



Agility and flexibility in international business research: A comprehensive review and future research directions

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ABSTRACT

This study explores 134 articles on agility and flexibility research published in the top-nine international business (IB) journals. Accordingly, we critically analyze, map and structure flexibility and agility research in IB, and synthesize the findings into an integrative framework. The paper identifies a wide range of definitions of the concept and a lot of work on its conceptualization. However, studies at the individual and institutional levels of analyses are scarce, and the concept is under-theorized, as there is a dearth of real theoretical underpinnings in this research stream. Thus, in addressing this gap, more qualitative and interdisciplinary research is needed.

1. Introduction

In today's turbulent and highly competitive environment, organizations demand a differing set of capabilities for effective and efficient organizational responses towards such increased levels of uncertainty, complexity and unpredictability (Brozovic, 2018; Fayezi, Zutshi, & O'Loughlin, 2017; Purvis, Gosling, & Naim, 2014). In both research and practice, these responses have been associated with the concept of agility, or flexibility (Fayezi et al., 2017), as the terms are used synonymously in the literature to refer to a similar phenomenon (Bernardes & Hanna, 2009; de Haan, Kwakkel, Walker, Spirco, & Thissen, 2011). The term agility also includes the sense of 'speed', or 'quickness'. According to Fayezi et al. (2017) and Wadhawa and Rao (2003), there is a dichotomous view of how flexibility and agility occur. Several scholars see agility as composed of several core elements surrounding the concept of flexibility (Prater, Biehl, & Smith, 2001; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999), whereas other researchers view the concept of agility as an inalienable extension of flexibility (Backhouse & Burns, 1999; Richter, Sadek, & Steven, 2010; Vokurka & Fliedner, 1998).

Moreover, agility and flexibility are rather broad – albeit closely intertwined – concepts, whose meaning can vary from one field to another (Pérez Pérez, Serrano Bedia, & López Fernández, 2016). For instance, operations and supply chain management focuses on an

organization's agile functions, processes, and supply chain relationships (Akhtar, Khan, Tarba, & Jayawickrama, 2018; Fayezi et al., 2017). In the business strategy realm, they relate to efficiently and successfully adapting to ever-changing and uncertain environments (Junni, Sarala, Tarba, & Weber, 2015; Zhou & Wu, 2010). Among others in the IB arena, they help organizations cope with the new sources of global competition they constantly face (Arslan, Tarba, & Larimo, 2015; Junni et al., 2015; Xing, Liu, Tarba, & Cooper, 2016).

Scholarly interest in agility and flexibility has been rising continuously (Brozovic, 2018; Combe, 2012; Harsch & Festing, 2020), and from various academic disciplines such as strategy and management (Xing, Liu, Boojihawon, & Tarba, 2020). Adding to this, the existing body of knowledge on agility and flexibility has also revealed that IB research is paying increased attention to the concept (Fourné, Jansen, & Mom, 2014; Xing, Liu, Boojihawon, & Tarba, 2020). Rather strikingly, despite the stream of publications on the topic in IB journals, the nature, breadth, and depth of agility and flexibility in IB research is yet underexplored. In particular, in an attempt to consolidate the scope of this broadly applied concept, several literature reviews and overviews of extant research have been conducted over the years. They have enhanced our overall knowledge of agility or flexibility in various disciplines, such as information technology (Tallon, Queiroz, Coltman, & Sharma, 2019), supply chain management (Fayezi et al., 2017; Wu &

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Barnes, 2011), human resource management (Putnam, Myers, & Gailiard, 2014), marketing (Combe, 2012), and general management (Brozovic, 2018). However, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study, to date, has systematically and comprehensively reviewed studies on agility and flexibility in the IB domain. Moreover, with an increasing body of knowledge in various business disciplines, there is an urgent need to consolidate, structure, and synthesize extant literature, especially in disciplines such as international marketing and IB (Gaur & Kumar, 2018).

Thus, the purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, to assess the current status of agility and flexibility research in IB. We include the various definitions, meanings, and contexts within it that IB scholars use, so as to provide a holistic understanding of agility and flexibility research in the IB literature. We conducted a systematic review of 134 relevant studies published in the top IB journals. Following the rationale of Koveshnikov et al., 2019, we focused on the core IB journals to enhance our understanding of how this academic community views the concepts of flexibility and agility, and we highlight knowledge gaps and offer promising directions for further research within the IB research stream.

In this sense, our review is the first initiative to systematically examine the contemporary and previous literature on flexibility and agility that emerges from IB journals. We explore the patterns of (1) year and type of publication; (2) authors' geographical information and other data; (3) content by antecedents, characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation, and outcomes; (4) applied and tested theories; (5) methodologies applied and data sources used; and (6) citation analysis of the domain. Second, based on the aforementioned information, we critically analyze, structure, map existing literature, and suggest avenues for future research with regards to theory, context, and methodology.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the subsequent section we delineate the criteria used for selecting the journals and identifying the articles that are included in our review, as well as the coding process applied. We then discuss our analysis and synthesize our findings in a conceptual framework. Next, we propose a set of guidelines for future research and best practice approaches based on the limitations of existing literature.

2. Methodology

Since agility and flexibility are widely researched in the strategy, management, and, potentially, the IB literature, the systematic review methodology proposed by Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003) and Petticrew and Roberts (2006) might better help us to critically analyze the extant literature within the IB discipline. Our decision to employ the systematic review of this research topic was also based on the results of a scoping study (544 potentially relevant studies published in the selected journals). This study is done to 'access the size and relevance of literature and to delimit the subject area or topic' (Rajwani & Liedong, 2015; Tranfield et al., 2003, p. 214). It identifies the current state of understanding of the subject area (Anderson, Allen, Peckham, & Goodwin, 2008), to comprehend the nature and extent of existing literature (Grant & Booth, 2009). Finally, it determines the value of conducting a systematic literature review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Rajwani & Liedong, 2015).

2.1. Selection of articles

As regards the scope of our review, we focused on articles that have been published in the leading journals in the IB field, because they substantially contribute to the field's academic development (Judge, Cable, Colbert, & Rynes, 2007; Luo & Zhang, 2016). Thus, we included journals that are considered to be the premier publication outlets of IB research, and we based our selection on widely accepted lists of elite IB journals used by state-of-the-art review studies that focused on topical issues in IB (e.g., Koveshnikov, Tienari, & Piekkari, 2019; Nielsen &

Raswant, 2018). Accordingly, the selected journals were the following: *Journal of International Business Studies* (JIBS), *Journal of World Business* (JWB), *Global Strategy Journal* (GSJ), *Management and Organization Review* (MOR), *Management International Review* (MIR), *International Business Review* (IBR), *Journal of International Management* (JIMan.), and *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* (APJM). Also, based on reviewers' suggestions, we included the *Journal of Management Studies* (JMS), as it is a publication outlet that consistently features agility and flexibility in the context of IB. We used ScienceDirect and EBSCOhost's databases to search for potentially relevant articles from the selected journals.

Having selected our publication outlets, the next step was to define the nature and to identify our final sample of articles. In line with our objectives and based on standard practice from state-of-the-art reviews in leading IB journals (e.g., Gaur & Kumar, 2018; Pisani, Kourula, Kolk, & Meijer, 2017), we applied the following criteria: we focused on full-length, peer-reviewed articles, but excluded letters, book reviews, editorials, conference proceedings, commentaries, and dialogue papers/replies. We also decided to put no time restrictions, because this is the first systematic review on the topic in IB research; thus, we wanted to capture all possibly relevant studies, from the initial conception of the term agility/flexibility up to and including July 2019.

As frequently done in systematic literature reviews (Koveshnikov et al., 2019; Pisani et al., 2017), we ran a keyword search formula on the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the potentially relevant studies. The application of standard Boolean operators allowed for the development of a single search algorithm. Following a combination of the search terms included in existing reviews on agility and/or flexibility (Brozovic, 2018; Fayezi et al., 2017; Tallon et al., 2019), the keyword search formula used was: flexible OR flexibility OR 'dynamic capabilities' OR agility OR adaptability OR agile OR responsiveness. The initial search resulted in 544 potentially relevant studies (after excluding duplicates). Following prior review studies (López-Duarte, González-Loureiro, Vidal-Suárez, & González-Díaz, 2016; McWilliam, Kim, Mudambi, & Nielsen, 2019; Pisani et al., 2017), we read the titles and abstracts of each article identified to determine whether to include it in the review. This step focused on excluding articles that had no relevance with the reviewed topic. For example, the term agility or flexibility is used in a wide variety of contexts and perspectives, such as technical aspects of regulations among countries (for instance: flexible labour regulations). These topics and contexts that the term flexibility is used for do not relate to the focus of this review. Next, we read the full text of the remaining articles and excluded other studies that (a) had inadequate or only passing reference to the concept of agility and flexibility; and (b) were published in JMS but were not related to the IB field. In the process of doing so, and according to best practices (Keupp & Gassmann, 2009; Koveshnikov et al., 2019; Paul, Parthasarathy, & Gupta, 2017; Terjesen et al., 2016), we exchanged notes among five co-authors to reach a consensus on the articles to be excluded from our final sample. These two steps resulted in eliminating 418 articles.

Because formal search techniques of entering index terms or keywords in electronic databases may overlook important studies (Nielsen, Asmussen, & Weatherall, 2017), we also employed the backward and forward snowballing procedure, which is used by the latest reviews (e.g., Christofi, Vrontis, & Cadogan, 2019; Luo & Zhang, 2016; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014; Nofal, Nicolaou, Symeonidou, & Shane, 2018; Nielsen et al., 2017; Pisani et al., 2017), to search the reference lists of the selected studies for additional relevant works. After this screening process, we included another four articles in our final sample. Finally, as per the reviewers' suggestions, we also manually searched in the 'Articles in Press' and 'Issue in Progress' sections of *JIM* and *JWB* in order to identify articles that related to two ongoing Special Issues in these journals, which focus on the topic of this review. This final step resulted in the inclusion of another four papers from the forthcoming Special Issue at *JIM*. The final sample included 134 articles (see Online Appendix for the full list) that relate to agility and flexibility in IB research.

