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Three Pathways to Case Selection in IB:
A Twenty–Year Review, Analysis & Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

With its focus on locational context, International Business (IB) is a prime candidate for the application of Case Study (CS) methodology. Yet many IB scholars still have doubts about CSs, possibly because strategies for their selection and disclosure procedures may lack rigor. The purpose of this article is to document and discuss CS selection in IB research, make suggestions for improvement, and thus raise the standard and status of CS research.

Using qualitative content analysis, this paper examines CS selection strategies in four IB journals (1995-2014), relating them to chosen theoretical purposes and logics employed. Our results indicate that 12% of the 333 investigated CS articles lacked a section on methodology, and 41% of papers reported no indication of how CSs were selected. Drawing insights from the dataset, we propose and distinguish between *theory-driven* and *phenomenon-driven* CS selection approaches. In light of our evidence, best-practice papers are identified and apportioned to coherent pathways connecting theoretical purpose, logic and CS selection strategies. In doing so, we address the link between case selection and theorizing in CSs and advocate greater methodological sophistication and transparency of CS selection reporting in IB research.

Key words: Qualitative Research, Case Study Research Methodology, Case Selection, International Business

1. Introduction

International Business (IB) research uses many different units of analysis (e.g. groups of countries, countries, regions, cities, multinational organisations, industries, firms and individuals) but its distinguishing characteristic is that geographical location is key, and each unit of analysis is tagged according to its location. Guidance for authors in IB journals emphasizes that "…all submissions should reflect some cross-border or comparative dimensions…(Journal of World Business, 2017). Thus, besides comparative quantitative studies, with its defining focus on multiple contexts, IB seems well-suited to qualitative case study (CS) methodology with its emphasis on local contextualization and meaning (Meyer, 2007). Indeed, much quantitative IB research has been criticized as being too aggregative in some circumstances, under-appreciating contextual features or for treating firms and countries as "black boxes" (Doh, 2015; Fey, Morgulis-Yakushev, Park & Björkman, 2009). Recently, Delios (2017: 393) points out that "excessive quantification damages IB", and that interesting research in IB can be found in new non-quantifiable phenomena.

Viewed in this light, CSs are one way in which IB research can be grounded in reality and local settings, explicitly addressing the contextual conditions of theory as a natural ingredient of IB. This paper concentrates on qualitative CS research distinguished by (a) a variety of sources of data that are mainly qualitative, (b) that have an emphasis on the study of a phenomenon in its context and, crucially, have (c) the purpose of confronting theory with reality (Piekkari, Welch & Paavilainen, 2009). Indeed, CSs are becoming a popular methodology of choice for many qualitative IB researchers (Piekkari et al., 2009), used extensively, and increasingly, to inform IB theorizing, teaching, research and policy (Piekkari et al. 2009). This increasing

adoption of CS research by IB scholars has been justified in terms of gaining contextual knowledge of IB phenomena, taking into consideration environmental characteristics, resource constraints and cultural traits (Doz, 2011; Thomas, 1996).

At the same time however, CSs have been criticized for relying upon "biased samples" (Flyvbjerg, 2006) that can distort findings, and "convenience" samples have become a regular target for criticism (e.g. Bono & McNamara, 2011). The literature highlights the importance of case selection to producing trustworthy qualitative evidence (Cuervo-Cazurra, Andersson, Brannen, Nielsen & Reuber, 2016) and cautions about a lack of rigor in the selection of qualitative CSs (e.g. Johnston, Leach & Liu, 1999). Such criticism may reflect a lack of unanimity among CS researchers themselves in relation to the appropriateness of different CS selection strategies (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011) and this absence of consensus and methodological justification regarding case selection may render findings hard to interpret, and jeopardize theorizing and the transferability of CS evidence (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

Criticism of CS selection in qualitative research is not a peripheral issue, but rather a challenge that goes to the heart of an appreciation of qualitative CS research (Ragin, 1987). Indeed, Cuervo-Cazurra et al., (2016) suggest that justifications for CS selection decisions, including the number of cases and rationale for the selection of investigated sites, may enhance confidence and elevate the importance of qualitative research in IB. Siggelkow (2007) points out that the selection of investigated instances or phenomena in CS research determines the contribution of the CS.

In light of these arguments, the purpose of this paper is to *make suggestions for improvements in the coherence of CS selection practices in IB and help researchers justify their selections. In so doing we intend to calm the concerns of critics of CS*

research. We conduct a systematic review of four main IB journals over two decades, identify and report two sampling approaches, namely theory-driven and phenomenon-driven. These sampling approaches underpin three pathways that we identify for CS selection.

Our structure is as follows. In the next section we elaborate on CS design and the implications for CS selection strategies. This is followed by a discussion of our review methods for CS selection practices in IB journals; then key findings, which include the identification of what we consider to be best-practice papers, and of three suggested pathways for CSs in IB research. We also note departures from these pathways and consider whether they may represent interesting experiments in methodology. We then draw conclusions and make recommendations to help researchers enhance their CS selection practices.

2. Literature Review: The constitution and selection of cases

The term "case study" defies generally acceptable definition and this lack of unanimity stems from the fact that cases are tied to different disciplinary perspectives and theoretical traditions (Patton, 2015). Despite differences in viewpoints, CS scholars consider cases to be meaningful and complex configurations of events and structures, which are treated as singular, whole entities purposefully selected. Thus selection is not seen as separate observations drawn at random from a pool of equally plausible selections. Viewed in this light, selecting cases lies at the core of what constitutes CS research. Patton (2015) notes that case selection is the foundation of qualitative inquiry and different selection strategies can influence the conduct and results of research. Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014: 33) emphasize that sampling

should be "theoretically driven" for both within-case and multiple-case sampling on conceptual grounds as opposed to representativeness.

2.1. What is the Case? Multiple Dimensions of Case Selection

According to Ragin & Becker (1992), decisions on how CSs are selected are far from settled but usually involve ***sampling strategies***, ***unit of analysis*** and ***sample size*** i.e. number of cases (Patton, 2015). As such, case selection includes a set of decisions that are not taken in a vacuum but they may emerge and support the research question, theoretical purpose and theorising logic (induction versus deduction) of the CS (Patton, 2015). In this paper we unpack the key decisions of case selection and advance a discussion that brings together the theoretical purpose and the theorising logic of a CS with sampling strategies. To the best of our knowledge, this discussion is relatively absent within the IB discipline and is not reflected in evidence from authors' practices in the field.

The ***unit of analysis*** is the focal entity investigated and discussed in CS research. It is the "what" or "whom" that is being studied. Stake (2005: 443) suggests that the "…case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied…" equating in effect the case with the unit of analysis (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011). Both sampling strategies and sample size depend on prior decisions about the appropriate unit of analysis to study (Patton, 2015). Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki (2011) classify units of analysis into four overlapping categories, namely social units (e.g. individuals, groups, organizations, communities, social interactions); temporal units (e.g. episodes, encounters, events or process that occur over a period of time); geographical units (e.g. countries, towns, states); and, artefacts

(e.g. books, photos, newspapers, buildings or technological artefacts). Patton (2015: 261) also provides examples of broader categories of units of analysis, which include people-, structure-, perspective-, activity-focused units, time-bounded units and documents. Of course, an IB approach emphasizes geographical units.

