

Chapter 4

Tracing the Path of International Business Research

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ABSTRACT

Past studies have attempted to identify the domains of international business over specific periods of time. Most have used data sets for short time periods, providing a snapshot of the field for the period under review. This chapter reviews the research in the area of international business for the past five decades, with the objective of understanding the path that research has taken during that period in terms of research content, relevance, and methodology. While this understanding supports a proposal for a research agenda for the future, from the perspective of both content and methods in international business research, the impact of the pandemic may require a re-look at the trends that have been presented. The chapter addresses some of the potential changes in the trends in the research agenda that could occur due to the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

As a field of inquiry, international business (IB) has shown tremendous growth in the past five decades. The attention that practitioners and academics alike give to the field of international business has increased in step with the pace of globalization. Since the field is growing, many scholars have conducted reviews to define the field and its trends over the past five decades, in terms of content and the outlets where the articles have appeared. Some of the reviews with their broad objectives are shown in Table 1.

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Table 1.

Year	Author/s	Journal	Period of Review	Broad Objectives
2002	Werner & Brouthers	JIBS	1976-80 & 1996-2000	Amount & Type of international research
2002	Werner	JOM	1996-2000	Trends in IM research based on 12 areas
2003	Lu	JIM	1991-2000	Breadth & contribution of International Strategic Management research
2005	Acedo & Casilla	IBR	1997-2000	Trends most relevant in the field
2009	Pisani	JOM	2002-2006	Comprehensive picture of the field

Most of the review objectives shown in the table above serve to define the domain of this research by identifying key areas of study and looking at trends during the periods reviewed. The initial studies look at defining the field of international business (IB) research in terms of the domain, and clearly distinguish it from pure management studies (Boddewyn, 1999; Contractor, 2000; Martinez & Toyne, 2000). Only 1.6% of articles belonging to the area of IB research were published during 1976-1980 (Werner & Brouthers, 2002); in 1996-2000 this increased to 5.5% (Werner, 2002), and in 2002-2006 it reached 7%. These findings confirm that research in the IB field is steadily increasing and is becoming an important field of inquiry in the area of management. While the overall studies have mainly addressed the areas of research during the time periods reviewed, none has studied how IB research has evolved. Examining the evolution of the research and reporting findings in the area will enable scholars to identify gaps both in the content of research and its methods. This will also help to describe the relevance of IB research.

With the current changes in global business environments due to the increasing influence of developing economies, changing strategies of multinational enterprises, progress in telecommunications, and challenges in the transfer of knowledge across subsidiaries, it is important to understand whether certain categories will become more relevant than others in the development of the IB field (Pisani, 2009). This is more so with the external shock of the COVID pandemic. It is also important for any field of study to take an occasional step back to reflect on the composition of the research area and to evaluate the relevance of its content (Daniels, 1991). International business views itself as an applied discipline (Oesterle & Laudien, 2007). Therefore, the importance of the practical relevance of IB research is as Dunning (1989) stated:

... the effectiveness of our scholastic efforts to study and teach international business is entirely dependent on our capability to marshal and organize the necessary human and other assets so as to supply a range of end products which are acceptable to the academic community of which we are part, our paymasters and the main purchasers of our products, viz, the business community.

Thus, tracing the path that academic research in the area has taken can be one of the ways to evaluate the current and future relevance of the categories that constitute the domain of IB research. The objectives of this study, which is essentially a literature review, are threefold. The first is to understand the path that IB research has taken over the past five decades in terms of content and methodologies for conducting research. The second is to understand the relevance of IB research—in other words, to see

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