2.2. Coding

Given the nature and the intended contributions of our review, we deemed multistep qualitative coding to be the most suitable method for our analysis. To do so, we followed best-practice-recommendations offered by Gaur and Kumar (2018) and examples from recent reviews (e.g., Nielsen & Raswant, 2018; Koveshnikov et al., 2019; Pisani et al., 2017), with some variation according to the objectives of the review (Gaur & Kumar, 2018). Thus, we first documented the basic facts of each article, including the publication outlet, year of publication, core topic investigated, type of paper (theoretical, empirical, or review), methodology applied (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approach), data sources, industry context of empirical studies, and level of analysis (multilevel, institutional, organizational, and individual). We also documented the main theory(ies) used by the selected studies.

As regards the international context of empirical studies, we coded the geographic coverage of data of the selected studies. This analysis is useful when interpreting patterns of theory, content, and methodologies applied. For instance, the type of countries covered in extant literature provide information and insights regarding the extent to which findings could be generalized across different national contexts (Terjesen, Hesses, & Li, 2016). It is also useful for identifying possible under-researched regions. Adding to this, we followed the example of Pisani et al. (2017) to code each country mentioned in the sample studies using a three-group country categorization that distinguishes between developed (high-income), emerging (middle-income), and developing (low-income) countries, based on World Bank’s annual gross national income (GNI) per capita indicator. Then, we coded each article based on the widely accepted international management categories

Table 1
Categories of International Management Research.

Categories in International Management Research	Summary of each category
Internationalization	Description and measurement of internationalization, antecedents and consequences of internationalization
Multinational enterprises	Multinational enterprise strategies and policies, and models and descriptives of the multinational enterprise
Foreign direct investment	The timing, motivations, location of foreign direct investment, and firm and host country consequence
Subsidiary-headquarters relations	Subsidiary role (including subsidiary strategies and typologies), subsidiary control, and subsidiary performance
International exchange	International exchange, determinants of exporting, export intermediaries, and consequences of exporting
Global business environment	Global economy, global markets, political and regulatory environments, and international risk
International joint ventures	International joint venture partner selection, partner relations, and consequences of international joint ventures
Subsidiary and multinational team management	Subsidiary human resource management practices, subsidiary behaviors, multinational negotiations, and multinational team management
Entry mode decisions	Predictors of entry mode choices, predictors of international equity ownership levels, and consequences of entry mode decisions
Expatriate management	Expatriate human resource management, issues for expatriates, and expatriate and repatriate reactions
Transfer of knowledge	Antecedents of knowledge transfer, processes of knowledge transfer, and consequences of knowledge transfer
Strategic alliances and networks	Strategic alliance relationships, networks of strategic alliances, and outcomes of strategic alliances

Sources: Pisani et al. (2017), Pisani (2009) and Werner (2002).

developed by Werner (2002), as shown and briefly summarized in Table 1. Finally, following (with some variation) the examples of Hinojosa, Gardner, Walker, Coglisier, and Gullifor (2017) and López-Duarte et al. (2016), we coded the number of citations of the selected studies in order to conduct a citation analysis of the domain in IB research and to identify major contributions to this subject area in IB research.

Finally, to synthesize the final sample of studies, we coded the findings of each study by applying an ‘antecedents-phenomenon-consequences’ logic (e.g., Pisani et al., 2017; Narayanan, Zane, & Kemmerer, 2011). This allowed us to analyze and map the final sample of studies in a systematic and methodical way. The ‘antecedents’ category is comprised of studies that deal with the main drivers that trigger/influence the emergence of the agility/flexibility phenomenon in the context of IB. The ‘phenomenon’ category consisted of articles that examine the agility/flexibility phenomenon and its most salient perspectives within the IB context. The ‘consequences’ category included studies that focus on the main outcomes related to the agility/flexibility phenomenon in IB.

3. Results

The analysis of the results consists of six parts. In the first part, the descriptive analysis, embeddedness, and global nature of extant research, we provide an analysis of the articles’ characteristics (year of publication, type of contribution, methodology applied, etc.) to identify various weaknesses of extant research and, thus, to provide corrective suggestions for future research, as well as insights into how it should progress. The result (analysis of inputs) is a helpful tool to understand the development of agility/flexibility research in the IB field, as analyzing research published in high impact and top-tier journals is a commonly used method for identifying scholarly debates and research trends in a domain (Atewologun, Kutzer, Doldor, Anderson, & Sealy, 2017; Foss & Saebi, 2017). Moreover, in this part, we analyzed the geographical context of data.

The second part provides a thematic analysis of the extant literature. In particular, we identify the key definitions operationalized in extant IB research, in an effort to understand how the concepts of agility and flexibility were operationalized in the IB field. Adding to this, we analyze the theoretical basis of the articles published on the topic by identifying the key theories used, as well as the way they are used, in order to understand the domain’s various research streams and to provide suggestions for further research. Also, by ascertaining the various theories that extant research utilized on the topic helps scholars to identify other possible research routes through cross-disciplinary fertilization.

The third part consists of the synthesis of extant research. Our core aim was to synthesize the findings into an integrative framework, shown in Fig. 1, that presents the state of current research on the topic and provides the basis for researchers to further build on and for practitioners to be guided by. Adding to this, the synthesis part also allows for fleshing out the complementary and synergistic insights from the selected studies. The fourth part consists of the citation analysis, whereas the fifth part provides a correlation analysis between citation impact and methodology applied, as well as the number of countries used in the samples of the articles, in order to understand possible interrelationships between the variables. The sixth and final part analyzes the sources of data from which the empirical studies in our sample.

3.1. Basic characteristics, embeddedness, and the global nature of international agility and flexibility research

Table 2 illustrates the number of articles on agility and flexibility published in IB journals from 1982 to 2019, which clearly mirrors the rise of interest in the international dimension of these concepts. Our analysis in this section excludes articles from our review that are

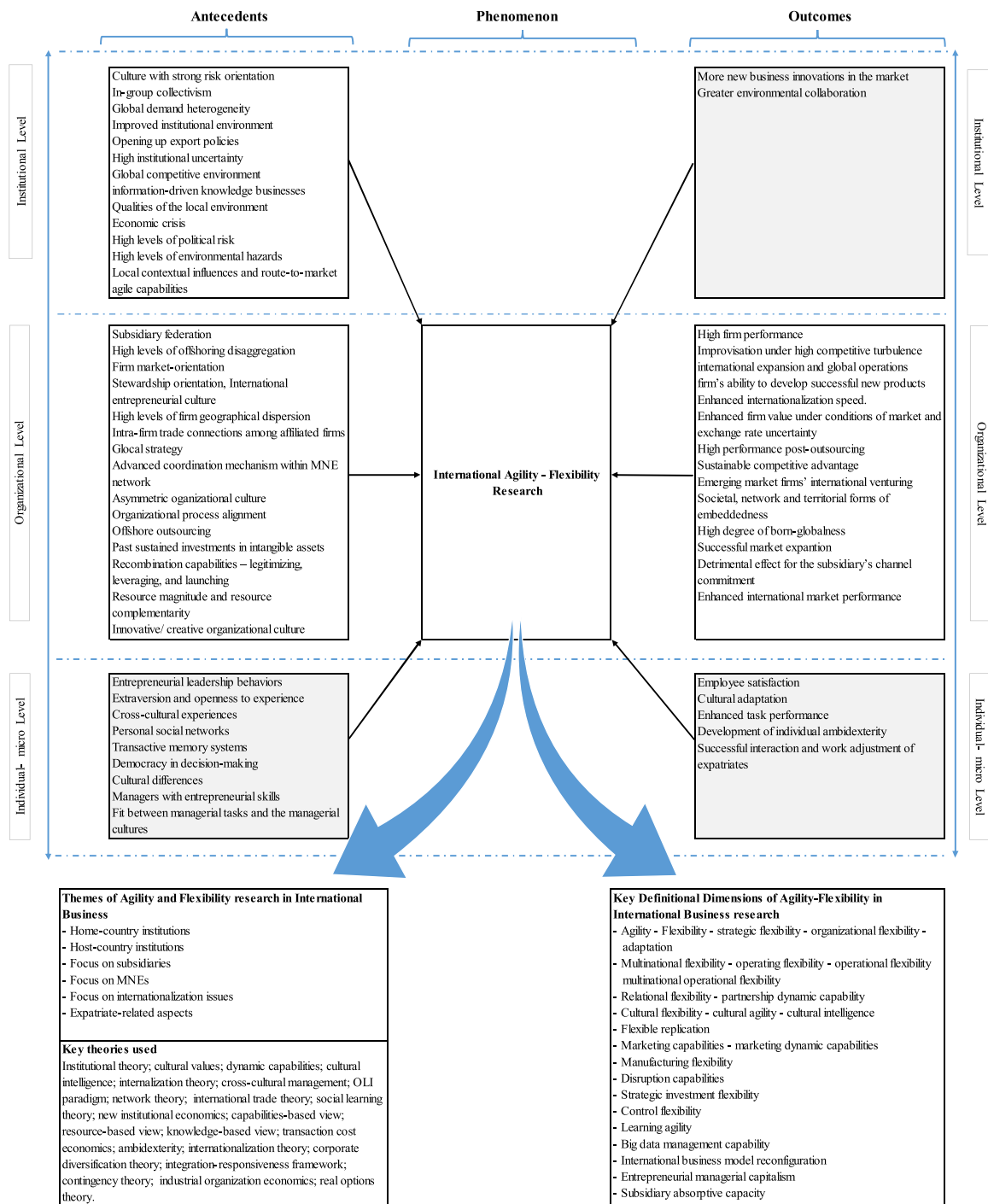


Fig. 1. Integrative framework of agility and flexibility research in the International Business field.
 Notes: Gray text signifies embryonic research areas identified in need of further research.

published in 2020 – four articles from the *JIM* Special Issue – because the results would not be representative. In particular, since the first article published in 1982, there has been a continuous increase in the publication of agility and flexibility research in the top IB journals. Also, 36 % (49 studies) of the articles included in the final sample were published in the last five years. Major shifts along the way included 2012 (n = 9), 2014 (n = 13), and 2015 (n = 11). However, the biggest increase in published articles on the topic came in 2019 (n = 16) – an increase of 229 % from the previous year. In particular, considering all 38 years covered, we notice a general increase. An incidental article was published during the early years, and about two studies per year (on

average) were published from 1996 until 2006. There were almost seven studies per year from 2007 to 2014, which climbed to on average 10 studies per year in the last five years. We also believe that this increase will continue in 2020, as various IB journals, such as the *JWB* and the *JIMan* have ongoing agility-related special issues within 2019. Coupled with the sheer number of studies identified in nine publication outlets only, these findings also lend credence to our belief that the concepts of agility and flexibility are, beyond question, of very high interest to IB scholars and top IB journals. Moreover, these observations further support our belief that the time is appropriate for reviewing the use of agility and flexibility research in the IB literature. These findings also

Table 2
Year and publication of agility and flexibility research in top IB journals.

