



## Five decades of business research into exporting: A bibliographic analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Although exporting has established itself as an important field of research within the overall international business discipline, no attempt has yet been made to provide a bibliographic analysis showing how the subject has evolved over time. This article reports the findings of a study which provides a systematic analysis of the content of 821 export business-related articles published in 75 academic journals during the period 1960–2007. The analysis focuses on five major areas: characteristics of authors involved in exporting research; major contributors of exporting publications based on their productivity; characteristics of manuscripts published on exporting; exporting articles with the greatest impact in the field; and specific themes that exporting research has covered over time. The outcome of this analysis revealed that exporting literature has experienced a phenomenal advancement during the last five decades, characterized by continuous refinement, improved quality, and extensive topical coverage. Some guidelines for potential future research on the subject are provided.

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## 1. Introduction

Although exporting is one of the oldest forms of economic activity, its theoretical roots were first addressed by economists with the pioneering work of Smith (1776), and the subsequent theories of comparative advantage by Richardo (1817), factor endowments by Ohlin (1933) and Heckscher (1950), demand similarity by Linder (1961), and international product life-cycle by Vernon (1966). These theories offered useful insights into explaining international trade activities between nations, and provided the basis of international business thinking. Exporting is the most common way for many firms (particularly those of small-to-medium size) to enter international markets, attributable mainly to the fact that, compared to other foreign direct entry modes, it involves fewer resources, lower risks, and less costs.<sup>1</sup> This has attracted the attention of many business researchers since the early 1960s, who have produced numerous articles on the subject, establishing it as a legitimate field of academic inquiry within the international business discipline.

Research into exporting, examined from a business, rather than an economic perspective, has at times been criticized for being too fragmented, uncoordinated, and repetitive to offer any useful insights (Bilkey, 1978; Aaby and Slater, 1989; Axinn, 1994). As a result, several efforts have been made to review research on the subject, evaluate extant knowledge, and provide directions for future research. While early reviews provided a general assessment of the different streams taken by exporting research (e.g., Bilkey, 1978; Miesenböck, 1988; Aaby and Slater, 1989; Ford and Leonidou, 1991; Chetty and Hamilton, 1993), more recent efforts

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<sup>1</sup> By engaging in export operations, firms can reap various benefits, such as making better utilization of production capacity and other resources, obtaining competitive advantage through the acquisition of innovative technologies, know-how, and experience, and improving their financial position by gaining extra sales revenues and profits.

have carried out more specialized reviews owing to the accumulation of a substantial volume of research in specific exporting areas (e.g., Leonidou and Katsikeas, 1996; Matthyssens and Pauwels, 1996; Leonidou et al., 1998, 2002; Zou and Stan, 1998).

Despite the usefulness of these efforts to review general or specific aspects of the export business literature, no attempt has yet been made to examine the profile of contributors or the characteristics of manuscripts of research on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, there has been no effort to establish trends in this field of international business in terms of the inputs used and the outputs received. Such an endeavor is deemed necessary because it will provide a more complete view of the developments in the field, a better understanding of the impact of extant research on the literature, and a clearer guidance for future research on the subject. This will in turn provide the impetus and strengthen the motivation to make further contributions to the discipline.

Such a comprehensive bibliographic analysis of business research into exporting could be beneficial to various interested parties, namely researchers, educators, managers, and policymakers. *Researchers* would be equipped with a reference tool that would enable them to identify colleagues with similar research interests, select studies pertinent to their research, and recognize avenues for future investigation into the subject. *Educators* would be in a position to trace key resources and thematic issues to be incorporated in their teaching materials for international business courses. *Managers* would gain insights and adopt ideas that would assist them in better targeting and implementing their business strategies in foreign markets. Finally, *policymakers* would have access to an inventory of knowledge that can help to formulate more effective and efficient export promotion programs.

The aim of this study is to provide such an analysis of the evolution of export business research during the last five decades. Specifically, five major objectives need to be addressed: (a) to evaluate the characteristics of authors involved in exporting research; (b) to identify the major contributors of export business-related publications and rank them according to their productivity; (c) to assess the characteristics of manuscripts published on exporting; (d) to trace those exporting articles that have made the highest impact in the field; and (e) to examine the specific themes that business research into exporting has covered over time. Thus, the emphasis of this study is mainly on providing evaluations and showing trends in the authorship, structure, and content of export business-related articles, complementing in this way the work of Katsikeas et al. (2008), which offered an in-depth analysis of the theoretical, methodological, and empirical dimensions of exporting research.

The remainder of the article first describes the methodology used in carrying out the bibliographic analysis. It then presents and discusses the results of this analysis with regard to each of the study's objectives. A summary and conclusions from this investigation are subsequently stated, while the paper ends with some guidelines for future research on the subject.

## 2. Research methodology

This section explains the investigation method employed to carry out the bibliographic analysis of the exporting field. It consists of three major parts: the scope of the present investigation, the approach used to identify the required export business-related articles, and the content analysis method adopted to extract the relevant information.

### 2.1. Investigation scope

Five major criteria were employed in deciding which publications to search for and eventually incorporate in the analysis: (a) *Focal theme*. The focus of the study was on exporting, defined as selling products/services via direct and/or indirect methods to overseas markets using the firm's production facilities in its home country. Thus, articles investigating other foreign market entry modes (e.g., licensing, joint venturing, wholly owned production) were excluded from the analysis. (b) *Time period*. Our research examined articles published since the inception of research into exports by international business scholars in 1960 up to 2007. This is a sufficiently extensive period (48 years) to yield useful insights and establish trends on the subject. (c) *Publication outlet*. The study covered academic articles published in marketing, management, or business journals, having either a mainstream or a specialized international focus. Although there are many exporting articles published in mainstream (e.g., *American Economic Review*) and specialized (e.g., *International Trade Journal*) economic journals, these were excluded from the review because the present study examines exporting from a purely business perspective. Other publication outlets, such as books, book chapters, monographs, and conference papers, were excluded from the analysis. (d) *Manuscript type*. Manuscripts included in the study were of a conceptual, empirical, methodological, or meta-analytical/review nature. Editorials, case studies, or reply comments, as well as journalists' articles (appearing in business magazines, newspapers, or other publications) were not included in the analysis. (e) *Linguistic expression*. Our study covered articles published in internationally known journals written in English. Due to linguistic constraints, articles appearing in other languages were not examined.

### 2.2. Literature search

Eligible articles were identified using a combination of electronic and manual literature search methods. Electronic searching was carried out using various bibliographic databases, such as ABI-INFO, PRO-QUEST, and SCIENCE DIRECT. Keywords like 'exporting', 'exports', and 'exporters' were employed to electronically trace articles of relevance to the study. The abstract of each article was independently reviewed by two academic experts who had an extensive knowledge of international business, and those referring to export business-related issues were retained for further examination. In the rare cases in which opinion was

<sup>2</sup> There has been another attempt in the past to consolidate the inventory of research into exporting and international marketing. Despite its comprehensiveness, the study was confined to contributions made by Canadian researchers during the period 1980–1995 (Papadopoulos and Rosson, 1999).

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