A CS may involve the examination of a single unit of analysis (holistic CS) or more than one unit of analysis (embedded CS) (Yin, 2014). A holistic design may be used where a single CS examines only the overall nature of an organisation. However, when sub-units are analysed in a single setting, an embedded single CS approach may be used (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). To illustrate the latter, even though a CS might be about a single organisation, data collection and analysis, as well as presentation of findings, can occur at multiple levels including the individual, sub-groups of individuals or/and strategic business units. The use of embedded units of analysis suggests that an equal emphasis should be placed on both the sub-units of the study and the case as a whole (Yin, 2014).

The selection of unit of analysis depends on the unit that the researcher wants to be able to say something about at the end of the research. Patton (2015: 263) argues that "…each unit of analysis implies a different kind of data collection, a different focus of analysis of the data, and a different level at which statements about findings and conclusions would be made". Essentially, choosing among different units of analysis entails making decisions about the spatial/temporal variation of a study as well as whether to investigate groups, individuals or organisations. Units of analysis can be emergent and context-specific and CS researchers in IB may be open to the possibility that the unit of analysis can hold different meanings in different cultures, countries or regions or changes over time. It follows that selection of the unit of

analysis can become overwhelming but facilitates the selection of the study sample by employing different sampling strategies discussed below (Patton, 2015).

Sampling in qualitative CS research is about appropriateness, purpose and access to information-rich cases. This is captured in the notion of purposeful sampling which entails "…selecting information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated (Patton, 2015: 265). A few scholars have attempted to document and discuss different ***sampling strategies*** that fall under the umbrella of purposeful sampling (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Gerring, 2007; Stake, 1994; Yin, 2014). Perhaps, the most exhaustive analysis has been provided by Patton (2015) who has recently identified forty different types of sampling strategies that may be employed in CS research. He groups these sampling strategies into eight broad categories: 1) single significant case (e.g. critical or exemplar cases); 2) comparison-focused sampling (e.g. outlier sampling or matched comparisons); 3) group characteristics sampling (e.g. maximum variation cases or typical cases); 4) concept or theoretical sampling (principles-focused or causal pathway sampling); 5) instrumental-use multiple case sampling (e.g. utilization-focused sampling); 6) sequential and emergency-driven sampling (snowball or opportunity sampling); 7) analytically focused sampling (e.g. confirmation or disconfirming cases); 8) mixed, stratified and combination sampling (e.g. stratified purposeful or mixed probability sampling) (Patton, 2015: 265).

The key issue for the IB researcher in choosing a sampling strategy is to consider and anticipate the arguments that will give credibility to the study, e.g. carefully articulate reasons for site selection or individual case sampling and be open and clear about the study's limitations. Patton (2015) recommends that researchers

should anticipate and address likely criticisms of a particular sampling strategy, especially researchers using random sampling approaches.

Adequacy of ***sample size*** in CS research is relative and dependent on the purpose of the study and the envisaged contribution to theory, available resources and sampling strategy employed (Yin, 2014). For instance, when the CS researcher is mainly concentrating on the use of contrasting/differing observations for advancement of propositions and replication of findings in various settings and employs a comparison-focused sampling strategy, a multi-case approach appears to be appropriate (Eisenhardt, 1989). Alternatively, if the CS researcher is concerned with the development of idiographic explanations and deep contextualisation of CS evidence, a single CS may be adopted (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). This discussion poses a dilemma between breadth versus depth that can be reconciled by the observation that meaningful qualitative research has more to do with the information richness of the selected cases than with the sample size (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Moreover, the sample size and composition can be adjusted, based on the needs of the fieldwork and in light of theoretical saturation or the achievement of the theoretical purpose of the CS.

2.2. Case Selection, Theorising Logic and Theoretical Purpose

In this section, we approach case selection through the lenses of the theoretical orientation and theoretical purpose of the CS. This discussion builds upon the complexity of case selection discussed above and paves the way towards the identification of different sampling pathways from our findings. It should be noted that theorising logic relates to inductive or deductive approaches to CS research while theoretical purpose deals with how CSs confront theory (Welch, Piekkari,

Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011). For instance, "exploration", "explanation", "theory building", "theory testing", "theory elaboration" or "revision" are some of the terms used to position a CS in terms of its theoretical purpose.

In line with Patton (2015: 288), we suggest that a deductive approach to CS research may involve sampling strategies that seek case manifestations of previously identified relationships, models, logic or mechanisms relating theoretical concepts or constructs. We label this approach to CS selection as "theory-driven" given that these relationships provide the basis for the selection of the case, the gathering of the empirical evidence and the theorising output of the research. Building upon Schwarz & Stensaker (2014: 478) theory-driven CS selection aims to "…refine, enhance, advance, and generally stimulate theory by focusing on theory".

An inductive theorising logic is grounded on observing real-life phenomena that can serve the basis for case selection. It entails deep immersion over time in the focal phenomenon and openness to many types of rich data (Eisenhardt, Graebner & Sonenshein, 2016). Phenomenon-driven selection of CSs is inspired by phenomenon-driven research and places emphasis "…on identifying, capturing, documenting, and conceptualizing a phenomenon of interest in order to facilitate knowledge creation and advancement" (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014: 480) without relying on prior theory. Phenomenon-driven selection can be emergent as the sample can be adjusted as the inquiry unfolds (see Ragin's 1992, process of casing) and dependent on the identification of the investigated phenomenon that is usually dynamic and complex.

Different CS sampling strategies may be used for different theoretical purposes. For example, the achievement of maximum variation requires the selection of a set of cases, which are intended to represent the full range of certain concepts in

some particular relationship. The investigation is understood to be exploratory when researchers focus on developing concepts, and confirmatory when they focus on relationships (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Alternatively, the extreme/deviant CS may rely on some general understanding of a topic (either a specific theory or common sense), demonstrating the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). The extreme/deviant case is therefore closely linked to theory building through the investigation of theoretical anomalies, unusual instances or outliers that do not support, or appear to contradict, patterns or explanations that are emerging from data analysis. Thus, the selection of instrumental, unique cases (Stake, 1994) or counter-examples (Szulanski, & Jensen, 2006) of critical, extreme/deviant or revelatory cases, may offer potential for theorizing.

It may be inferred from the above that the diversity of CS theoretical purposes and logics employed, can fuel different sampling pathways in IB CS research. We identify and discuss these pathways drawing insights from a twenty-year analysis of qualitative CSs published in IB journals. In the next section, we detail how we ourselves used purposeful sampling to select and investigate sampling strategies in IB.

3. Methods

To identify and analyze case selection practices in IB, we performed a systematic review of the content of CS articles and selected four key international refereed IB journals over twenty years, 1995-2014 for our analysis, in line with Piekkari, Welch & Paavilainen, (2009): International Business Review (IBR), Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS), Journal of World Business (JWB) and Management International Review (MIR). This selection captured diversity in terms

of journal rankings (with JIBS and JWB receiving the highest rankings at the time of writing), origins (JIBS and JWB are US-based whereas IBR and MIR are European), and editorial policy and scope (e.g. JIBS covers economics and finance, unlike MIR or JWB) (Piekkari et al., 2009). Our twenty-year span 1995-2014 offers sufficient temporal depth and is in line with those of previous methodological reviews (Yang, Wang & Su, 2006; Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki & Welch, 2010; Welch et al., 2011). For JWB we excluded 1995 and 1996 when it was known as the Columbia Journal of World Business, which changed its focus in 1996 from a practitioner-oriented to an academic publication.

FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE

Our review of case selection practices in IB followed a two-phase methodology: in the *first phase* we identified papers that used a CS methodology from all published (conceptual and empirical) articles in the four investigated journals. As shown in Figure 1, IBR published 113 CSs, JWB (104), JIBS (58) and MIR (58); in total 333 CS articles. In the *second phase*, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of CS articles identified in the first phase, placing emphasis on the case selection decisions of the authors. This approach has also been used in other review studies in various areas of business, including international marketing (Clark, 1990; Nakata & Huang, 2005), IB (Welch et al., 2011), and industrial marketing (Piekkari et al., 2010).

First, we identified CS articles by thoroughly scrutinizing the entire article not just its abstract and title, employing the CS definition proposed by Piekkari et al., (2009) referred to in our Introduction. Since most papers purporting to use CSs routinely satisfy the first (sources of qualitative data) and second (contextualization)

conditions, the third condition (concerning theoretical contribution) effectively distinguishes CSs from descriptive examples or teaching cases. Nevertheless the identification of CS articles was challenging despite the application of this definition in our analysis. For example, reviewers' perceptions of a paper may contrast with the claims of authors, or insufficient detail could hinder categorization as a CS. We also found articles that conflated the terms "case" with "example". These articles were excluded from our analysis, as they briefly elaborated on the CS phenomenon and did not establish a theoretical role. In other words, we disregarded authors' claims as to whether their papers were CSs, and applied established criteria.

Second, we embarked on a qualitative content analysis of 333 CSs across the four IB journals over twenty years, with the purpose of identifying case selection practices. This was based on a methodology from the extant literature. According to Berelson (1971: 114), this process entails a close reading of text "…followed by summary and interpretation of what appears therein". Our emphasis on scrutinizing the entire article stems from the assumption of qualitative content analysis that meaning resides in the totality of the text, not measurable units of analysis (Berelson, 1971). Each article included in our review was content-analysed employing a set of codes that was both theory- and data-driven in that new insights from the data were imported into our initial coding scheme. Suddaby (2006: 636) highlights the necessity of a clear articulation of the "…process of data analysis, including coding schemes and category creation". In conducting the analysis, we concentrated on critical aspects of case selection mainly induced by the relevant literature, including case selection strategies, number of cases, unit of analysis, and context. In addition to identifying case selection decisions, we went further by classifying and interpreting text, paying attention to the entire content of the article and the authors' arguments in

relation to the theoretical purpose of the CS, theorizing logic (induction, deduction etc.), the process of data collection and analysis, the cited sources of CS methods, the presentation of the findings and their theoretical role.

In relation to case selection strategies, some were implicit, others quite explicit. Therefore, it was decided that the four reviewers should make a deeper analysis of the text of the papers, which eventually identified 197 papers that revealed their selection strategies. In addition, there were ambiguous selection strategies that were based on either a phenomenon or a dependent or independent variable suggested by theory (Plümper, Troeger & Neumayer, 2010).

The coding categories formed the columns of a spreadsheet, with a row for each article. With a view to rigor in the qualitative content analysis process, we employed routines suggested in the relevant literature (Denzin, 1989; Krippendorff, 2004). A protocol of the process was defined and allocated among the reviewers that ensured consistency in analysis and monitoring of the process over time (Krippendorff, 2004). We initially pilot-tested the coding instrument by individually coding ten articles from each of the four journals. We discussed and reconciled differences to ensure consistency of findings. Following Denzin (1989), we independently coded all articles and discussed coding on an on-going basis, theme-by-theme as issues arose. We also ensured that each of the 197 articles was independently coded by two co-authors of this study. In all cycles of analysis, we refined the codes through successive iterations between theory and data (Berelson, 1971) and produced new emergent codes such as the “theory-driven” and “phenomenon-driven” selection of cases.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section we report our review of 333 CS papers in four IB journals over a period of twenty years from 1995 to 2014. Our discussion unfolds at three levels: first, we report on time trends in disclosure, in terms of both methodology sections in general, and then case selection decisions in particular. These selection choices relate to sampling strategies, units of analysis and sample size, i.e. number of cases (Patton, 2015). Second, we discuss one of our key themes, i.e. phenomenon-driven and theory-driven case selection strategies. Finally, we bring together these components and report on our classification of reviewed papers into three proposed pathways, providing examples of each.

4.1 Information Disclosure and Case Study Selections

CS selection strategies used by IB authors were not always discernible from sections on methodology. In general terms, most of the 333 papers had a methodology section, but 41 (12.3%) had none (IBR 9, JIBS 7, JWB 16, MIR 9). More specifically, only 197 (59.2%) of the 333 papers stated or implied a selection strategy, and 136 (40.8%) papers had no description of CS selection processes. Across the four journals, JIBS and MIR were above-average, with 46 (79%) and 45 (78%) papers reporting CS selection respectively, compared to IBR with 60 (53%) and JWB 46 (44%). More specifically, there were also few academic references made to CS methodology in order to justify selection strategies: Yin, Eisenhardt and Patton were the most frequently cited authorities used to support CS selection choices. Other important contributions to CS methodology, e.g. Stake (1994), had very few citations.

To identify any trends towards improvements in disclosure over time, we developed two polynomial-fits (Figures 2 and 3) that outline the development of CS papers over our twenty-year review period (1995-2014).

FIGURES 2 AND 3 NEAR HERE

Figure 2 shows that the percentage of papers reporting methodology sections did improve gradually from 1995 to 2014, reflecting authors' efforts to clarify and explain better their research designs. This trend can be also attributed to the incremental influence of academic sources guiding authors' methodological reporting in qualitative IB research.

In contrast with methodology sections, the percentage of papers that stated or implied their case selection strategies showed a U-shaped pattern, with no consistent improvement over time (see Figure 3). In particular, papers between 1997 and 2003 exhibited low and declining levels of disclosure. The percentage increased slightly from 2004 to 2009 and stayed relatively stable, 2009 to 2014. We found only 197 papers disclosed their case selection strategies, but 41% (136) of CS papers neither explicitly stated nor implicitly discussed their case selection strategies. We suggest this lack of rigor in the justification of case selection strategies can distort CS results and damage the status of CS research in the wider IB community. We also maintain that this emphasizes the need for our study. Disclosure of selection strategies is an important part of establishing the trustworthiness of research design in terms of; credibility (confidence in the truth of the findings) and transferability, i.e. the findings may have applicability in other context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Inappropriate case selection can impact on what is actually being studied (see Flyvbeg, 2006: 231).

Different CS selection strategies may lead to different theorising alternatives and interpretation, "The interpretation of such a case can provide a unique wealth of information because one obtains various perspectives and conclusions on the case according to whether it is viewed and interpreted as one or another type of case" (Flyvbeg, 2006: 233).