	JWB	JIBS	JIMan.	GSJ	IBR	MIR	APJM	MOR	JMS	Total
1982	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
1983	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1984	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
1985	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1986	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1987	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1988	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1989	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1990	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
1991	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1992	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
1993	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1994	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1995	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1996	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
1997	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
1998	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
1999	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
2000	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
2001	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
2002	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
2003	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
2004	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2005	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
2006	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
2007	0	3	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	7
2008	2	1	1	0	1	1	2	0	0	8
2009	3	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	6
2010	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
2011	1	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	6
2012	2	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	3	9
2013	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	4
2014	1	1	1	1	7	1	1	0	0	13
2015	2	0	2	1	1	2	3	0	0	11
2016	2	1	0	4	0	0	0	0	1	8
2017	1	0	0	1	1	2	1	1	0	7
2018	1	1	0	1	3	0	0	0	1	7
2019	1	4	3	0	5	1	1	1	0	16
2020	–	–	4	–	–	–	–	–	–	4
Total	20	29	20	9	23	10	12	3	9	134

Notes: The results for the year 2020 are not representative because they include articles from a forthcoming Special Issue at Journal of International Management, as per the reviewers' comments.

illustrate the need for an informed dialog about how agility and flexibility research should, and could, best be used in future IB research. Thus, now is the appropriate time for the IB domain to take a stance and apply a common language. The publication outlets with the highest number of articles among the top IB journals surveyed were *JIBS*, with

29 studies; *IBR*, with 23; and *JWB*, with 20 articles. Taking into account the last five years together, *IBR* published 10 articles, followed by *JWB* and *GSJ*, with seven studies each; *JIBS*, with six studies; *JIMan* with *MIR* and *APJM*, at five articles each; and *JMS*, with *MOR*, with two research articles.

Table 3
Article distribution per level of analysis and category in International Management research.

Categories in International Management Research	Level of Analysis				Total
	Individual	Organizational	Institutional	Multiple	
Multinational enterprises	4	18	1	4	27
Internationalization	2	17	0	5	24
Foreign direct investment	0	10	3	2	15
Multiple	0	10	0	4	14
Subsidiary–headquarters relations	0	9	0	4	13
Global business environment	0	5	4	1	10
International joint ventures	1	5	0	0	6
Subsidiary and multinational team management	4	2	0	0	6
International exchange	0	3	0	2	5
Entry mode decisions	0	3	0	0	3
Expatriate management	3	0	0	0	3
Transfer of knowledge	1	2	0	0	3
Strategic alliances and networks	0	1	0	0	1
Total	15	85	8	22	130

Notes: The analysis in Table 3 excludes articles from our review that are published in 2020 – 4 four articles from the JIM Special Issue – because the results would not be representative.

Sources: [Pisani et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Werner \(2002\)](#).

Continuing, agility and flexibility IB research welcomes diverse methodologies when it comes to empirical studies (n = 104). Still, quantitative studies have dominated the domain (n = 81). Qualitative based studies (n = 16), which draw mainly on interviews, are still rare even though their usage has increased by about 300 % in the last decade, compared to previous years. In the same note, pure theory papers (n = 26) started showing up in recent years, compared to their scarcity in the first two and a half decades. Studies utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodology approaches are the rarest of all (n = 7). As regards the industry focus by empirical studies, the majority concentrate on industries included in the manufacturing sector (n = 42, 40 %), in contrast with studies that draw their samples from the services sector (n = 19, 19 %). A fair percentage of empirical studies used samples from both sectors (n = 20, 20 %), whereas 23 studies provide no indication as to which sector their sample was drawn from.

In Table 3, we report the levels of analysis focused on in international agility and flexibility research, as well as their topical classification according to the 12 categories of international management (IM) research developed by Werner (2002) and (Pisani, 2009; Pisani et al., 2017). The institutional (n = 8, 6%) and individual (n = 15, 12 %) levels of analysis emerge as understudied. Multilevel theorizing occurred in 22 studies (17 %) from the sample, which is unexpected given that IB is characterized as a discipline that focuses on multiple levels of analysis (Pisani et al., 2017). However, the organizational level of analysis dominates (n = 85, 65 %), and the topics that are mainly investigated deal with the categories of multinational enterprises and internationalization. Studies at the institutional level of analysis mainly focus on foreign direct investment and the global business environment categories, whereas the focus on the individual level of analysis relates to studies that deal, mainly, with topics on subsidiary and multinational team management, followed by the categories of expatriate management, multinational enterprises, and internationalization. As regards the multiple levels of analysis, the focus of studies was evenly distributed among international management categories that relate to subsidiary-headquarters relations, multinational enterprises, and internationalization, as well as on topics that are included in multiple categories. Taken together as a whole, the most frequent international management categories found are multinational enterprises (21 %) (e.g., Chen, Zou, Xu, & Chen, 2019; Fainshmidt, Nair, & Mallon, 2017; Rangan, 1998; Tong & Li, 2008) and internationalization (18 %) (e.g., Jonsson & Foss, 2011; Segaro, Larimo, & Jones, 2014), followed by studies that deal with the foreign direct investment category (12 %) and 14 studies that focus on multiple categories. The remaining 38 % is distributed across eight categories. The least studied categories include strategic alliances and network, with one study, as well as entry mode decisions, expatriate management, and transfer of knowledge, with three studies each. These results point out that the main focus of international agility and flexibility research is on agility- and flexibility-related matters that specifically interest MNEs' strategies, as well as issues of internationalization. Further research is needed on how agility and flexibility affect and/or relate with knowledge transfer, entry mode decisions, expatriate management, and strategic alliances in IB research.

To understand the international nature of agility and flexibility research in the IB field, we focused on the 98 studies from the sample that contain information about the geographical location (six studies do not provide information for a specific country from which their sample was drawn). As anticipated, the most researched country is China (29 %), followed distantly by the USA (21 %) and Korea (13 %). Taken together, these three countries represent more than half (63 %) of the sample of countries examined in extant literature. Adding to this, it is clear that the list of examined countries suggests a dominant focus on East Asia and North America, whereas the country results from Europe show a greater dispersion, with studies focusing on United Kingdom and Germany being the most researched territories (eight and seven studies respectively). The least frequently studied continents were Australia/

Oceania and Africa. Meanwhile, only 11 studies (11 %) from among the selected empirical papers, were conducted with samples from different economic contexts (e.g., Belderbos & Zou, 2007; Parkhe & Miller, 1998; Rangan, 1998; Young, Welter, & Conger, 2018). These findings align with findings from IB reviews of other topics, which clearly indicates the greater difficulties in accessing data in developing countries (Pisani et al., 2017) and provides insights into which geographical regions are under-represented or even unrepresented in extant literature. Furthermore, our findings indicate that only developed countries were considered before 1998, whereas the focus on the BRIC context is mainly in China, which continues to remain highly dominant until today.

We classified each article that contained geographical information on a specific country focus (n = 100, 98 empirical and 2 conceptual articles) into the four country groupings based on its primary focus. This action further enhances our understanding of the extent to which agility and flexibility research in the IB field focuses on developing, emerging, and developed countries, as well as on multiple economies. Following this, our results illustrate that only one study is primarily focused on a developing country (Uganda), whereas 39 % (n = 39) and 50 % (n = 50) focused on emerging and developed economies respectively. Studies that include countries with various levels of development constitute only 11 % of this subset. We combined emerging and developing countries into one category, as only one study focuses on a developing country, thus generalizations cannot be extracted. Table 4 illustrates this grouping and further enhances our understanding in terms of the publication year, levels of analysis focused on, IM categories investigated, and methodology applied. The table clearly demonstrates that the organizational level of analysis dominates in all categories, whereas the

Table 4
Country level of development, publication years, level of analysis, category and methodology.

	Country level of development		
	Developed	Developing & Emerging	Multiple
Publication Years			
1982 - 1990	2	0	0
1991 - 2000	7	0	1
2001 - 2010	10	12	5
2011 - 2020	31	27	5
Levels of Analysis			
Institutional	3	1	1
Organizational	32	27	6
Individual	8	2	2
Multilevel	7	9	2
Category			
Internationalization	9	9	2
Multinational enterprises	8	6	2
Multiple	5	4	3
Foreign direct investment	9	3	0
Subsidiary-headquarters relations	6	4	2
International exchange	3	2	0
Global business environment	0	4	1
International joint ventures	1	5	0
Subsidiary and multinational team management	5	0	0
Entry mode decisions	1	1	0
Expatriate management	2	0	1
Transfer of knowledge	0	1	0
Strategic alliances and networks	1	0	0
Methodology applied (empirical studies)			
Qualitative	8	6	1
Quantitative	39	29	8
Mixed Methods	3	2	2
Total	50	39	11

Note: The number of studies considered is 100, i.e., 98 empirical articles that report information on the country from which the sample was drawn, as well as two theoretical articles that explicitly state that they focus on a specific geographical context.

institutional and individual levels are under-researched. In terms of IM categories, on both developed and emerging-developing categories, internationalization captures the largest portion, followed by issues related to multinational enterprises. Adding to this, foreign direct investment also stands highly in the developed category. The least studied categories that need further attention in the domain include transfer of knowledge and strategic alliances and networks, with one study each, as well as entry mode decisions and expatriate management, with two and three studies respectively.

To identify any interesting degrees of influence in terms of research approaches, correlation analyses between country groupings and methodologies were conducted. The outcome confirmed that research on all categories is tending toward quantitative methods, whereas qualitative methods are not so frequent. Mixed methods approaches are the least used, even though they can provide both in-depth and generalizable insights. The results align with the methodology findings of the full sample, which indicates a similar pattern in all three categories.

3.2. Key definitional dimensions and theories

The terms agility and flexibility have not been defined unanimously in IB research. Thus, this paper provides an extensive overview of the definitions used in extant literature in an effort to extrapolate the terms' dimensions for further research and to offer implications regarding the ways and means by which they are operationalized.

