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Narrative synthesis and thematic analysis in systematic literature reviews

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It is important that reviews and introspection are reported periodically to take cognizance of developments and shortcomings and incite progress.

Knight & Liesch, 2016



Narrative-oriented reviews and thematic analysis

Narrative-oriented reviews
researchers integrate a framework to provide directions for future research in a more narrative-oriented type of literature review (Paul, Rialp Criado, 2020).

Criticism on narrative reviews

- Narrative synthesis does **not rest on an authoritative body of knowledge or on reliable and rigorous techniques** developed and tested over time (Rodgers et al. 2016)
- There is ‘a possibility that systematic reviews adopting a narrative approach to synthesis will be **prone to bias**, and may generate unsound conclusions leading to harmful decisions’ (Cochrane Handbook)

So, why developing a narrative review or a review with a thematic analysis?



Why developing a narrative review or a review with a thematic analysis?

- Because when I approach a new topic, I tend to use narrative reviews and/or reviews providing a thematic analysis
 - Because this approach allows to identify **key emerging themes** and research questions (Trainfield et al., 2003)
 - Some examples in different fields:
 - Voluntary employee turnover: Hom, Lee, Shaw, Hausnecht (2018) → output: *a description of the evolution of the literature over 100 years.*
 - Innovation, exporting & growth: Love & Roper (2011) → output: *a table providing an overview of areas of agreement and contention*
 - International entrepreneurship: Jones, Coviello, Tang (2011) → output: *a thematic map of the International-entrepreneurship domain 1989-2009.*
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Learning from our experience: a case study

- Systematic literature review of 280 studies investigating BGs, INVs and EIFs published between 2004 -2018
- Time to develop the review: about 2 years
- Time from submission to acceptance: about 1 year
- Number of reviewers: 4
- Major revisions: update the review by integrating the last 3 years (+ 100 articles)



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Early internationalizing firms: 2004–2018

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Abstract

The literature on early internationalization has evolved rapidly in the last few decades. Firms that achieve early and rapid internationalization have emerged as newcomers in the international arena. Disclosed in the late 1980s, international new ventures and born globals today are well known by academics, practitioners, and policymakers. However, the rapid evolution of literature on this topic has produced a considerable corpus of articles in just a few years, discouraging the realization of iterative and thematic analyses. Existing reviews have analyzed the first decade of research or some peculiar aspects of early internationalizing firms or have been focused on the wider international entrepreneurship domain. This article complements previous studies by reviewing the literature on early internationalizing firms over the years 2004–2018. The authors develop a systematic review of 280 studies investigating born globals, international new ventures, and early internationalizing firms that

Purpose and contributions

Purpose

- Complement other existing literature reviews:
 - Rialp, Rialp & Knight (2005) and Aspelund et al. (2007) focus on **the first decade of research**
 - Jones et al. (2011) provide a thematic analysis of IE research field, of which **early internationalization represents a sub-field**
 - Cesinger et al. (2012) focus on definitions and labels in early internationalization
 - De Clerq et al. (2012) focused on the concepts of «learning» and «knowledge» in early internationalization
 - Dzikowski (2018); Garcia-Lillo et al. (2017,a,b) bibliometric analyses
- Describe the state-of-the-art and provide a thematic analysis

Contributions

- Assess the state of knowledge on EIFs, identify gaps and inconsistencies, suggest avenues for future research
- Develop a thematic analysis and classify 280 articles into four macrocategories
- Contribute to IE research field by focusing on the sub-field of «early internationalization»



Methodological procedures for search, selection and exclusion

1. **Positioning:** Clearly position the SRL in the literature, acknowledging other existing LRs
2. **Search strategy:** Clearly describe the search procedure and criteria (e.g. database of extraction, article types, journal types, scope, publishing year, language...) and select the appropriate keywords
3. **Eligible criteria:** Specify eligible criteria to include candidate articles (e.g., review OR empirical; publishing years; keywords mentioned in text OR abstract/title/keywords;..)
4. **Transparency:** be transparent in order to ensure the replicability of the search and selection strategy (Jones et al., 2011)

Methodological procedures for thematic analysis

1. **Data organization:** content-analysis to extrapolate data that are organized in excel workbook (e.g., id; authors, title, source, year of publication, article type, purpose; findings; venture types analyzed; methodological approach; sample; four keywords; key research findings; country of research; country comparisons)
2. «**Concept centric**» review (Webster, Watson, 2002) and a **thematic analysis and synthesis** (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008) of 214 empirical articles
3. **Interpretative approach** (Tranfield et al., 2003) including a **stage-process**:
 - a. Driven by the goal of creating **mutually exclusive categories**, we selected a criterion to categorize works: **the characteristics and labels of sampled firms**
 - b. Based on this criterion, we **inductively** identified four macro-categories
 - c. Based on purpose and findings, we **inductively** identified thematic groups inside the macrocategories
 - d. Independent reading and classification of the papers by the researchers; discussion when disagreement.
 - e. Themes were originated based on the purpose/findings of articles and organized in tables.

