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International Strategic Alliances and National Culture: Mapping the field and developing a research agenda

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the role of national culture and cultural distance (NC/CD) in international strategic alliances features, management, and evolution. Our integrative literature review combines the results of a Multiple Correspondence Analysis with an in-depth reflection derived from the research team's thorough study of the selected articles. The key trends within the field are identified and represented in a proximity map. The resulting four thematic regions are deeply analyzed in terms of content and dynamics. Additionally, the study identifies research gaps and proposes avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

Hybrid forms that fall in between markets and hierarchies (Powell, 1987) are common alternatives for organizing companies' international growth (Christoffersen, 2013; Larimo, Nummela, &

Mainela, 2015). These hybrid forms involve a wide range of inter-firm agreements and governance structures that can be broadly labelled as alliances and cooperative agreements. The definition of International Strategic Alliances (ISAs) is not straightforward. Yet, they can be understood as voluntary collaborative arrangements that utilize resources and/or governance structures from autonomous partners headquartered in different countries (Inkpen, 1998) and involve exchange, sharing, or co-development of products,

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technologies, or services (Gulati, 1998) in order to achieve specific strategic objectives (Harrigan, 1988).

Within an international context, national culture (NC) and cultural distance (CD) between partners have arisen as key factors determining not only the formation of alliances, but also their development, management, and outcomes. Drawing on Hofstede (1980), House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004), Ghemawat (2001), and Schwartz (1999), we refer to NC as collective values, norms, and principles shared by national human communities that guide individual behavior and interactions. This collective “software of the mind” (Hofstede, 1980) makes diverse (national) human communities different or similar.

The number of studies dealing with ISAs has sharply increased over the last few decades, to such a point that the *Strategic Alliances* field has been identified as an essential area of study within International Management (IM) and International Business (IB) research (Werner, 2002; Pisani, 2011). Consequently, the new century has witnessed an upsurge of reviews dealing with ISA literature—see Christoffersen (2013) for an exhaustive appraisal. Some of these reviews are even focused on the interface between alliances and NC/CD. Nevertheless, most of them are focused exclusively on a particular type of alliance, that is, international joint ventures (IJVs). These studies center their analysis on CD and the choice between IJVs and wholly owned subsidiaries (WOSs) as alternative entry modes when investing abroad (Harzing, 2003; Morschett, Schramm-Klein, & Swoboda, 2010), the impact of CD on IJVs’ performance (Reus & Rottig, 2009) or the impact of CD on both the choice of entry mode and its performance (Shenkar, 2001; Tihanyi, Griffith, & Russell, 2005). Other studies have approached the issue with a broader scope (López-Duarte & Vidal-Suárez, 2015), but the topics to be studied are established *ex-ante* by the authors so that the intellectual structure (map) of the subject remains unveiled.

The differential contribution of this piece of research is to explore the intellectual structure of this area at the intersection between ISAs and NC/CD by (I) considering a wide range of international cooperative agreements and a broad array of issues, and (II) following an inductive approach that makes descriptors emerge from the content review. We seek to develop an integrative review; that is, a piece of research that focuses on a specific topic and uses a replicable methodology in order to reveal the intellectual structure of this research (Callahan, 2010). This outcome “reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on this topic in an integrated way so that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic can be generated” (Torraco, 2005; p. 356). In short, the review will provide a comprehensive picture of the topic, as well as identifying relevant gaps in the extant literature so as to suggest avenues for future research. Our methodology combines a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) that allows the representation of the underlying intellectual structure of the area with a thorough reflection derived from the research team’s analysis and interpretation of both the map and the content of the articles.

This article has been organized as follows: the next section describes the methodology. After that, we introduce our main findings. The article concludes with a reflection focused on the identification of avenues for broadening the breadth and scope of research on ISAs and national culture.

2. Methodology

In order to ensure replicability of the methods and reliability of the outcomes, we have followed Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart’s (2003) recommendations relative to a stepwise method. This includes planning the review, building the codebook of content

descriptors, and analyzing these descriptors to map the intellectual structure of the field to date. Pan and López’s (2004) and Torraco’s (2005) suggestions relative to good practices in conducting this type of reviews have been followed.

2.1. Planning the review and data collection

Focus of the review: This study focuses on the role played by NC/CD in firm-level business activity and management decisions relative to ISAs.

Period of study: 2000 to 2012.¹ This focus on recent literature allows us to not only analyze key trends, findings, and missing elements within the extant literature, but also to explore the degree to which recommendations by previous studies have been followed.²

Type of scientific contributions: We have focused on full length articles published in indexed academic journals, as they can be considered as knowledge certified by peers (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Bachrach, & Podsakoff, 2005; Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruiz-Navarro, 2004). The analysis of articles indexed in top-journals in a field is a standard practice that enhances the reliability of results—see for instance Peng and Zhou (2006).

Selected journals: In keeping with Bradford’s law,³ we have restricted our search to a selected list of high-impact journals. This law proposes that within each particular research field there are a few journals that are the most salient since they contain the majority of cited articles that are the core of the field (Garfield, 1990). We have selected these journals based on Dubois and Reeb (2000), Lu (2003), and Acedo and Casillas (2005).⁴ In accordance with Bradford’s law, roughly one third of these journals have accumulated more than 70% of the total number of selected articles (see Table 1).

Selection of articles: The selection of articles followed a two-step process. The first step implied the performance of a keyword search using the Scopus database. In this search, we identified all the articles including any of the target words in their title, abstract, or keywords. Table 2 contains all the words used in the keyword search. As a second step, an analysis based on at least two researchers’ interpretations of the abstracts/articles was conducted in order to decide whether these articles actually dealt with the matter at hand. This step entailed the removal of more than 70% of the articles initially identified. The final dataset brings together 150 articles (see Appendix B in Supplementary material).

2.2. Information extraction and codebook building

A key process within this stage is building a codebook containing main descriptors within the field. We have followed an inductive approach; therefore, these descriptors were not established beforehand but derived from the analysis of the content of the articles. This stepwise procedure comprises: (I) extracting key content from the articles’ titles, abstracts and keywords; (II) classifying this content in order to build a reduced

¹ Our choice of 2012 as the last year of the period is derived from restrictions relative to the citation analysis (see section 3.2), as a lag period is required to provide enough time for an article to be cited.

² Shenkar’s (2001) article has been recognized as one of the most influential articles published within the IB field in recent years. It presents a critical review of the CD construct and its measurement in IB literature and makes several recommendations for addressing this issue.

³ This law was formerly proposed by Bradford (1934) and later updated by Garfield (1990).

⁴ These studies identify the most outstanding journals within the IM/IB by considering different weighting factors—citation, impact factor, and/or scoring by researchers within the field.

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