To start with, the majority of studies (e.g., Argote & Ren, 2012; Eriksson, Nummela, & Saarenketo, 2014; Fainshmidt, Pezeshkan, Lance Frazier, Nair, & Markowski, 2016; Luo, 2000; Prange & Verdier, 2011; Williamson, 2016; Zhang, Xie, Li, & Cheng, 2019) dealt with agility/flexibility in the IB context as a responsive, reactive ability. By using the terms 'agility', 'flexibility', 'strategic flexibility', 'dynamic capabilities', 'organizational flexibility', or 'adaptation', the authors of these studies have considered flexibility as a complementary dynamic capability that provides the means for MNEs to fight inertia and to rapidly respond to various contexts by adapting their main competencies (Zhang et al., 2019). In other words, agility and flexibility focuses on an MNE's ability to interact with and adapt to changes in the environment. It does so by becoming agile and flexible at home and abroad, thus, requiring that management operates with less authority and promotes responsiveness, flexibility, and learning (Teece, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019).

Adding to this, within the dynamic capabilities framework, Teece (2012) argued that, unlike ordinary capabilities, certain dynamic capabilities could be based on the knowledge and abilities of executives (individual level of analysis) rather than the organization as a whole. In particular, 'entrepreneurial managerial capitalism', the dynamic capability of individual executives, involves evaluating opportunities and identifying threats, directing (and redirecting) resources based on a policy or action plan. It possibly also involves reshaping business processes, systems, and structures so that they develop and utilize technological opportunities and respond to competitive threats. These definitions of agility and flexibility in the IB context are based on the dynamic capabilities framework, defined as the capabilities that enable an organization to integrate, build, and reconfigure external and internal resources to sustain leadership in constantly changing business landscapes (Teece, 2014; Williamson, 2016). In that respect, researchers have differentiated dynamic capabilities from ordinary capabilities. Ordinary capabilities allow a firm to make a living in the present, whereas dynamic capabilities change the way a business makes its living. This is because dynamic capabilities allow the organization to change the resource base, alter ordinary capabilities, and/or trigger change in the firm's external environment (Fainshmidt et al., 2016). Hence, ordinary capabilities are not sufficient for long-term survival and growth, whereas dynamic capabilities provide the ability for an organization to have higher possibility of developing and sustaining competitive advantage, especially in markets where change is high and rapid (Teece, 2014).

Continuing, a large portion of studies reviewed here focus on

'multinational flexibility', 'operating flexibility', 'operational flexibility', or 'multinational operational flexibility', as it is also called, in order to describe the flexible structuring and coordination of MNEs (e.g., Chung & Beamish, 2005; Song, Lee, & Makhija, 2015; Song, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b). These studies primarily draw on the notions of real options theory. According to this theory, a real option is a right, without any obligation, to take a specific action (at some cost) in the future. This action could be regarding an intangible or tangible asset, such as acquiring a share of ownership from a partner, divesting or expanding an existing production facility, or switching production across subsidiaries in an MNE network. Moreover, when uncertainty is present with regard to the asset value, the option provides the possibility for the decision maker to collect new information and proceed to act if there is a benefit. In the IB area, the new information could be a more precise assessment about market demand for the company's products in a foreign country, the costs of production of a subsidiary network in an MNE, or the synergies with and capabilities of an acquisition target (Chi, Li, Trigeorgis, & Tsekrekos, 2019). Thus, based on this theoretical basis, the real options' view of multinational flexibility argues that subsidiaries of MNCs, operationally linked to peer subsidiaries in other geographical regions, can respond to external uncertainties in more flexible ways. Such flexible intra-firm responses have a positive effect on firms' performance and enable them to minimize their exit rates. In particular, the multinational operational flexibility concept states that MNCs use their subsidiaries and take advantage of environmental shocks and fluctuations specific to their host countries. They can do that by adjusting and relocating their activities, including sales and production, and/or transfer resources among subsidiaries (Hada, Grewal, & Chandrashekar, 2013; Song, 2014a, 2015a).

A different set of studies have focused on the concept of flexibility and agility within an organizational entity with various partners, as well as on the relationships of MNEs with various partners. Referred to as 'partnering flexibility', 'relational flexibility', or 'partnership dynamic capability', this set of studies draws on various theories, including dynamic capabilities framework, resource-based view, and transaction cost economics, among others. Taking the perspective of agility within an organizational entity with various partners, the term agility/flexibility primarily relates to the ability of a pair of partners to integrate and reconfigure resources to respond and adjust to environmental shifts (Chang, Chen, & Huang, 2015).

According to the findings of the review, another group of studies considers the aspect of culture within the concept of agility and flexibility. Drawing on a range of theories, such as Hofstede's cultural value dimensions, cultural adaptation and cultural intelligence, social learning theory, and contact hypothesis, these studies use agility and flexibility as an ability at the individual level of analysis (employees, managers, and leaders) that provides individuals with the capability to adjust, function, and respond effectively and appropriately in culturally diverse settings (Ang et al., 2007; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012). The most common terms used in this group of studies for the concept of agility and flexibility are 'cultural flexibility' (e.g., Black, 1990; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012), 'cultural agility' (e.g., Ma, Chen, & Zhang, 2016), and 'cultural intelligence' (e.g., Ang et al., 2007).

Finally, we identified some definitions adopted by individual, or a very small number of, studies, which we briefly mention here. First, Jonsson and Foss (2011) used the phrase 'flexible replication' to describe the successful combination of the advantages that replication offers with the related benefits of being able to adapt and transfer new knowledge within an MNC. They used the example of IKEA to do so. Dynamic capabilities seem to dominate as the theoretical framing for many of the ten most cited papers in our analysis. From an international business context, Shams, Vrontis, Belyaeva, Ferraris, and Czinkota (2020), in their recent piece also reiterate that the term 'agility' extends the concept of flexibility while managing stakeholder relationships in order to develop key dynamic capabilities (DC). Other examples from varied disciplines, such as Eng and Spickett-Jones (2009), Fang and Zou

(2009), and Buccieri, Javalgi, & Cavusgil, 2019, focus on the marketing dimension of agility and flexibility. Their theoretical basis includes the dynamic capabilities framework and ambidexterity. They refer to the concepts of agility and flexibility as 'marketing capabilities' or 'marketing dynamic capabilities'. Based on the dynamic marketing capabilities dimension, these authors refer to agility and flexibility as the capabilities that allow an international new venture (INV) to respond to the competitive environment in foreign markets by enhancing the international entrepreneurial culture-INV performance relationship. In other words, these marketing dynamic capabilities enable INVs to meet customers' changing demands by appropriately adjusting, combining, and (re)configuring organizational skills, functional competences, and internal and external resources, which in turn positively affect their internationalization activities.

On a similar note and from a manufacturing discipline context, Malik and Kotabe (2009) used the term 'manufacturing flexibility' to describe the ease with which a business can quickly bring innovative change to its productive processes, by varying products, product mixes, and production volumes in an accurately respond to external opportunities or threats. Continuing, Pinho and Prange (2016) introduced the term 'disruption capabilities', which refers to those capabilities that create the flexibility that allows businesses to learn the competencies necessary for continuous growth and prevents businesses from age-related liabilities. On the other hand, McCarthy and Puffer (1997) claimed that 'strategic investment flexibility' was the ease with which the strategic direction of MNEs could be changed. Moreover, Luo (2003) referred to the concept of 'control flexibility', which relates to the extent to which a parent company's organizational control over the activities and operations of subsidiaries is flexible enough so that budget, bureaucratic control mechanisms, output, and operations respond to local market or environmental conditions. Madhok and Keyhani (2012) wrote about the notion of 'learning agility' through which emerging MNEs discover opportunities available via acquisitions and capitalize on these by improved facilitation of knowledge assimilation via such acquisitions. In the context of the knowledge-based dynamic capabilities and ambidexterity theoretical framings, Shamim, Zeng, Choksy, & Shariq, 2019 introduced the term 'big data management capability', which means the ability of MNEs to transform insights generated from data into actions in an agile and timely manner and could lead to the identification of opportunities and the development of a firm's value. Continuing, Argote and Ren (2012) presented 'transactive memory systems', a micro-foundation of the dynamic capabilities framework, defined as a shared system that individuals in groups and businesses create to collectively store, encode, and draw knowledge or information in various domains. In turn, they illustrated how such an organizational system can enhance the combinative renovation and integration of a firm's knowledge base. The last identified dimension of agility and flexibility is 'international business model reconfiguration', which is linked to online international expansion. It refers to the fast, agile involvement in changing opportunities of innovations in digital technology, as well as to the flexibility of testing redesigned offerings and engaging in small changes or larger adjustments to business models that are not working in virtual marketplaces (Cahen & Borini, 2019).

In a nutshell, the definitions of flexibility and agility have been analyzed to extrapolate their dimensions and perspectives. By reviewing the definitions, it is evident that extant research utilized the terms from a wide variety of dimensions, nevertheless, there is a strong emphasis on the responsive nature of agility and flexibility. However, more recent conceptualizations focused on the proactive dimension through which businesses not only respond to institutional uncertainties and changes in the environment, but also have the ability to shape them. Moreover, it is also evident that the definitions of agility and flexibility relate primarily to the organizational level of analysis and how MNEs, subsidiaries, and firms, in general, respond to changes in the market and the environment. There are however a few exceptions where agility and flexibility are operationalized at the individual employee level of analysis, such as

those studies focusing on cultural flexibility and agility. And of course, we conceptualize and identify a key differentiator among the two concepts (agility and flexibility), i.e. speed or quickness, when it comes to agility, which we discuss in greater detail below.

3.3. Broad themes and synthesis of key findings

This section conducts a theme-based analysis of the studies that are incorporated in each of the three categories based on the 'antecedents-phenomenon-consequences' framework used. Within each of the three categories, we report the identified key themes under which we group the articles, the representative studies that focus on each of the identified themes, the core frameworks and theories used, and a synopsis of the main results of the articles. Subsequently, we develop a schematic representation of the key findings, in this context (Fig. 1), and elaborate on their interrelation, importance, and essential theoretical contribution.