Review outputs

State of the art

- Number of articles
- Journal outlets
- Methodologies
- Country of origin
- Multi-country studies

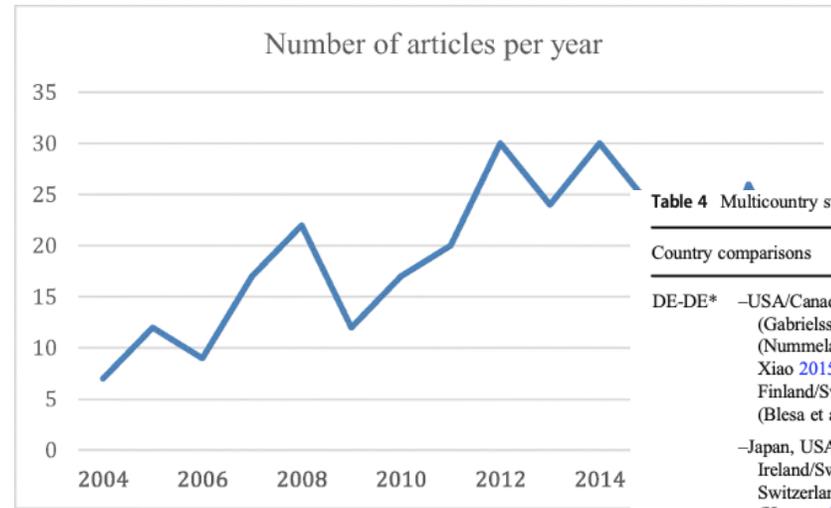


Table 4 Multicountry studies

Country comparisons

DE-DE*	–USA/Canada (Haskell et al. 2016); Australia/USA (Weerawardena et al. 2015); Finland/Israel (Gabrielsson and Kirpalani 2004); Denmark/Ireland (Hannibal et al. 2016); Finland/Ireland (Nummela et al. 2016); New Zealand/Australia (Gerschewski et al. 2015; Gerschewski and Xiao 2015); Finland/USA (Vapola et al. 2008); Denmark/USA (Knight et al. 2004); Finland/Sweden (Gabrielsson et al. 2012; Gabrielsson and Pelkonen 2008); Spain/Belgium (Blesa et al. 2008)
	–Japan, USA, Israel (Li and Deng 2017); USA/UK/Greece (Dimitratos et al. 2016); Ireland/Sweden/Denmark (Evers et al. 2012); Israel/Ireland/Finland (Nummela et al. 2014); Switzerland/Germany/Australia (Gassmann and Keupp 2007); Sweden/Australia/Switzerland (Hennart 2013); Italy/Greece/Norway/Finland (Gabrielsson et al. 2008); Australia/Canada/Ireland/New Zealand (Loane et al. 2007; Loane 2006); USA/UK/Germany/France/Israel/Australia/Japan/Taiwan (Murmman et al. 2015)
DE-EM*	–Hong Kong/China/Brazil/Finland (da Rocha et al. 2017); China/Hong Kong (Tang 2011); Czech Republic/USA (Di Gregorio et al. 2008); India/Ireland (Terjesen et al. 2008)
EM-EM*	–China/India (Khavul et al. 2010a; Yamakawa et al. 2013); China/India/South Africa (Khavul et al. 2010b)
Mixed	–All around the world (Cannone and Ughetto 2014), 29 EMs (Glaister et al. 2014), mixed EM (Wood et al. 2011), mixed DE (Khalid and Larimo 2012); mixed (Young et al. 2018; Pogrebnyakov 2017; Patti et al. 2016; Evald et al. 2011; Naudé and Matthee 2011; Hessels and Van Stel 2011; De Clercq et al. 2008; Zahra and Hayton 2008; Fan and Phan 2007)

*Emerging and developing economies (EM) and developed economies (DE) are defined according to the IMF's 2008 definition. <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/01/weodata/groups.htm#mac>.

Continent	Countries
Europe (89)	–North: Finland (19), Sweden (10), Norway (4), Denmark (3) –West: UK (9, of which 1 in Scotland), Germany (6), France Netherlands (2), Belgium (2) –East: Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Czech Republic –South: Italy (10), Spain (8), Greece (2), Portugal
America (30)	–USA (17), Canada (5), Brazil (2), Chile (2), Mexico (3), Cc
Oceania (23)	–Australia (14), New Zealand (8), South Pacific
Asia (46)	–China (21), India (7), Israel (7), Turkey (3), Korea (2), Viet Thailand, Singapore, Nepal, Hong Kong, Pakistan
Africa (1)	–Morocco

Source: Romanello, Chiarvesio (2019), JIEN.