Based on a close reading of their text by the four authors, the 197 papers that stated or implied their case selection strategies became the basis for our discussion of case selection choices, (theory-driven versus phenomenon-driven) selection strategies and pathways, see below. The papers exhibited a great variety of units of analysis. Some explicitly referred to firms as the unit of analysis (e.g. Bangara, Freeman & Schroder, 2012; McGaughey 2007; Danis & Parkhe, 2002; Poulis, Yamin & Poulis, 2012; Fletcher & Harris, 2012), while others addressed activities (Li, Yu & Seetoo, 2010), networks (Cova, Mazet & Salle, 1996), transitions (Gabrielsson, Kirpalani, Dimitratos, Solberg & Zucchella, 2008), learning modes (Dimitratos, Plakoyiannaki, Thanos & Förbom, 2014), foreign market entries (Agndal, Chetty & Wilson, 2008), strategies (Lim, Acito & Rusetski, 2006), and social acts (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011). Papers addressed internationalisation processes (Yamin & Sinkovics, 2006; Walters, Whitla & Davies, 2008), foreign market entry vehicles (Bridgewater, 1999), marketing routines and rituals (Hallbäck & Gabrielsson, 2013), human resource systems and practices (Müller, 1999) and organisational capabilities (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). They also addressed the role of networks in the international/global expansion of firms (e.g. Hatani & McGaughey, 2013). Knowledge learning, acquisition, transfer and sharing (e.g. Kasper, Lehrer, Mühlbacher & Müller, 2013; Daunmu & Fai, 2007) between joint ventures and subsidiaries frequently appears, especially in research focusing on cross-border acquisitions, mergers, and alliances.

Cases can also be individuals, e.g. returnee entrepreneurs (Pruthi, 2014), executives (Witt & Redding, 2009), leaders in multinational settings (Takahashi, Ishikawa & Kanai, 2012) and individuals' careers (Carr, Indson & Thorn, 2005). In addition, there are CSs that are country-focused, which assess country risks (Oetzel, 2005), identify paths to national economic reform (Buck, Filatotchev, Wright & Nolan, 2000), and evaluate political risks (Iankova & Katz, 2003).

In addition, our findings reveal that among the 197 CS papers that revealed selection strategies, 37 papers (IBR 7, JIBS 13, JWB 11, MIR 6) employed single CSs and 160 used multiple CSs. Single and multiple CSs represent distinct alternatives in case selections as single cases address the exploration of information-rich cases while the latter focus on theory-building through the comparison of evidence from different cases. This is detailed in the next section that distinguishes phenomenon-driven from theory-driven case selection strategies.

4.2 Phenomenon-driven and Theory-driven Case Selection

The 197 CS papers that stated or implied CS selection strategies were found to fall into two groups, namely; theory-driven (73) and phenomenon-driven (124). Theory-driven selection can usually be traced back to previously identified relationships, models, logic or mechanisms relating theoretical concepts or constructs to each other. CS selection is pre-determined before the project has started and informed by theory, i.e. the selection of cases is conducted within the context of an existing theory. The cases are selected because they are particularly suitable for extending and revising relationships among concepts and models. Echoing Ragin (1992), researchers often base their case designations on relationships between

existing constructs existing in the literature. Table 1 summarises the most common features of theory-driven case selection, with examples of each.

TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

In contrast, phenomenon-driven selection was based on a focal phenomenon, e.g. organizational learning, offshoring or entry mode selection, where the cases themselves are empirically bounded in the course of the study, i.e. cases are found in the process of investigating real-world phenomena. Such phenomena were often new at the time of publication, with little prior research and no pre-determined theoretical assumptions. Thus, the selection of cases is broadly designed to provide the flexibility to capture, document and conceptualise a phenomenon that lacks plausible existing theory and empirical evidence. It would, however, be difficult for academic researchers to write a phenomenon-based study that makes absolutely no reference to prior theory. Indeed, phenomenon-driven selection may refer to concepts from prior literature but not previously identified relationships between them. This introduces a potential "grey area" in relation to the distinction between theory-driven and phenomenon-driven selection, which we return to, below, under Pathway 3.

In addition, phenomenon-driven case selection can be constructed during the course of the research process, after the project has started. Sequencing is clearly an important distinction between the two kinds of case selection. Theory-driven case selections are usually pre-determined and static, following prior literature, while phenomenon-driven case selections can be more dynamic in nature, mainly based on previously under-researched phenomena. Authors may select, add, and discard cases during the research, in a continuous process of "casing" (Ragin, 1992), e.g. Meyer &

Altenborg, (2008). Examples of phenomenon-driven case selections are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2 NEAR HERE

Specifically, strategies that involved replication logic, polar types, homogeneous, confirming/disconfirming cases were more likely to be theory-driven (Table 3), where the selection of cases was guided by pre-determined theory. In contrast, phenomenon-driven strategies were more likely to follow an emergent selection process. These phenomenon-driven strategies included critical, extreme, key informant, snowball, and revelatory selection strategies.

TABLE 3 NEAR HERE

In addition to this distinction between theory- and phenomenon-driven strategies, criterion, maximum variation, and typical case selection were also employed as *either* theory-driven or phenomenon-driven strategies. Criterion sampling (choosing all cases that meet some criterion) was the most frequently used, cited explicitly in 52 papers, and many used this strategy implicitly. For example, Cyr (1997: 132) stated that "...the IJVs were chosen as they were the same age, all in the manufacturing sector, and in three different country locations where foreign investment was beginning to flourish". However, CSs that implicitly adopted the criterion selection strategy often lacked justification in terms of how criteria were chosen.

In contrast to the lack of clarity in justifying criterion sampling, maximum variation samples were relatively well explained. For example, maximum variation samples were used in a theory-driven, pre-determined fashion where cases were selected to embrace diversity in terms of dependent variables or predicted outcomes linked to the case. This is illustrated by Danis (2003) who selected cases that were diverse in terms of size, industry, organizational structure, and partner nationality. Maximum variation sampling was also used where there were no predicated outcomes, and CS selection was aimed to represent complexities in the phenomenon itself. This is illustrated in Welch & Welch (2012) where five cases were selected to capture variation in human resource management roles in international projects. Similarly, CSs employed the "typical" selection strategy chose "average" cases to address a theory or study a phenomenon. For example, Mäkelä, Björkman & Ehrnrooth (2010) sought "theoretical generalization" by selecting a company's headquarters in different countries based on theoretical propositions, and eventually developed a theoretical framework. In contrast, Pinkse, Kuss & Hoffmann (1999: 164) selected firms that were rich in the environmental policy and high in absorptive capacity because they "…suited to exemplify the phenomena in the focus of our research".

Extending sample selection to include number of cases, our findings reveal that critical (8 papers), extreme (7), and criterion (7) sampling are the most common case selection strategies adopted in single CSs. The other selection strategies used for single CSs include typical, convenience, instrumental and revelatory. The single CSs mostly employ phenomenon-driven selection strategies (25 out of the 37 single CSs), which places the phenomenon of interest at the core of the case and addresses the contextualizing the CS evidence. In contrast, strategies include replication logic, polar

types, homogeneous, confirming/disconfirming cases are not identified in the single CSs, because these selection strategies focus on theory development through the comparisons and replications between cases, which implies the multiple CS method.

4.3 Three Pathways to CS Selection

Following the identification of theory and phenomenon-driven case selection strategies, three coherent pathways emerged from the data, involving different combinations of deductive/inductive logic, theoretical purpose and theory/ phenomenon-driven CS strategies, see Figure 4.

Figure 4 NEAR HERE

PATHWAY 1

CS papers that followed Pathway 1 employed a deductive logic where, typically, initial propositions or frameworks were developed from prior theory, and were then revised or modified through CSs. We found thirteen papers that clearly followed Pathway 1, e.g. Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson (2011) examined three propositions taken from deductive theory, exposed them to CS reality, then developed a framework for subsequent analysis of the internet-based sales channels of born-global firms.

