting information by own company	Spreading information by TV advertisement, magazine etc.
—①information about overseas market	— ③ Spreading information by TV advertisement, magazine etc.
—②information about overseas selling channel	<b>Q4 Particularities of Craft Maker</b>
—③information about how to expand their business overseas	—①price
Public information support	—②output
—④information about overseas market	—③design
—⑤information about overseas selling channel	<b>Q5 Business connections</b>
—⑥Information about how to expand their business overseas	—①connection(domestic)
	—②connection(overseas)

<b>Q6 Construction of distribution channel</b>
Continuity of channel
—①continuity of channel
Influence on the channel
—②Influence on the price
—③Influence on the design
<b>Q7 Continuous selling overseas</b>
—①Growth of export sales
—②Growth of export production

### *Section 4: Redefining hypotheses and analysis frame*

We failed to collect coherent answers to (Q1-②, Q2-①, ②, ③) due to inadequacies with our questionnaire. Thus we will perform analysis excluding these items. Furthermore, we will combine Q1-②、 Q2-④、 ⑤、 and ⑥ into a single variable named *public support*. We finally define our hypotheses and analysis frame as shown in the figure 3 below.

**Figure 3 : Redefined analysis frame**



H1: “*public support*” has a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”

H2: “*spreading information*” has a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”

H3: “*particularities*” has a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”

H4: “*business connection*” has a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”

H5: “*construction of distribution channel*” has a positive impact on “*continuous selling to overseas*”

### *Section 5: Validity of samples*

In this paragraph, we perform one-way analysis of variance in order to verify whether there is a difference in the trend in responses for the dependent variable among small, medium and large-scale businesses. Since we could verify that there is no statistical significance between any variables, we determined that all samples can be used for analysis by pooling.

***Section 6: Exploratory factor analysis***

In this paragraph, we perform exploratory factor analysis (Principal Factor Method • Varimax Rotation) to explore which potential factor affects answers to questions of each variable and, extract factors with eigenvalues of 1.00 or more. We perform reliability analysis to study the reliability as a measure of the factors that were extracted. Results of reliability analysis and factor analysis of each variable in the analysis frame are shown in the table 3 - 8 below.

**Table 3 : Public support**

Factor matrix alpha

	Factor
	1
Information about selling channel	.912
Information about how to expand their business	.836
Information about local market	.812
Public funding support	.626

Cronbach's alpha .873

Factor extraction method: principal factor method

**Table 4 : Spreading information**

Factor matrix alpha

	Factor
	1
Release information onto the Internet(domestic)	.778
Release information onto the Internet(overseas)	.772

Cronbach's alpha .887

Factor extraction method: principal factor method

**Table 5 : Particularities of the Craft Maker**

Factor matrix alpha

	Factor
	1
Particularity about production	.881
Particularity about pricing	.843
Particularity about design	.832

Cronbach's alpha .751

Factor extraction method: principal factor method

**Table 6 : Business Connections**

Factor matrix alpha

	Factor
	1
Connection(domestic)	.429
Connection(overseas)	.429

Cronbach's alpha .309

Factor extraction method: principal factor method

**Table 7 : Construction of distribution channel**

Factor matrix alpha

	Factor
	1
Influence on the price	.922
Influence on the design	.886
Continuity of channel	.648

Cronbach's alpha .897

Factor extraction method: principal factor method

**Table 8 : Continuous selling overseas**

	Factor
	1
Sales	.978
Production	.964
ROI	.872

Cronbach's alpha .952

Factor extraction method: principal factor method

Regarding table 3, all four items are combined into one factor, which we name "*public support*" (0.873=Cronbach's alpha) as we assumed above.

Regarding table 4, two items are combined into one factor as spreading information. However Q3-③ is excluded because this item is not resolved as a factor statistically. We name this factor "*spreading information on internet*" (0.887= Cronbach' s alpha) as items related to spreading information on internet are combined.

Regarding table 5, all three items are combined into one factor as the particularities of the Craft Maker, which we name "*particularity*" (0.751=Cronbach's alpha) as we assumed above.