Review outputs

Thematic synthesis

- a. Studies on **new venture internationalization**
- b. Studies on **EIFs**
- c. Studies **comparing** EIFs and other companies
- d. Studies on **other companies and actors**

Macro-category

Table 7 Studies on EIFs

Studies on EIFs
Themes
Factors influencing the EIF creation and early internationalization: Evangelista (2005); Fan and Phan (2007); Di Gregorio et al. (2008); Karra et al. (2008); Evers (2010); Harms and Schiele (2012); Weerawardena et al. (2015); Kumar and Sharma (2018); Tiwari and Korneliusen (2018); Chhotray et al. (2018)
Networks, social capital, and alliances: Presutti et al. (2007); Wakkee (2006); Coviello (2006); Coviello and Cox (2006); Mort and Weerawardena (2006); Freeman et al. (2006); Zhou et al. (2007); Sasi and Arenius (2008); Thistoll and Pauleen (2010); Prashantham and Dhanaraj (2010); Vasilchenko and Morrish (2011); Sepulveda and Gabrielsson (2013); Thurner et al. (2015); Nowiński and Rialp (2016); Haskell et al. (2016); Laurell et al. (2017)
Drivers of performance outcomes: Knight and Cavusgil (2004); Knight et al. (2004); Gabrielsson and Kirpalani (2004); Yeoh (2004); Arenius et al. (2005); Loane et al. (2007); Freeman and Cavusgil (2007); Zhou (2007); Gassmann and Keupp (2007); Blesa et al. (2008); Kocak and Abimbola (2009); Thai and Chong (2008); Khavul et al. (2010b); Zhou et al. (2010); Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson (2011); Kumar (2012); Park and Rhee (2012); Taylor and Jack (2013); Baronchelli and Cassia (2014); Cerrato and Piva (2015); Pehrsson et al. (2015); Bai et al. (2016); Lee et al. (2016); Nemkova (2017); Martin et al. (2018)
Early internationalization effects: Li et al. (2012); Zhou et al. (2012); Zhou and Wu (2014)
Post-entry phase, survival, growth processes, and evolution: Hashai and Almor (2004); Gabrielsson et al. (2008); Turcan (2011); Khalid and Larimo (2012); Efrat and Shoham (2012); Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson (2013); Nummela et al. (2014); Oxtorp (2014); Turcan and Juho (2014); Almor et al. (2014); Hagen and Zucchella (2014); Gabrielsson et al. (2014); Trudgen and Freeman (2014); Glaister et al. (2014); Johanson and Martin (2015); Romanello and Chiarvesio (2017); Li and Deng (2017); Øyna et al. (2018); Patel et al. (2018); Khan and Lew (2018).

Themes

Challenges and strengths

Challenges

- Systematicity required to reconnect with articles published even before 2004 (additional deepening)
- Thematic analysis posed difficult choices:
 - E.g., one category was not focused on EIFs, but highly related – keep it or not?
 - E.g., mutually exclusive categories required to give a single/dominant interpretation of each article's purpose



Strengths

- Deep reviewing process that forces the researcher to in-depth analyze each article, to identify trends, recurring themes and – wherever possible - **to link themes across the various core contributions** (Tranfield et al., 2003)
- Dramatically improves the researcher's knowledge of the topic

Challenges

- Most editors might not be favorable to publish narrative reviews and thematic analyses

Possible solutions

- Start developing your review with a **clear journal outlet** in mind
- Read the **aims, scope and methodologies** accepted in the target journal
- Consider developing a **framework-based review**:
 - «*Thematic reviews with a framework have proven to be more acceptable as they are likely to show a more robust structure.*» (Paul, Rialp Criado, 2020) - e.g., ADO framework (Antecedents, decisions, outcomes) (Paul & Benito, 2017)
- Focus on a **specific/well defined topic**: e.g., drivers, moderators, outputs (Martineau & Pastoriza, 2016); e.g., effectuation (Karami et al., 2019)
- Provide a **valuable outcome**: e.g., a future research agenda

Challenges

- Narrative reviews are criticized for lack of rigor
- Thematic analysis can be really difficult to manage

Possible solutions

- Adopt **strict protocols** both for the **search, selection and classification** of articles (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008; Jones et al., 2011):
 - e.g. PRISMA methodology (Moher et al., 2015)
- Include **more co-authors** to increase the validation approach
- Co-develop the review with an **experienced researcher** in the field
- Adopt **rigorous procedures for the thematic analysis**:
 - E.g., Jones, Coviello, Tang (2011) describe a rigorous procedures related to: data organization, theme identification/coding, thematic/ontological interpretation/validation; quality checking.
 - e.g., Thomas & Hardy (2008) propose a 3-stage approach based on NVivo: 1) coding of findings, 2) organizing codes in descriptive themes, 3) development of analytical themes
- Clearly acknowledge and explain the **limitations** of your study



Thank you for your attention!

Q & A?

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