In Pathway 1, deductive logic was usually combined with the aim of testing or revising theory that tended to include discussions of existing theory and the identification of theoretical gaps. There is a long-standing debate (e.g. Johnston,

Leach & Liu, 1999) about whether CSs can *test* theory. Nevertheless we did find papers that followed Pathway 1 and explicitly stated their theoretical purpose to be theory testing. In these papers, it was common to see initial hypotheses, propositions or frameworks developed from the literature, and these initial propositions confronted with empirical reality through CSs. As a result, it was claimed that the initial propositions or frameworks could be either confirmed or disconfirmed, though this is contradicted by the insistence that a single case can refute but not confirm a theory (Liu, Xiao & Huang, 2008; Peng & Wang, 2000; and Laanti, McDougall & Baume, 2009). In contrast, other scholars clearly stated that "…this paper is an exercise in theory building rather than the testing of theory" (Buckley, Clegg & Tan, 2003: 76), even though the paper did confront a theoretical framework developed from the literature with empirical reality. Nevertheless, the CS proposed a tentative model that explains the process of strategy formation in knowledge transfer by extending the knowledge transfer theory into an emerging economy (China), which invited "…further testing and suggestive of future empirical developments"(Buckley, Clegg & Tan, 2003: 68).

Besides testing, theory revision focuses on advancing an established theoretical position beyond the initial scope of the theory. For example, a paper by Vapola, Paukku & Gabrielsson (2010: 247) "…extends the Integration–Responsiveness (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Prahalad & Doz, 1987) international business framework of multinational companies (MNCs) strategies…", which explains how MNCs manage strategic alliance portfolios. Benito, Petersen & Welch (2011) challenge the view that companies adopt a singular foreign operation mode in developing international business operations. Their CS revealed that companies develop operating mode packages and modify these packages over time, which refined the theory of

internationalization path. Other papers aimed to examine the applicability of existing theory to a new phenomenon or context, e.g. Liu, Xiao & Huang (2008: 505) "…developed six (pairs of) major propositions from the existing literature, which have then been compared with the multiple cases". The CS revealed that "…existing individual theories for firm internationalisation from developed countries can only provide a partial explanation of the internationalisation process of indigenous Chinese private firms as their owners are bounded both by their limited education and international experience and by China's unique institutional barriers" (Liu, Xiao & Huang: 506). Accordingly, the CS proposed "bounded entrepreneurship" to explain the unique internalization patterns of focal Chinese private firms.

Given the theoretical purpose of testing and revising existing theory deductively, theory must play a crucial role in case selection strategies here, and it was indeed found that case selection in Pathway 1 papers was theory-driven. For example, Nummela, Saarenketo, Jokela & Loane (2014) set up three theory-informed criteria to select cases, which helped to examine propositions upfront and accordingly extend international growth process theory from the strategic decision-making perspective. Similarly, Galperin & Lituchy (1999) used maximum variation sampling based on theory with the declared purpose of testing eight propositions.

PATHWAY 2

Thirty examples of papers were found that corresponded with Pathway 2 in terms of the sequence of induction/theory-building/phenomenon-driven selection. These papers developed CSs inductively, often aiming to develop emergent theory in which propositions and theoretical models were directly generated from data analysis. For example, Oetzel (2005) explored and developed five propositions for strategies

assessing and managing political and economic risks in FDIs. Hamprecht & Schwarzkopf (2014: 758) "…develop empirically grounded propositions" for exploring why the initiatives deviating from headquarters' organisational value can affect the b subsidiaries of MNCs.

Apart from the explicit adoption of inductive theorizing logic, there were three papers that combined an inductive theory-building approach with deductive pattern-identification (e.g. Yu & Zaheer, 2010). For example, Duanmu & Fai (2007: 453) reported "…the combination of inductive pattern recognition and deductive reasoning" in order to "…generate knowledge not only of the outcomes but also of why, and how outcomes are shaped by processes". Nevertheless, these papers referred to cases as their empirical units, aimed to build, generate or construct theory by focusing on an under-investigated phenomenon.

Given the theoretical purpose of building theory inductively, papers that followed Pathway 2 placed phenomena at the core of their CSs, and case selection in Pathway 2 were phenomenon-driven. For example, Oetzel (2005) explicitly chose inductive logic in an exploratory study intended to build theory, aligning this approach with case selections designed to explore the phenomenon of economic and political risk assessment by managers. To this end she used phenomenon-based criterion sampling according to firm size, industry and nationality in a high-risk country (Costa Rica) and her theoretical outcome was five new propositions. In another example, Hamprecht & Schwarzkopf (2014) used an inductive, ethnographic approach to an exploratory study designed to develop "grounded propositions" in relation to the phenomenon of subsidiary initiatives in MNC subsidiaries with managerial values that deviated from HQ strategies. While earlier studies in this research field chose a MNC with (758) "…a set of monolithic and pervasive

values…" this study deliberately deployed a phenomenon-based case selection strategy based on a car manufacturer with wide variations in values across subsidiary units.

PATHWAY 3

Reference was already made above to three papers that combined an inductive theory-building approach with deductive pattern-identification, and it must be conceded that clear-cut binary distinctions were often difficult to justify, concealing grey areas. At the same time, it would be wrong to force all CS papers into strait-jackets, and hybrid methodologies may produce innovative approaches. Indeed we found a few papers with various combinations of theorising logic, theoretical purpose and CS selection that did not fall conclusively into Pathways 1 and 2, but they lacked coherence with the exception of what we call Pathway 3.

On the face of it, there is a contradiction between the deployment of inductive logic (involving no prior theory) together with theory-driven CS selection (implying a reliance on prior theory). However, papers combining this apparently contradictory approach were consistent with Eisenhardt (1989) who argues for a theory-driven selection approach for inductive theory building. She considers the rationale for a research question to be the same as for hypothesis testing research and pre-defined constructs shape the design of the research. Constructs are based on *a priori* reasoning, and that "…it is impossible to achieve this ideal of a clean theoretical slate" (Eisenhardt, 1989: 536). The assumption here is that research can measure constructs accurately. However, Eisenhardt (1989: 536) recognises that "…although early identification of the research question and possible constructs is helpful, it is equally

important to recognize that both are tentative in this type of research. No construct is guaranteed a place in the resultant theory, no matter how well it is measured". By implication, the notions of construct development, replication logic and extreme exemplars are difficult to apply without some underlying theory linking concepts together (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Thus, Pathway 3 represents an inductive, theory building approach, where prior theory has a "sensitizing" role short of pure deduction, i.e. models or concepts "…are used in a very loose fashion to guide the research" (Vaughan, 1992:175). This allows authors to make their theoretical assumptions explicit from the beginning, avoids undeclared bias and can "…better guard against the tendency for our world view to affect our interpretation of information in unacknowledged ways" (Vaughan, 1992: 196). Breaking away from pre-conceptions about appropriate cases may allow variation that supports theory elaboration.