Regarding table 6, both items are combined into one factor as business connection. Then we name this factor "*business connection*" (0.309=Cronbach's alpha) as we assumed above. However, we reject this factor because the eigenvalue is less than 1.00 and Cronbach's alpha is 0.309.

Regarding table 7, all three items are combined into one factor as "*construction of distribution channel*". But in this study, we think there is need to distinguish clearly as separate variables "*continuity of channel*" and "*influence on channel*". Then we name Q6-① as "*continuity of channel*", while combining factors Q6-②,③ which we name "*influence on channel*" as we assumed above.

Regarding table 8, all three items are combined into one factor as continuous overseas selling. Then we name this factor "*continuous overseas selling*" (0.952=Cronbach's alpha) as we assumed above.

## ***Section 7: The method of analysis and the results of analysis***

Verification of hypothesis1 (H1)

**【Method of analysis】**

We verify that "*public support*" gives a positive impact on "*construction of distribution channel*". We set one factor of "*public support*" as an independent variable and two

factors of “*construction of distribution channel*” as dependent variables. Then we perform single regression analysis.

**【Results of analysis】**

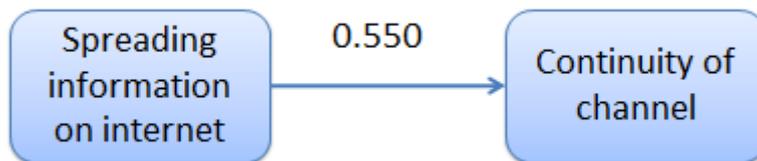
As a result of analysis at the 5% level of p-value by the method described above, H1 is not supported.

Verification of hypothesis2 (H2)

**【Method of analysis】**

We verify that “*spreading information on internet*” gives a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”. We set one factor of “*spreading information on internet*” as an independent variable and two factors of “*construction of distribution channel*” as dependent variables. Then we perform single regression analysis.

**Figure 4 : Result of single regression analysis of H2**



**【Results of analysis】**

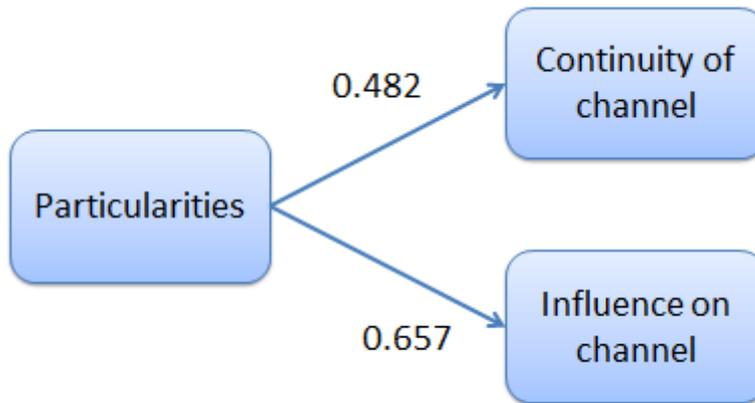
As a result of analysis at the 5% level of p-value by the method described above, H2 is partially supported. In concrete, “*spreading information on internet*” gives a positive impact on “*continuity of channel*” ( $\beta = 0.550$ ).

Verification of hypothesis (H3)

**【Method of analysis】**

We verify that “*particularity*” gives a positive impact on “*construction of distribution channel*”. We set one factor of “*particularity*” as an independent variable and two factors of “*construction of distribution channel*” as dependent variables. Then we perform single regression analysis.