3.3.1. The antecedents

The antecedents category includes articles that can be grouped according to the unit of analysis researchers focused on when investigating the drivers of the international flexibility/agility phenomenon. Studies included in this category examined the drivers triggering the concepts of agility and flexibility within the context of IB research at the institutional (institutional/ contextual drivers), group/organizational (organizational drivers), individual/ team (micro-level drivers), and multiple (multilevel drivers) levels of analysis.

Institutional theory has been a key theoretical framework for institutional/contextual drivers when considering various types of institutional environments such as institutional uncertainty; economic instability, or crisis; and an improved institutional environment. Other key theories used here include cultural value dimensions that deal with the characteristics of national culture. The MNE network theory is concerned with the exchange rate changes among the countries of the MNE subsidiary network. The capabilities and the resource-based view focus on country-specific factors such as the qualities of the local environment, including the availability (or scarcity) of particular types of resources (Williamson, 2016). For instance, Chung, Lu, and Beamish (2008) showed that increased flexibility related with intra- and inter-firm organizational relationships is more likely to enhance the subsidiary performance established in crisis rather than stable economic environments. On another note, Santangelo and Meyer (2011) found that in conditions of high institutional uncertainty, investors prefer low commitment but flexible modes that later encourage enhanced commitment. However, institutional voids negatively affect organizational flexibility because they result in the search for up-front information as well as in adapting costs to minimize the possibility of early post-entry adjustments.

Moreover, studies analysing the group/organizational level have investigated the organizational level drivers that foster or inhibit flexibility and agility in the IB context. These studies mainly used organizational culture, the resource and knowledge based view, ambidexterity, and dynamic capabilities for developing the theoretical basis of their research. For instance, they examined the impact of firms' capabilities, such as legitimizing, leveraging, and launching capabilities, on the development of organizational flexibility (Groggaard, Colman, & Stensaker, 2019). Conversely, articles that examined the micro-level drivers fostering international agility-/flexibility-related activities used theories applied at the other levels of analysis, as well as behavioral theories and theoretical frameworks related to individual or team characteristics. For instance, studies used the contingency of fit framework, through which researchers examined the impact of fit (at the managerial level) between cultures and tasks. They showed that cultural agility advances the contingency perspective in IM and provides managers with cultural agility to overcome international challenges (Ma et al., 2016). The final category entails studies that focused on drivers of agility/flexibility in IB

at more than one level of analysis and used theories similar to the other three levels of analysis.

3.3.2. The phenomenon

Studies classified in the phenomenon category allowed for a clustering in six broad themes based on the specific foci or identity (i.e., MNE, subsidiary) investigated. The 'home-country institutions' thematic category includes studies that investigate how home-country institutional environment affects firms' CSR practices. For example, Wang and Ma (2018) showed that High Export Intensity companies focus on export primarily to escape from their home country's deficient institutional context and that such escape-oriented firms are more sensitive and responsive to environmental changes. On the contrary, the 'host-country institutions' theme focuses on the effect that the institutional environment has on MNEs in host countries and their agility/flexibility in such an environment. For instance, Li and Li (2010) showed that applying strategic flexibility in response to uncertainty becomes less important for MNEs when the industry context of their operations in the host country requires less irreversible investments, is characterized by strong sales growth potential, and has high levels of competition. Studies included in the focus on subsidiaries theme have investigated how subsidiaries engage in agility and flexibility and, specifically, the core elements driving their use of agility/flexibility. Getachew and Beamish (2017) found, for example, that subsidiaries entering the African continent with various investment purposes or an enhanced market-seeking orientation are less likely to exit. This is because they have adaptability, flexibility, and learning advantages that are important in overcoming economic challenges or capitalizing into strategic opportunities.

As anticipated, a significant portion of studies investigated the specific role of MNEs and, specifically, the core elements driving their application of agility/flexibility. Accordingly, these studies were grouped together in the 'focus on MNEs' theme. Studies pertaining to this theme have, for instance, found that strategic investment flexibility, defined as the ease with which strategic direction may be changed, is the primary factor differentiating the various investment strategies MNEs adopt in market entry (McCarthy & Puffer, 1997). The next theme, called 'focus on internationalization issues', clusters studies that focus on various aspects of internationalization and their relation with the agility/flexibility strategy. For instance, costs of coordination in global operations can reduce the benefits of operational flexibility (Tong & Reuer, 2007). We identified one more theme in this category, namely 'expatriate-related aspects', that includes only one study that focuses on the relationship between expatriates and agility. Naturally, behavioral theories, including personality traits, value theory of culture, and social learning theory, have constituted the theoretical basis used in the study belonging to this theme. In particular, Shin, Morgeson, and Campion (2007) empirically show that expatriate jobs require higher perceptual and social skills, reasoning ability, being flexible and able to adjust to change, and an achievement-oriented personality than domestic jobs. Moreover, expatriates are required to change their behavior in order to align with the local cultural values.

3.3.3. The consequences

We further clustered articles that investigated the 'consequences' of agility/flexibility in the context of IB, thus, forming the institutional, group/organizational, and micro-level outcome-related themes. First, we grouped studies that focused on the institutional effects of international businesses using agility and flexibility. Researchers in this theme have, for instance, found that operational agility through flexible work conditions and creativity at the individual level leads to higher environmental collaboration (Bouguerra, Gölgeci, Gligor, & Tatoglu, 2019). Next, the majority of studies in this category investigated group-/organization-level outcomes, and thus mainly looked at how the performance and value creation effects experienced by MNEs, subsidiaries and other types of firms that are agile/flexible (e.g., Eng &

Spickett-Jones, 2009; Hodgkinson, Hughes, & Arshad, 2016; Hung, Yang, Lien, McLean, & Kuo, 2010; Luo, 2000; Yilmaz & Ergun, 2008). Finally, the last group of studies focused on the micro-level outcomes that emerged from the introduction of agility and flexibility practices in an IB context. Studies belonging to this theme mainly focused on employees. Specifically, they investigated the effect of firm-level agility and flexibility practices on employees' commitment towards the firm (Alpay, Bodur, Yilmaz, Çetinkaya, & Arıkan, 2008) and towards capabilities (Shamim et al., 2019). Also, they investigated individual-level agility and flexibility capabilities on employees'/expatriates' capabilities and performance (Ang et al., 2007; Black, 1990).

3.3.4. Integrative conceptualization and theoretical insights

The theme-based analysis of the studies whose empirical context is on developing and emerging economies provides valuable insights. As regards to the 'antecedents' category, we observe that equal emphasis is paid to a broad range of drivers at the institutional, group/organizational, and the micro-levels of analysis. However, studies focusing on a blend of drivers from various levels of analysis attracted the least attention. The 'phenomenon' category captured the least attention when focusing on agility/flexibility in IB research. The 'consequences' category has gained significant attention in the domain, although, most studies have focused on group/organizational level outcomes of agility/flexibility, except for a few studies that investigated the institutional and micro-level outcomes.

These results are valuable in identifying, profiling, interrelating, and positioning the individual fragments of extant knowledge on the subject. However, constructing this comprehensive 'Integrative framework of agility and flexibility research in the International Business field' is more than a simple schematic depiction of dispersed information gained. It is, in fact, a systemic overview of knowledge that allows further elucidations on the subject and provides greater insights into the present gaps and consequent needful future of research on the area (see Section 4.1). A closer look at the individual framework elements, not in isolation but in context and across the categories, levels, themes, theories, and definitional dimensions, presents some clear (and some less so) patterns pertaining to present theory and practice, as well as their future avenues of research.

Starting with the institutional level, we first observe an imbalance between antecedents and outcomes, with the former far outweighing the latter. Moreover, the findings present the antecedents as being focused and specific (e.g. 'export policies'), while the outcomes are more wide and general (e.g. 'business innovation'). Even the amount and specificity of the antecedents, though, appears to be lacking in comparison to the breadth and depth of current research on general institutional factors affecting international business. The findings highlight the absence of antecedents such as technological factors (e.g. artificial intelligence and digitalization), 'soft' resources (e.g. knowledge development and transfer), and other, more notional factors (e.g. macro-environmental effects of micro-foundational transformations of human resources and customers). Conversely, antecedents are dominated by the more 'classic' elements of cultural concerns, heterogeneity, globalization, economic crises, and political risks. Extant knowledge, therefore, on the subject of international agility and flexibility, at the institutional level, does not only lack in terms of foci, but it appears to be lacking in those exact areas, which constitute paradigm shifters in contemporary international business literature. The above analyses identify gaps in knowledge in terms of the overall outcomes, and in terms of the antecedents' foci, and innately point at the necessary corresponding future research directions to fill these (see Section 4.1).

At the organizational level, both the antecedents and the outcomes present a more complete theoretical picture of what might be viewed as a more natural amount, range, and foci of elements researched. Even so, the bird's-eye view is evidently incomplete. And though this is to be expected, considering the number of works under study, the absence, again, of the aforementioned contemporarily critical elements of

international business research is highlighted. This is the case for both antecedents and outcomes. The latter, in fact, albeit partly understandably so, further presents a less strong, yet distinguishable, inclination towards more general, competitiveness-relevant outcomes (performance, advantage etc.), somewhat ignoring more definite and internalized effects.

At the individual (micro) level, we observe similar phenomena and, additionally, a rather clear inclination towards socio-cultural elements in both the antecedents and the outcomes. These elements are, on the one hand, inherently strong aspects of the micro-foundational perspective on international business. On the other, they do disregard elements on both sides of the spectrum, from the more individualistic/psychological to the more functional/operational ones. It is noted, nonetheless, that the individual (micro) level works are somewhat underrepresented in extant literature, so the above observations are more valid in absolute and limited terms, rather than patterns per se.

The findings on the antecedents and outcomes at the three levels, however, are only part of the overall findings of this research. The ‘*themes of agility and flexibility research in international business*’ is an additional valuable set of findings, itself also presenting some patterns. One of the weaker ones is, potentially, the ‘international business’ perspective being studied as an organizational situation/condition, rather than a wider contextual phenomenon. This is not actually wrong, but it is limiting the perspective of extant works. Another is the focus on individual paradigms, as opposed to comparative studies. The more obvious pattern, though, is the attention paid to institutional elements (e.g. home-country institutions) and typological groups (e.g. MNEs) that are, of course, undoubtedly important, but missing the individual organizational perspective.