The papers in our review found to use a Pathway 3 route mainly cite Eisenhardt, (1989), but also Yin, (1994), Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Strauss (1989). For example, Verbeke & Greidanus (2009: 1481) frequently cited Eisenhardt (1989) and conducted "a largely inductive design" in the early stages of theorising about managerial opportunism, with the explicit purpose of "theory development". Prior literature was presented as "perspectives" and thirty CSs replicated a previous empirical and theoretical study by selecting CS firms with successful internationalisation in three Triad regions. The authors stated that "…case studies were typically crafted to offer insight into managerial responses to business opportunities and to the potential of failure associated with these opportunities" (Verbeke & Greidanus 2009: 1481). This theory-driven focus on failed managerial

commitments led to the generation of new concepts around the central notion of bounded reliability.

In another example, Tsang (2001) studied managerial learning where (p. 30) "…the objective of the paper is to propose a model". With this theory-building intent, a section covering the topic of levels of learning (p. 32) "…provides a backdrop for the rest of the paper" yet CSs were selected according to replication logic. Finally a model was developed (p. 36) from the results of the empirical study together with insights drawing on the prior literature, claiming to present a more nuanced picture of managerial learning.

Finally, we even found departures from these three pathways. For example, deductive logic was declared in some papers claiming to build theory. An interesting departure from Pathway 1 by Perks & Hughes (2008) stated that (316) "…the approach here is 'theory-first', whereby theory is developed via a 'deductive strategy' with the researcher identifying orienting constructs and propositions to test or observe in the field". This approach was combined with theory development through interviews with open questions and coding, leading to "grounded propositions" (Perks & Hughes: 324). Coviello & Munro (1997) departed from Pathway 1 by combining inductive logic (368) with theory extension via the integration (367) of two prior models: stages and network theories. Saorin-Iborra (2008) similarly demonstrated a departure from Pathway 1 by apparently combining induction with theory testing, based on five "proposals" (2008: 293) that give every appearance of being testable hypotheses. However, exposing these proposals to empirical reality led to eleven new/revised proposals and (2008: 304) "…the role of the inductive empirical work is mainly to guide theoretical development rather than offer comprehensive empirical testing." Such departures from pathways in terms of theorizing logic employed and

theoretical purpose are more convincing when accompanied by explanations of why departures from pathways were consciously chosen, as in Perks & Hughes (2008).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

It has been argued that IB's emphasis on local contextualization and meaning makes CS research a potentially fruitful methodology, among others, and the conclusions drawn from this study of IB papers using CSs are offered in a spirit of pluralism (Welch et al., 2011), intended to encourage researchers to use CSs, particularly when the analysis of new phenomena goes beyond extant theory. We make two contributions to CS selection strategies in IB. First, we make explicit the distinction between theory-driven and phenomenon-driven CS selection approaches in purposeful sampling. This distinction has been made before (e.g Krogh, Rossi-Lamastra & Haefliger, 2012; Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014) but not in an IB context and not in the context of case selection strategies. This distinction has implications for theoretical purpose and logic employed.

Second, we identify two broad pathways in terms of theory-driven and phenomenon-driven case selection, logic employed and theoretical purpose, which should make it more straightforward for researchers to explain, and for readers to appreciate, their theoretical purpose and contribution. In addition, we identify a promising third pathway.

Coherent pathways could promote methodological clarity and alignment and hopefully a wider acceptance of CS research. These pathways suggest aligned routes and can also help to identify departures from them. Such departures may be both acceptable and interesting, provided that they are clearly explained and justified, and

we provided exemplar CSs of papers that justified departures clearly. On the other hand, we noted a number of arguably inconsistent papers that were departures from pathways without any justification or explanation.

We are not judgemental in relation to CS selection strategies that are reported as being convenience- or snowball-based. Some of them could implicitly belong to other categories and in any case such strategies may be justified in the context of nascent theories. Edmondson & McManus (2007) suggest that (1172) "…when addressing a novel question, researchers collect – as they should – qualitative data opportunistically such that they are free to chase new insights that emerge in an interview or observation." Final judgements on the acceptability of convenience/snowball samples could conceivably be based on the extent to which they serve some purpose in the nascent stages of theory-building.

We propose two main recommendations for CS research in IB. First, concerning disclosure, we recommend that CS papers should certainly be more transparent in declaring their methodological choices and justifications: 12% of papers reviewed did not have a methodology section and only 59% revealed their CS selection strategy. We found that disclosure levels on theoretical purpose and logical methods were weaker than for case selection, and an absence of clear declarations of theoretical purpose and logic means that readers cannot judge the appropriateness of case selection. In these circumstances, it is understandable that CSs sometimes attract little respect from many quantitative researchers.

Second, the title of this paper was designed so that readers would not expect a CS selection "recipe book", a universal CS protocol or template, recommended for application in all circumstances. There can be no single "best-practice" CS selection strategy for all circumstances and purposes. We do, however, recommend that case

selections should be fit for the researcher's purpose and aligned in pathways, or at least, deviations from the pathways should be clearly justified.

In terms of limitations, although involving the analysis of 333 CS papers in four core IB journals over twenty years, our study included neither the sub-discipline of International Management nor IB papers using CSs in generic business and management journals. A further study could extend our scope to include these journals. Deeper analysis could also focus on methodological changes and improvements over time and across journals ranked by quality.

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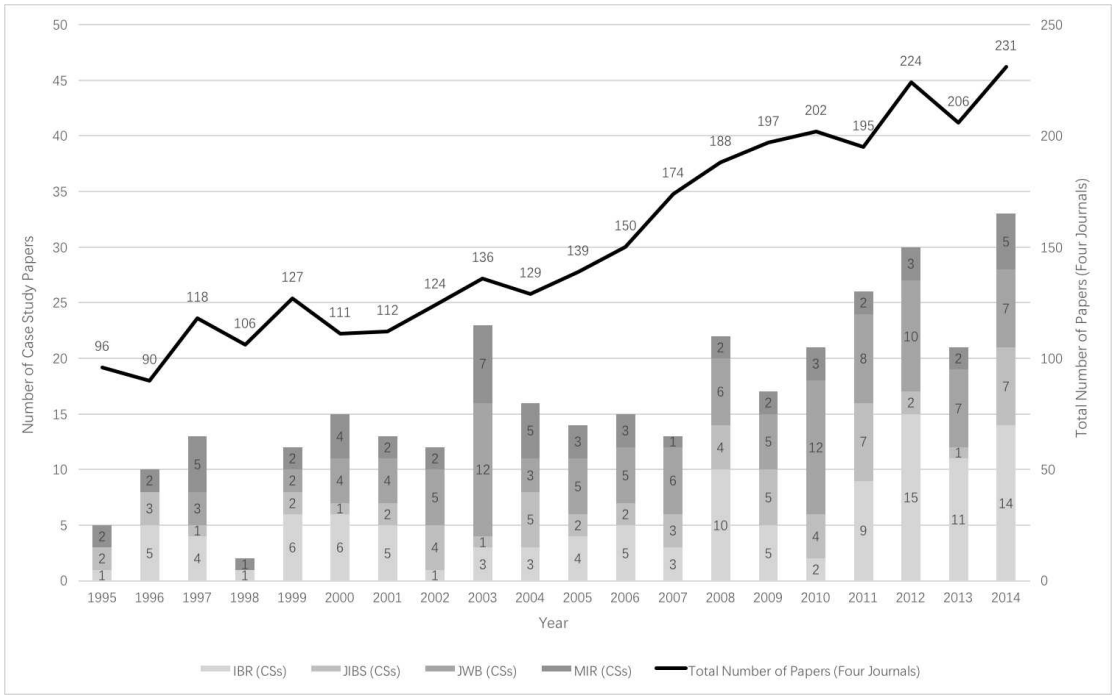