**Figure 5 : Result of single regression analysis of H3**



**【Results of analysis】**

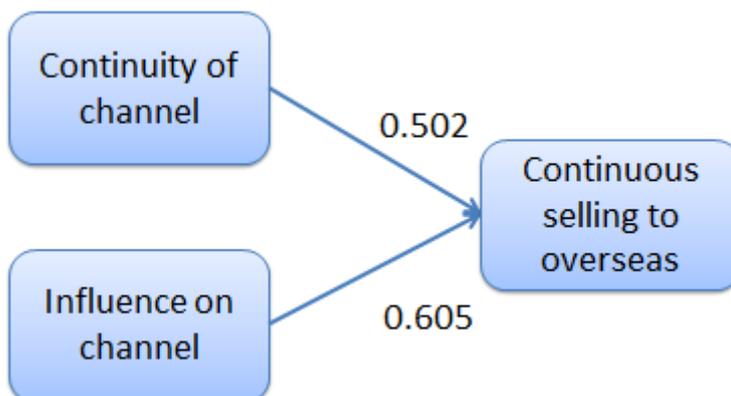
As a result of analysis at the 5% level of p-value by the method described above, H3 is strongly supported. In concrete, “*particularity*” gives positive impacts on “*continuity of channel*” ( $\beta=0.482$ ) and “*influence on channel*” ( $\beta=0.657$ )

Verification of hypothesis (H5)

**【Method of analysis】**

We verify that “*construction of distribution channel*” gives a positive impact on “*continuous overseas selling*”. We set two factors of “*connection*” as independent variables and one factor of “*construction of distribution channel*” as dependent variable. Then we perform single regression analysis.

**Figure 6 : Result of single regression analysis of H5**



**【Results of analysis】**

As a result of analysis at the 5% level of p-value by the method described above, H5 is

strongly supported. In concrete, “*continuity of channel*” ( $\beta=0.502$ ) and “*influence on channel*” ( $\beta=0.605$ ) give positive impacts on “*continuous selling to overseas*”

## **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

In this study, we empirically tested the importance of construction of sales channel to achieve continuous selling overseas and factors that promote the construction of sales channels for Japanese traditional crafts maker through a questionnaire survey. In this paragraph, we discuss the analysis results of this study and conclude this thesis by referring to problems and remaining issues.

### ***Section 1: Consideration***

In this study, we set and verify five hypotheses and found some hypotheses are supported. Though there might be various and numerous things to suggest from them, we would like to mention the most interesting ones here.

First, we prove that construction of sales channel has a positive impact on continuous selling overseas (H5). This importance was recognized in previous studies, such as the quotation in Chapter 1. We were also able to confirm the importance for Japanese traditional craft makers.

Second, we prove that spreading information on the internet has a positive impact on continuity of channel (H2). We confirm that makers should spread information from their own, especially by the internet like SNS. Among our samples, just a few makers spread information on SNS for the benefit of an overseas audience. Japanese traditional craft industry has a conservative image. However we hope that our findings will increase the number of makers that spread information on the internet. Furthermore, it could be suggested that spreading new information consistently on SNS or website might attract the buyers (not only the final consumer but also members in the channels) to purchase their products and it secures the continuity of the channels.

Third, we prove that particularity about price, amount of production, and design has a positive impact on continuity of channel and influence on channel (H3). Certainly strong particularity in a business negotiation disturbs an agreement. However, considering continuity of channel and influence on channel, makers should not abandon their particularities easily.

Lastly, it can be suggested that the fact we cannot prove that public support has positive

impact on construction of distribution channel (H1), as far as we are concerned, is caused by the usage limitation of funding support and the lack of usefulness of obtained information from public support. The usage limitation due to the regulations is supported by several statements of manufacturers written in the questionnaire answers. On the other hand, we found the mismatch of information between what the manufacturers demand and what supporters give through 21 answers. We can add the point that the time taken for applying to obtain such support is so long that the manufacturers miss opportunities to expand their business.

### ***Section 2: Problems in this study and future issue***

As for the problems of this study, first, there is a limit to how far we can generalize from the results due to the lack of samples. This is mainly because there are only few Japanese traditional makers which expand their businesses overseas. In the future, a more generalized study based on a larger number of samples is required.

Second, there is a limit to identify the factors which promote construction of sales channel. As mentioned in Section 4 of Chapter 3, we could not verify all of the factors that were assumed in advance due to inadequateness of questionnaire. And we select these factors from business reports of Small and Medium Enterprise Agency and interview. However there is a possibility that all factors cannot be covered by our research.

Third, we did not investigate from the point of view of the distributors and trading companies that make up the channel. This study is conducted from the point of view of Japanese traditional makers. In the future, studies that consider both positions would be desirable.

Finally, we would like to express deep appreciation for many corporations and people who cooperate on this thesis.

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