Regarding the ‘*key theories used*’, there is no apparent pattern in the utilization of the various theories. Some have been used more than others, as a well-founded a priori choice, but no evident trend or inclination has been identified. Finally, the ‘*key definitional dimensions of agility-flexibility in international business research*’ provide an interesting set of terminological uses, with some identifiable patterns. Expectedly, some definitional dimensions differ as a matter of natural communicational differences. In other words, similar meanings have different terms. The difference is actual in most cases though, with the variances pertaining to function (e.g. ‘operational flexibility’), context (e.g. ‘multinational flexibility’), and situation (e.g. ‘disruption’). And though the definitional dimensions are, apparently, largely in order and consistent regarding the secondary/accompanying term (‘strategic’, ‘organizational’, ‘control’, etc.), the primary terms of ‘flexibility’ and ‘agility’ are perhaps not as consistent, specific, or accurate as one might assume. For one thing, it appears that, though not interchangeable, the two terms are often used as though they are similar if not the same. It is not this research’s aim to start or fuel a discussion on the proper definition of these terms, nonetheless the two may be closely related, but are, inherently, not the same. Nevertheless, the difference is not evidently clear across the literature and, in some cases, even within individual works. It is, thus, apparent that a definitional/terminological gap exists at the very foundation of the subject, which calls for research to resolve it, not simply in terms of actual definitions, but through proper and appropriate descriptive research to define and refine both.

That said, we can identify one key differentiation when it comes to the two terms. To do so, we take into account two important and early definitions of the two terms. Very early on Gerwin (1987) defined ‘flexibility’ as a firm being able to effectively respond when faced with challenging and changing circumstances. Similarly, an early definition by McGaughey (1999) defines ‘agility’ as a firm being able to respond both successfully to challenges and changes, but with speed or quickness. Thus, both definitions could be deemed identical, other than the differentiator for the term agility, emphasizing speed or quickness in response to challenging or changes in situations. From an international business context, Shams et al. (2020), drawing from four very recent empirical papers in a special issue they edit, contend that multinational

enterprises (MNEs) tend to create an agile organizational system, by resorting to the following three key aspects: one, by making sense *quickly*; two, by making decisions *nimbly*; and, three, by redeploying resources *rapidly*. The authors argue that the term ‘agility’ extends the concept of flexibility, while managing stakeholder relationships in order to develop key dynamic capabilities (DC). Thus, the differentiator (speed or quickness when it comes to agility) between the two terms is to an extent validated by recent research (Boojihawon, Richeri, Liu, & Chicksand, 2020; Debellis, De Massis, Petruzzelli, Frattini, & Del Giudice, 2020; Gölgeci, Assadinia, Kuivalainen, & Larimo, 2019; Pereira, Budhwar, Temouri, Malik, & Tarba, 2020).

The integrative conceptualization (framework) and subsequent elucidations shed new light on extant knowledge, identifying patterns and inclinations, highlighting gaps and inconsistencies, and directing future research (see Section 4.1). These theoretical insights present an objective and holistic perspective on the subject of agility and flexibility in international business, and constitute a unique contribution to theory, balancing content and context, as well as notion and function.

3.4. Citation analysis of the field and most influential studies

Following standard practice in state-of-the-art systematic reviews (e.g., López-Duarte et al., 2016), we identified the most representative articles in the domain in terms of their actual impact. For such an analysis, we identified the total number of citations for each study using Google Scholar (i.e., Hinojosa et al., 2017) as of December 31, 2019. We excluded 2020, because it was too soon for those studies to accumulate citations (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Next, we divided this final number of citations by the number of years that elapsed from publication year to 2019, as recently published studies have less possibility to be cited by other scholars than earlier ones (López-Duarte et al., 2016). For the sake of readability, we report here only the articles with the 10 highest adjusted citations.

These top-10 articles are spread over various dimensions of flexibility and agility concepts. The most-cited paper is Zahra, Sapienza, and Davidsson’s (2006) study (222 adjusted citations). That study provides a critical review of entrepreneurship and dynamic capabilities, through which they offer a definition of dynamic capabilities, a model and a future research agenda within this realm. The second position is captured by a paper published by Teece (2012). His study (136 adjusted citations), again within the dynamic capabilities theoretical framing, focused on the role (skills and knowledge) of individual executives in the development of specific dynamic capabilities, which, in turn, enhance superior financial performance. The third most-cited article is the study developed by Ang et al. (2007) (131 adjusted citations). It focused on developing and analyzing the concept of cultural intelligence, including the notion of cultural adaptation. Another by Teece (2014) (no. 4, 121 adjusted citations), and developed a dynamic capabilities-based theory of MNE flexibility. Continuing, the paper published by Bock, Opsahl, George, and Gann (2012), captures the fifth position (53 adjusted citations). Here, the authors examined the impact of creative culture and structure on strategic flexibility during business model innovation. Their findings showed that the former variable has a positive impact on strategic flexibility, whereas partner reliance has a negative effect. Next, the study conducted by Madhok and Keyhani (2012) (no. 6, 48 adjusted citations) examined the rapid internationalization of several MNEs from emerging countries through acquisition in advanced markets and highlighted the role of learning agility as a potential ‘asset of emergingness’. Following, Caligiuri and Tarique (2012) (no. 7, 40) focused on how dynamic cross-cultural competencies, including cultural flexibility, are created or shaped, and their impact on global leadership effectiveness. Prange and Verdier’s (2011) study is next (no. 8, 37). They theoretically analyzed the internationalization process through the lens of an organization’s resources and capabilities. Moreover, Buckley and Casson (1998) (no. 9, 34) analyzed the models of MNEs and identified that the concept of flexibility is the hallmark of modeling of MNEs. Finally, Luo

(2000) (no. 10, 33) focused on the dynamic capabilities dimension of agility and flexibility within the context of international expansion.

In order to capture the citation impact of agility and flexibility studies in the IB field, we followed the example of Hinojosa et al. (2017) and counted all citations of studies on the topic published in the top-nine IB journals, per year. As evident in Fig. 2, there is a profound impact and sustained popularity of agility and flexibility concepts in IB research. In particular, the findings indicate that, since 1996, there has been a steady increase in citations from articles published in top-tier IB journals that focus on the concepts of agility and flexibility, with 2006 and 2014 being the years with the highest impact. Clearly, the relevance and utility of agility and flexibility within the field of IB remains strong.

3.5. Correlation analysis between citation impact, methodologies and levels of development

Moreover, in order to identify any trends in the sample studies regarding the relationship between citation impact and the country's level of development, we measured the average number of adjusted citations of studies, from which the sample was drawn, with the country's level of development. We categorized the countries used in the sample of empirical studies as developed, emerging, developing, and multiple, which includes studies that had a sample from countries of different levels of development. In the process of doing this analysis, we included 98 empirical studies that provided geographical information of the sample used. Based on this analysis, some interesting findings emerge relative to the citation impact of each category. In particular, the results showed that the citation impact is highest for studies using samples from countries with various levels of development (average adjusted citation impact: 19), followed by studies that focus on samples from developed economies (10), emerging (8), and lastly developing countries (4.3). This finding allows us to conclude that IB researchers and scholars are influenced and guided by papers that focus on various levels of development, as the number of citations is a reliable proxy of the impact and influence of these authors and their papers relative to the field of IB (Aguilera, Crespi-Cladera, Infantes, & Pascual-Fuster, 2019; Griffith, Cavusgil, & Xu, 2008).

Finally, as suggested by Porter, Outlaw, Gale, and Cho (2019), settling the many debates about best practices regarding the methodology applied for a topic is critical for any field of study. Based on that, we also explored the possibility of differences in the scholarly impact, based on citations, of articles utilizing qualitative methodologies compared to articles using a quantitative methodology or a mixed methods approach. In the course of exploring this question, we took the

total adjusted citations of studies per methodology approach and we divided them according to the number of studies in order to identify the average citation impact. We found concrete evidence that the quantitative methods approach has by far the highest citation influence (average adjusted citation impact: 10), followed by the mixed methods approach (9), and lastly the qualitative approach (7). The results indicate that, between the qualitative and quantitative methodology approaches, the citation impact difference is more than 30 % higher for the quantitative approach, whereas the mixed methods approach is at the upper scale of the methodology-related citation impact. A possible explanation of the results is that the quantitative approach is viewed as more trustworthy in the flexibility and agility domain of IB research, and that this trustworthiness results in more citations. However, future research is needed to investigate the relationship between citation impact and the adoption of various methodologies in various contexts (i.e., areas of research, theories used, etc.).

3.6. Data sources and empirics

Since a key challenge for IB research, including agility and flexibility, is access to data, we followed the analysis conducted by Pisani et al. (2017) and analyzed the sources of data from which the 106 empirical studies (including the year 2020) in our sample have been drawn (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix). The table categorizes the data sources identified in sampled studies in such a way that each of them could have several sources within and across categories. Primary data gathered by the authors of these studies, mostly in the form of surveys and interviews, is the most popular source of data in our consideration set. Other regularly utilized sources of data included corporate information databases (e.g., LexisNexis, Compustat, Toyo Keizai, Bloomberg); national public agencies or databases (e.g., China's National Bureau of Statistics, Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency, China Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation); data from business organizations or associations (e.g., Federation of Malaysian Manufacturer directory, Malaysia Biotech Corporation directory; WISEfn's QUANTI-WISE database, Korea Listed Companies Association; Korea Information Service); and data from inter-governmental organizations (e.g., Bank of Korea, Central Bank of Germany, World Bank, International Labour Organization, World Economic Forum). Interestingly, while a variety of data sources were utilized, none of them can be considered heavily used. Other less used data sources included academic databases (e.g., European Manufacturing Survey, Penn World Table – Center for International Comparisons at the University of Pennsylvania, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor); media (e.g., *Munwha Daily Newspaper* and

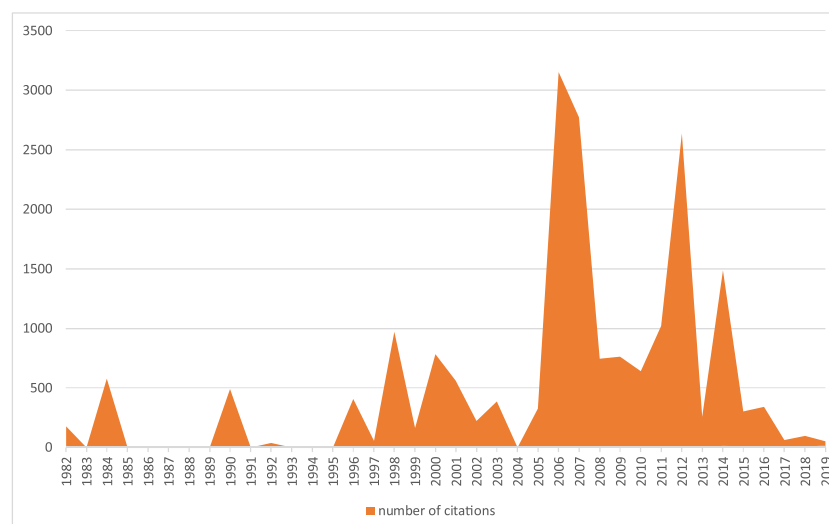


Fig. 2. Citation impact of agility and flexibility studies in the International Business.