Figure 1: Number of Articles and Number of CS Papers in the Four Journals (IBR, JIBS, JWB, and MIR) (1995-2014)

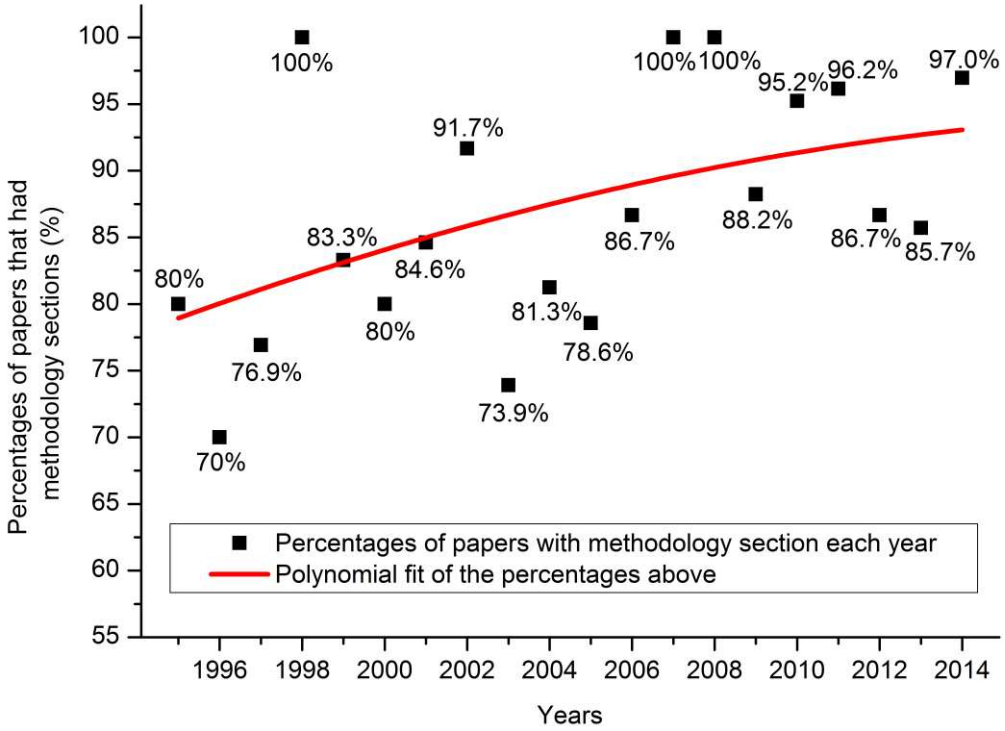

Figure 2: The distribution over time of the percentage of papers with methodology sections

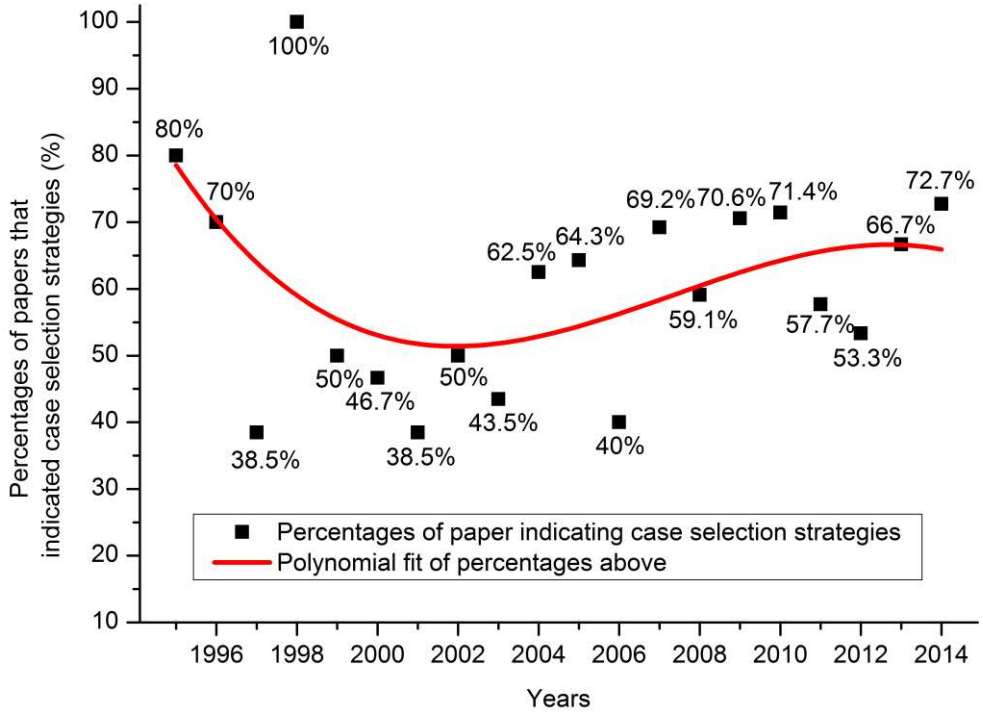

Figure 3. The percentage over time of papers that indicated case selection strategies

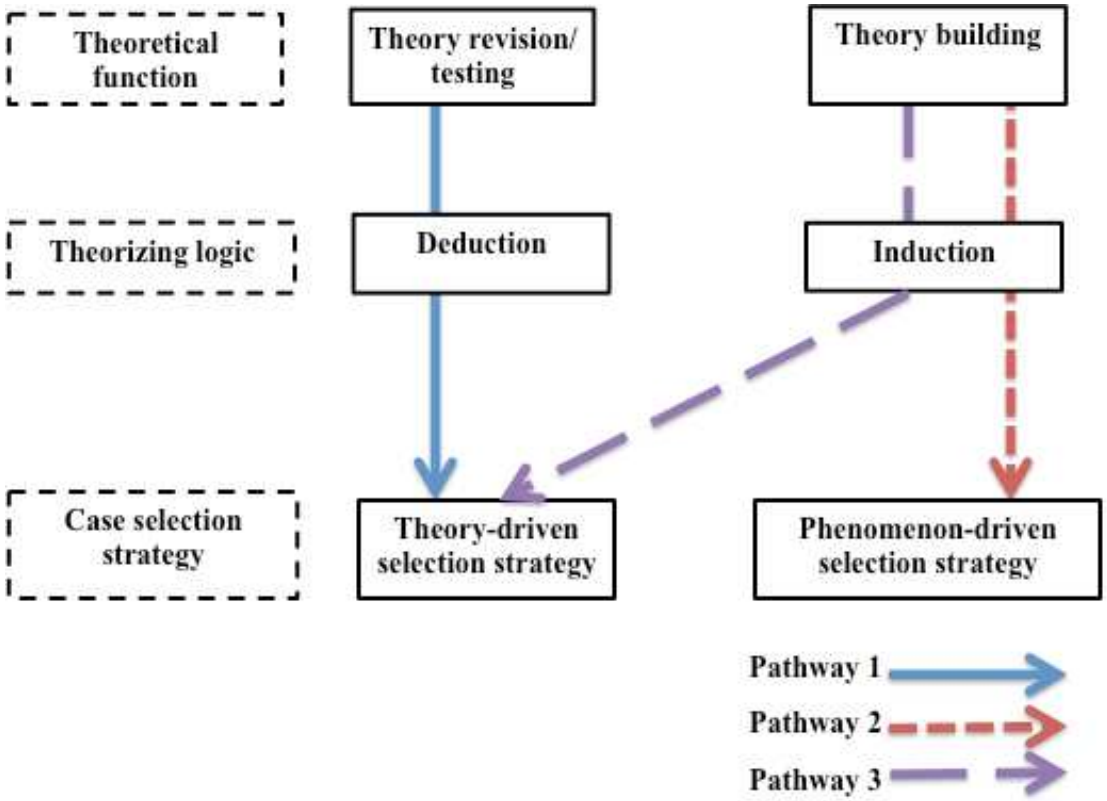

Figure 4: Case selection pathways

Table 1: Theory-driven Selection	
Features	**Examples**
i. Case selection is traced back to the relationships and logics between prior theoretical concepts	• "…The present case study is informed by a prior theory on the mechanisms that may be operative when firms internationalize by means of replication: specifically, we relate our study to the replication-as-strategy literature and the knowledge-based literature on internationalization and MNC." (Jonsson & Foss, 2011: 1084) JIBS • "To qualify for selection, the case firms had to be accelerated internationalisers from their earliest years; they also had to meet the more general definition of Oviatt and McDougall (1994) regarding the coordination of value chain activities across market." (Hagen & Zucchella, 2014: 498) MIR
ii. Case selection is traced back to a prior theoretical model/framework	• "The model serves as the theoretical base for our analysis of the present phenomenon." (Awuah, 1997: 77) IBR • "The theoretical foundation for this study embraces arguments from the entrepreneurship literature. By including theory pertaining specifically to the new venture, we address concerns that the conceptual frameworks underpinning INV research have relied heavily on the small firm literature." (Coviello, 2006: 714) JIBS
iii. Case selection is traced back to theoretical propositions upfront	• "The case studies were conducted by ... following theoretical sampling logic...Earlier studies have recommended that attention should be paid to ... Hence, the following criteria were used for case selection...." "...It allows the use of theoretical sampling and use of replication logic that is required for examining the framework and propositions." (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2011: 92-93) IBR
iv. Case selection is based on a theoretical sampling framework	• "We then develop a framework of the determinants of MNC-internal identification of talent, building on the literature on strategic search and choice." (Mäkelä et al., 2010: 134) JWB. • "Since manufacturing sector has generated nearly 60 per cent of acquisition inflows by 2006 (Thomson One Banker 2007), we focused on this industry using a theoretical sampling frame (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Guided by the emerging theory, we allowed significant heterogeneity among different types of acquisitions in China..." (Zou & Ghauri, 2008: 212) MIR

Table 2: Phenomenon-driven Selection	
Features	**Example**
i. Case selection represents the focal phenomenon.	• "Cases were selected based on how well they appeared to represent the phenomenon of interest." (Westphal & Shaw, 2005: 84) MIR • "An empirical setting that represents the research issue." (Hadjikhani, Hadjikhani & Thilenius, 2014: 159) IBR • CSs are "…suited to exemplify the phenomena in the focus of our research". (Pinks et al., 2010: 164) IBR
ii. Case selection captures variations in a phenomenon without predetermined theoretical assumptions.	• "Our starting point is an investigation into the relationship between elevator manufacturers Kone and Toshiba that illustrates the complex reality of foreign operation modes, including the combination of modes in 'mode packages', and switching within and between modes and modes packages." (Benito, Petersen & Welch, 2009: 1456) JIBS • "...the samples are best chosen purposively to yield information-rich cases that exhibit the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002)." "Firms were selected from four different industries in order to broaden our understanding of the various legitimacy building strategies employed." (Bangara, et al., 2012: 626) JWB • "The case selection sought to capture a range of international projects, the variations among which are likely to impact HR roles." (Welch & Welch, 2012: 602) MIR
iii. Case selection is a process of casing, which is dynamic.	• "Gradually the questions became more focused as more was learnt about the project …The classification *(sampling)* was done in order to detect differences within and between the individuals in each group, and to enlighten the phenomena studied from different perspectives." (Lagerström & Andersson, 2003: 87) JWB

Table 3: Case Selection Strategies				
	Definition	**Theory - driven**	**Phenomenon -driven**	**Total**
Criterion	Select cases that meet a set of pre-determined criteria that are important to the study (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).	*17*	*35*	52
Critical Case	Select cases that permit logical generalisation and maximum application of information to other highly similar cases (Patton, 2015).	*6*	*18*	24
Maximum Variation	Select cases that demonstrate diversity in terms of the dependent variable or predicted outcomes linked to the case (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011). Maximum Variation documents diversity and identifies important patterns that are common across the diverse dimensions of interest (Patton, 2015).	*10*	*12*	22
Convenience	Select cases that are easily accessible (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).	*3*	*15*	18
Extreme deviant/Outlier	Select cases on the tails of a distribution that would have little or no visibility in a statistical analysis (Patton, 2015). The logic of this selection strategy lies in lessons learned about unusual conditions or extreme outcomes manifested in the case (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).	*4*	*10*	14
Replication Logic	Select cases that are likely to replicate or extend the emergent theory, or to fill theoretical categories and provide examples of polar cases (Eisenhardt, 1989).	*9*	*5*	14
Polar Types	Select cases where the process of interest is transparently observable. It positions the interest at opposite ends of a continuum, e.g. the contrast between a highly successful and a highly unsuccessful case, which aims to develop and examine extreme or contrasting patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989).	*10*	*3*	13
Typical	Select and study several cases that are “average” to understand, illustrate, and/or highlight what is typical, normal, and average (Patton, 2015).	*4*	*5*	9
Key Informant	Identify people with great knowledge and/or influence (by reputation) who can shed light on the inquiry issues (Patton, 2015).	*3*	*6*	9

Snowball/ Chain	Start with one or a few relevant and information-rich interviewees and then ask them for additional relevant contacts, others who can provide different and/or confirming perspectives (Patton, 2015).	*0*	*7*	7
Homogeneous	Select cases that are very similar to study the characteristics they have in common (Patton, 2015).	*4*	*0*	4
Confirming/ Disconfirming	The confirming strategy select cases fit to already emergent patterns. They confirm and elaborate on previous findings and/or theories, adding richness, depth and credibility. The disconfirming strategy select cases disconfirm and alter findings or/and theories, leading to alternative interpretations of emerging empirical evidence (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).	*3*	*0*	3
Revelatory	Select cases that provide opportunities to observe and study a phenomenon that was previously not accessible and which can provide useful insights (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).	0	3	3
Instrumental	Select cases of a phenomenon for the purpose of generating generalizable findings that can be used to inform changes in practices, programs, and policies (Patton, 2015).	0	2	2
Stratified	Facilitates the selection of different sub-groups for investigation or levels of analysis with a case study project or across different cases (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).	0	1	1
Selective	Refers to decisions made prior to beginning a study to sample subjects according to a preconceived but reasonable initial set of criteria (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).	0	1	1
Purposeful Random	Select cases in a probabilistic manner, perhaps facilitating confirmation of theories through case research. However, the rationale for random selection of cases is not the development of a representative sample as in survey research (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).	0	1	1
Discussed selection strategies		**73**	**124**	**197**
No discussion of selection strategies				**136**
Total papers				**333**