Wall Street Journal); various corporate websites or internal company data (e.g., company annual reports and archival documents); and stock index (e.g., Korea Stock Exchange, Securities and Exchange Commission's form 10-K, Taiwan Stock Exchange). As a general observation, the sources of empirics and data used were diverse; however, the focus is mainly on large MNEs, whereas, for example, research on international small or medium-sized (SMEs) firms is limited.

4. Discussion and conclusions

It is inherent to the methodological nature of this research (systematic review) that the identification of extant knowledge limitations and future research avenues is not simply a resulting by-product, but, largely, the essence of the work. We have already presented the explicit and 'tangible' results of our study (Section 3), as well as their synthesis in a manner that allows for true meaning and insights to be drawn (Section 3.3, 'Broad themes and synthesis of key findings'). More essentially, in sub-section '*Integrative conceptualization and theoretical insights*', we have identified patterns and inclinations; highlighted gaps, inconsistencies, and limitations; and presented the general directions for future research. This section elaborates on and elucidates the latter, in the wider context of contemporary international business research, culminating with this research's explicit value and contribution to knowledge.

4.1. Extant knowledge limitations and future research avenues

4.1.1. Sourcing future research and general directions

Our final analysis of the full sample aimed to identify the limitations of extant literature, and thereby make suggestions for future research. The pool of knowledge, from which future research suggestions are drawn, comprises the knowledge gained through the synthesis of the results, as already presented in Section 3.3, sub-section '*Integrative conceptualization and theoretical insights*'. These synthesis-stemming future research avenues expand the spectrum of questions in need of answers, to engulf wider contextual issues, as well as interdisciplinary research potentialities. This is in tune with contemporary international business trends of both theory and practice.

Overall, the results from the analysis and the variable tabulations and synthesis suggest multiple knowledge gaps and theoretical inconsistencies, all of which restrict knowledge on the international agility and flexibility domain. Thus, in mapping out a broad agenda for enhancing the impact, rigor, and accessibility of future IB research on agility and flexibility, we argue for stronger theoretical grounding and development, greater methodological diversity, and better contextual positioning. Subsequently, we explicate these knowledge gaps and theoretical inconsistencies and suggest the requisite means and ends for future research to overcome them. To provide clearer and more valuable research directions, the suggestions, though stemming from separate analyses, are presented in a tri-axial manner, with the axes being '*theory*', '*methodology*' and '*context*'. The term 'tri-axial' is hereby purposefully used to signify that future research is positioned along these axes not independently, but with potentially relevant scope to all and any of the three.

4.1.2. Axis 1: theory

A number of issues relating to theory emerged during this review. First, there is an appreciable bias toward studies that focus on agility and flexibility in four IM categories (internationalization, multinational enterprises, foreign direct investment, subsidiary-headquarters relations). On the other hand, very little work has been performed in other IM categories, such as transfer of knowledge, entry mode decisions, expatriate management, and strategic alliances and networks. This calls for more conceptual, theoretical, and empirical studies from the scholar community on the relationship of agility and flexibility to all categories-topics of IM research, especially those that are under-researched.

Second, despite that the greatest advances in business related disciplines, such as strategy, management, IB, and marketing research begin with novel, insightful, and carefully developed conceptual papers that challenge conventional wisdom (MacInnis, 2011; Yadav, 2010), the results of this review show that conceptual advancement in the domain within the IB field is scarce.

A possible reason for this may be the lack of any guiding theoretical framework. As such, agility and flexibility scholars should emphasize this form of scholarship and develop conceptual articles that apply robust methodological approaches for conceptualization in IB and related disciplines to both advance agility and flexibility thought in IB research. This would serve as a basis for future research streams. Another shortcoming related to theory is that no progress has been made in publishing meta-analyses at any level in the prior literature. This is particularly important given the scarcity of meta-analytic integrations (only one was identified: Fainshmidt et al., 2016) of primary studies in this increasingly large and disparate body of research. Thus, the need for meta-analytical agility-related IB research at different levels of analysis is notable. There are a number of reasons for the importance of conducting meta-analyses in the domain. In particular, a meta-analysis conducted by accumulating primary findings across studies (Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005) can be used to assess more comprehensive models of factors that drive the effects of agility and flexibility on all IB aspects researched in the literature.

Once such quantitative integrations have been conducted and published, researchers will be free to pursue other research questions and cross-level issues rather than continuing to focus upon historically well-examined relationships at single levels of analysis.

Another gap and consequent future research direction stems from the various definitional issues that exist with the concepts of agility and flexibility in the IB field. In particular, the extant IB literature on agility and flexibility appears relatively broad, delineating a variety of definitions of the concepts, embedding it in a variety of different forms, meanings and theoretical framings to conveniently meet diverse needs. This review identified more than 25 definitions of the agility and flexibility concepts. However, convenience and a broad range of definitions can lead to confusion (de Haan et al., 2011), a concern that has been identified in other disciplines, such as strategy, operations and supply chain management (e.g., Brozovic, 2018; Fayezi et al., 2017). Adding to this, Fayezi et al., 2017 and Bernardes and Hanna (2009) state that confusion also occurs due to the interchangeable use of the terms agility and flexibility, as both are used to describe the same set of circumstances or situations. However, as identified above, one key differentiator between the two terms is that agility emphasizes ability of speed or quickness by firms in response to challenges or changes. This interchangeable use of the terms is not different in the IB literature either, as the findings of this review show: cultural agility with cultural flexibility (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Ma et al., 2016); or agility with flexibility within the context of dynamic capabilities (e.g., Eriksson et al., 2014; Luo, 2000; Prange & Verdier, 2011; Williamson, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). Such discrepancies in the use of these terms occur because neither agility nor flexibility have been adequately defined in the IB literature. This lack of definitional clarity and a set of common definitions and definitional dimensions in a scientific field could delay the academic findings to reach business reality (Brozovic, 2018; Schutjens & Wever, 2000), and IB is not excluded. As per the findings of this review, this situation currently prevails within the scope of the IB literature. For instance, scholars used three different definitions to examine the flexibility and agility within an organizational entity with various partners, namely, '*partnering flexibility*', '*relational flexibility*', or '*partnership dynamic capability*'. This could create significant problems in the field. In an effort to provide solutions to these definitional issues, various definition-related literature reviews and conceptual studies exist in other disciplines (i.e., Combe, 2012; de Haan et al., 2011; Saleh, Mark, & Jordan, 2009). Consequently, additional theoretical studies about the concept of agility and flexibility are necessary to bring further

consolidation and clarification to the IB field as well. Adding to this, such conceptual studies could focus on offering possible specific approaches to measurement of the concept and its various dimensions.

Also, as both definitions could be deemed identical, we encourage scholars to build upon the key differentiator we identify in this paper for the term agility, emphasizing speed or quickness in response to challenging or changes in situations. Additionally, as DC seems to dominate as the theoretical framing for many of the top ten cited papers in our analysis, we also encourage future work to explore how this theoretical strand has evolved, especially in the context of agility and flexibility, within international business.

Moreover, the relationships between flexibility or agility and ambidexterity, as well as with other concepts within the IB research can be investigated. Another important endeavour will be the exploration of agility and flexibility in relation to other constructs and theoretical framings regarding the skills of MNEs and other types of businesses within the global landscape that contribute to developing and managing such abilities in highly dynamic environments. That is, as it currently stands, the concepts of agility and flexibility in the IB discipline are under-theorized. Aside from real options theory, resource-based view, and dynamic capabilities theoretical framings, there is a dearth of real theoretical underpinnings in this research. Towards this direction, since IB is by definition interdisciplinary in nature (Buckley, Doh, & Benischke, 2017), IB scholarship could draw on theories from other disciplines in order to develop a robust theoretical basis on this research domain. Another way to fill this gap is to conduct more qualitative research that can make substantial contributions to the research domain, mainly by uncovering practical and theoretical paradoxes (Doz, 2011).

Finally, while there is a significant increase in number of studies exploring the strategic agility (Clauss, Abebe, Tangpong, & Hock, 2019), limited research exists to date investigating the linkage between strategic agility and HRM (Ahhammad, Glaister, & Gomes, 2020; Ananthram & Nankervis, 2013; Dyer & Ericksen, 2005), especially in IB. To achieve strategic agility, it is of crucial importance for both SMEs and MNEs to nurture the key human capabilities needed to accelerate the rejuvenation and transformation of the existing business paradigms (Shin, Lee, Kim, & Rhim, 2015; Weber & Tarba, 2014). Furthermore, anticipating a tumultuous and unpredictable crisis period in the industry, significant changes are necessary in organizational design and its human resource strategy to enable the successful attainment of organizational agility (Shafer, Dyer, Kilty, Amos, & Ericksen, 2001). Nijssen and Paauwe (2012) pinpointed the need to identify the dynamic capabilities, namely specific organizational practices, that serve as critical determinants of organizational agility. In this vein, recently Doz (2020) stressed the vital need to unpack particular individual behaviors, and to comprehend how these skills and behaviors, and their supporting HR practices affect the strength of each of the vectors of strategic agility (strategic sensitivity, resource fluidity, and collective commitment). Looking forward, it would be an imperative to learn how strategic agility could serve as a potential path in reconciling seemingly irreconcilable paradoxical situations. One example would be when firms, such as MNEs, have to nurture their improvisational capabilities and inform accordingly their HRM practices while implementing their previously planned strategy that might reduce their temporal responsiveness (Cunha, Gomes, Mel-lahi, Miner, & Rego, 2020). Another potentially interesting research avenue would be to explore strategic agility and its interaction with transactive memory systems. This could be done in a general context, during internationalization, and in the specific context of cross-border collaborative partnerships, such as strategic alliances, joint ventures, and M&A (Khan, Soundararajan, & Shoham, 2020).

4.1.3. Axis 2: methodology

Agility and flexibility research in the IB field welcomes diverse methodologies. Still, quantitative studies have dominated the field. Qualitative studies are rare in the literature, and what little work has been performed is of uneven quality. This is a clear methodological gap

of extant knowledge. A possible interpretation of this lies in research traditions as well as in the various difficulties in analyzing qualitative research. Moreover, as indicated by the citation analysis, quantitative research has a higher citation impact, possibly because it seems to be more trustworthy compared to a qualitative research approach, and this could explain why scholars prefer quantitative approaches. However, overcoming the limits of quantitative empiricism is where qualitative research can play a determining role.

The natural future research implication of this gap is a call for more and better qualitative research, since, as argued by multiple researchers (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Doz, 2011), qualitative research makes a central contribution to theory development. Moreover, qualitative research is also important for identifying contextual dimensions, such as differences among cultures and countries (Doz, 2011). Contextual characteristics are difficult to determine observationally without having been experienced. Thus, without pre-existing contextual conversance, qualitative research in new contextual dimensions is a way to increase close familiarity with specific contexts rather than falling into risky assumptions about contextual differences (Doz, 2011). Toward this aim, the complex constructs involved in agility/flexibility relationships and their inherent dimensions in the IB field call for significantly more qualitative studies to capture their depth and interdependence, as well as to add to and complement the extant knowledge base and prevailing research methods.

Another potential methodological direction/solution is to conduct studies that employ mixed methods approaches. Even though the benefits of such approaches minimize the inefficiencies of both qualitative and quantitative ones, mixed method approaches are the rarest in our consideration set. Thus, future scholars should also consider conducting empirical studies that employ both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Finally, research on the subject appears to be methodologically quite mainstream, even conservative. Rising forms of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches, methods and tools are underutilized and future research needs to consider approaches such as big data analytics, internet/media sourced data analysis, or crowdsourcing; not necessarily as a matter of obtaining better results, but at least to expand and enrich research through different means and perspectives.

4.1.4. Axis 3: context

Contextual gaps and future research directions pertain to a number of conditions. Starting with the more obvious, *industry focus*, our results revealed that the majority of the studies in our sample focus on manufacturing industries and largely ignore the service sector. Thus, we urge IB agility and flexibility scholars to focus more on the service sector, given its importance in developed countries, where service contributes to over 70 % of these countries' GDP (Paton & McLaughlin, 2008; Salunke, Weerawardena, & McColl-Kennedy, 2013). Moreover, a comparative perspective between industries that examines the relationship patterns between independent and dependent agility variables is absent within the IB field. As a result, inconsistent findings within the related literature may occur due to variations in industry contexts. Hence, it would be interesting for future studies to conduct research that compare industries from the same sector. Finally, a multitude of other manufacturing and service contexts have yet to be investigated. Future research should thus examine a larger industry variety and conduct comparative studies to offer a better understanding of relationships and patterns, through industry-level analysis, as well as to contribute to theories that could be generalizable to a wider range of economic sectors.

Continuing with another mainstream contextual gap, *geographic reach*, we highlight that a theoretical framework is much more robust when its applicability is examined in several geographic contexts (Kiss, Danis, & Cavusgil, 2012). In this context, however, 'geography' relates less to the physical location of the country and more to its developmental and other characteristics. Typically, developing markets

constitute a diverse range of countries in terms of both level of development and geography. Of all the studies reviewed here, only one examined agility/flexibility in developing economies (namely, Uganda). Similarly, emerging and culturally, or otherwise, differing markets are also much neglected. Thus, even though such contexts have unique cultural, historical, and institutional attributes, and offer fertile ground for theoretical advancement, the results show that much of the extant literature falls short in this context. In terms of actual geographic locations, the USA, China, and Korea have received the highest attention, followed by UK, Japan, and Germany. Little attention has been given to Africa and Australia. Comparative studies in different geographic areas are also limited, and thus, there is a limited understanding of the often idiosyncratic social, institutional, economic, and geographical characteristics found in different countries, which may affect the impact of independent, moderating, and mediating variables on agility and flexibility, and their impact on IB related topics in various ways. Therefore, a crucial shortcoming identified from the review is the tendency of international agility research to focus on a relatively small number of countries. An overreliance on countries such as the USA and the China may lead to false generalizations to other geographic contexts on which our knowledge is currently very limited. To extend the field's geographic reach, we urge future researchers to reach out to partners, in either industry or academia, from countries underrepresented in extant research, which likely have deeper contextual understandings and could also help with access to data, which are difficult to obtain in these countries.

Furthermore, another research gap that emerged from this review is the lack of studies that focus on different types of firms within this research domain. The focus is mainly on large MNEs, whereas, for instance, research on international SMEs (Villar, Alegre, & Pla-Barber, 2014; Yayla, Yeniyurt, Uslay, & Cavusgil, 2018), or family firms (Alpay et al., 2008; Debellis et al., 2020; Segaro et al., 2014), or new ventures (Bucciari et al., 2019; Dai, Goodale, Byun, & Ding, 2018; Zhan & Chen, 2013) is scarce. Thus, another valuable avenue for further enquiry is to investigate the role of agility and flexibility between such types of businesses in relation to various IB research areas, such as the role of agility/flexibility on the internationalization process of family-owned businesses, or the role of these constructs in foreign market exit and re-entry decisions of such types of businesses.

Several other fruitful research streams of investigation of the relationship between agility or flexibility and IB within a specific context may be explored. For instance, by looking at the results of this research, we identify that only a small set of studies (Chung & Beamish, 2005; Chung et al., 2008; Chung, Lee, Beamish, & Isobe, 2010; Fainshmidt et al., 2017; Lee, Beamish, Lee, & Park, 2009; Pereira et al., 2020) looked at the role of agility and flexibility in the context of a global crisis. In particular, these studies were conducted in relation to only one form of crisis, namely, an economic crisis. Thus, an interesting question is the impact of agility and flexibility on organizational performance based on the type of crisis. Another interesting question is whether different types of global crises (e.g., a global pandemic such as the current Covid-19 crisis) demand different levels of skills in developing agility and flexibility. If so, how do these vary, based on the type of crisis? Does the level of difficulty differ in developing agility and flexibility based on the type of crisis, and if yes, why? And, is there variability of the use of agility and flexibility in relation to different types of crises? Moreover, the synthesis of our research results has further detected patterns of inconsistencies creating gaps. At the institutional level, an imbalance has been identified between research on antecedents and outcomes, in terms of both volume and focus. With the former being more specific and the latter wider and more general. More importantly, the synthesis highlights the absence of research on antecedents such as technological factors, 'soft' resources, and other, more notional factors; and dominance of more 'classic' ones. Extant knowledge, therefore, at the institutional level was found to lack in terms of foci, especially in the areas that constitute paradigm shifters in contemporary international business literature. This both constitutes

a gap and a clear research direction for the future. At the organizational level, the absence of the aforementioned contemporarily critical elements of international business research is noted regarding both the research on antecedents and outcomes. The latter also presents a moderate inclination towards more general, competitiveness-relevant outcomes, rather ignoring more definite and internalized effects. At the individual (micro) level, the most notable gap is the inclination towards socio-cultural elements, at the expense of the individualistic/psychological to the more functional/operational ones. Further contextual gaps stemming from the synthesis relate to the 'international business' perspective being studied as an organizational situation/condition rather than as a wider contextual phenomenon. This calls for research on the latter, and attention to be paid to institutional elements and typological groups, albeit discounting the individual organizational perspective.

Finally, the above gaps, arising from the synthesis, further to their stipulated and/or self-evident consequent future research directions, also evidently give rise to the need for a stronger micro-foundational perspective. In particular, the micro-foundational thinking is drawing a significant and steadily growing scholarly attention in the general business strategy realm (Felin, Foss, Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012; Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015; Foss, 2011) and particularly in the field of international business. For instance, several studies have adopted a micro-foundational view while exploring the knowledge transfer in multinational enterprises (Andersson, Gaur, Mudambi, & Persson, 2015), CEOs' origin and international background (Kunisch, Menz, & Cannella, 2017), transnational capabilities (Morris, Hammond, & Snell, 2014), innovation and entrepreneurship endeavors in the multinational subsidiaries (Nuruzzaman, Gaur, & Sambharya, 2019), and sustainability in the emerging markets (Elg, Ghauri, Child, & Collinson, 2017). As recently underscored by Contractor, Foss, Kundu, and Lahiri (2019) and Kano and Verbeke (2019), the emerging micro-foundations literature contends that macro concepts and macro-outcomes, such as firm-level capabilities, performance, and strategies, need to be understood in terms of the underlying micro-level actions, interactions, and characteristics of micro-level entities. The findings and directions of Foss and Pedersen (2019) also support this. They, in a more focused context (knowledge sharing in the international management micro-foundational perspective), found that, though this perspective has become highly influential in macro-management in general, the international management field has not paid due attention to the project of building microfoundations for key macro-constructs and relations. Thus, we believe that future research studies on strategic agility need to elucidate the role of underlying micro-level actions and practices adopted at the individual and/or team level in the MNCs and SMEs operating in the global setting. As indicated above in a more general way, one of the most promising areas for future research in this context might be a fine-grained investigation of potential psychological micro-foundations (Vahlne & Bhatti, 2019; Vahlne & Johanson, 2020) of incumbent executives and employees that enable achieving strategic agility.

4.2. Concluding remarks

This systematic literature review offers a comprehensive outlook on the state-of-the-art research on agility and flexibility in the IB field. Our analysis and synthesis have identified and elaborated paths of how future research may fill knowledge gaps in the domain by incorporating stimulating theoretical inputs. They also show how research may overcome theoretical and methodological weaknesses through the development of new theoretical frameworks and empirical studies that draw on various disciplines and test a variety of contexts. These recommendations may provide ways to expand the research boundaries of international agility and flexibility research and enhance external theoretical legitimization. It is our hope that this review will provide a foundation for new and exciting research avenues on various international agility

and flexibility phenomena that are likely to be of interest to a broad range of scholars and practitioners alike.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2021.101194>.

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