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Exporter-Importer Business Relationships:

Past Empirical Research and Future Directions

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Abstract

We present a systematic and comprehensive review of the extant empirical literature on exporter-importer business relationships during the period 1975-2017. The review covers 196 articles published in academic journals, which were content-analyzed with their theoretical background, research design, scope of research, sampling/data collection methods, data analysis, and thematic areas covered. Our findings reveal that this line of research is characterized by: (a) a sound theoretical foundation, the most frequent theories being the behavioral paradigm, transaction cost economics, and relational exchange theory; (b) heavy emphasis on formalized, statistical, cross-sectional, and causal research designs; (c) focus on single-country studies, conducted mainly in Europe, Asia, and North America; (d) a tendency to employ probabilistic samples, of a relatively large size; (e) an adoption of relatively sophisticated methods to purify and analyze data collected; and (f) an emphasis on topics relating to behavioral and structural relational dimensions, followed by external and internal influences. Guidelines for researchers focusing on exporter-importer relationships are provided, as well as suggestions for potential new research topics.

1. Introduction

Exporting and importing have been the traditional and most common methods of exchanging products and services across countries since time immemorial (Samiee, Leonidou, & Aykol, 2014). However, although the economists' explanations of international trade have been primarily based on the inter-dependencies between nations with regard to their factors of production, business scholars have emphasized the critical role of relational aspects in the exchange process between exporters and importers as a means of complementing their resources, integrating their activities, and achieving their goals (Leonidou, 2003; Obadia & Vida, 2011). Most importantly, the exporter-importer (E-I) relationship does not solely consist of financial transactions, but also of behavioral interactions that are responsible for its performance and long-term viability (Hallén & Sandström, 1991).

As opposed to domestic seller-buyer relationships, the E-I relationship is characterized by: (a) greater geographical, psychological, and cultural distance, which makes the process of monitoring and evaluating the business partner a rather difficult and dubious task (Anderson & Gatignon, 1986; Li & Ng, 2002a); (b) higher environmental uncertainty, complexity, and dynamism, which restricts information flow, creates insecurities concerning partner involvement, and leads to a misalignment of goals (Dou, Li, Zhou, & Su, 2010); (c) more adaptations in terms of structural, strategic, and operational aspects, which often require the extensive use of financial, human, and allied resources (Ford, 1984; Leonidou, Palihawadana, Chari, & Leonidou, 2011); and (d) higher levels of perceptual differences between the interacting parties, which may cause misunderstandings, disagreements, and tension, that can jeopardize its overall effectiveness and efficiency (Homburg, Krohmer, Cannon, & Kiedaisch, 2002).

Despite these idiosyncrasies in E-I relationships, their initiation, development, and sustainment are of paramount importance to international business managers on four major grounds: first, they facilitate entry and solidify presence in foreign markets, which helps to reap the advantages associated with exporting (e.g., economies of scale) or importing (e.g., lower costs) (Katsikeas & Leonidou, 1996; Leonidou, 2003); second, they provide the nucleus of the firm's foreign operations, since they govern the elements (e.g., products, information, money) of the exchange process between exporters and importers (Håkansson, 1982); third, they largely determine the firm's internationalization process by decreasing distance and uncertainty, increasing learning and investments, and building network connections (Leonidou, 2003); and fourth, they can enhance performance levels for both exporters and importers, through better coordination and integration of resources, capabilities, and skills for selling/sourcing their products in a volatile business environment (Bello, Chelariu, & Zhang, 2003; Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, & Snehota, 2011).

The academic community has swiftly responded to this phenomenon by producing a growing number of studies since the mid-1970s, when the first article on the subject was published by Håkansson and Wootz (1975). Although at times several attempts were made to review this body of knowledge, their focus was either on theoretical dimensions of the E-I relationship (Saleh, Ali, Quazi, & Wickramasekera, 2015; Samiee et al., 2014) or specialized aspects of it, such as the quality of the E-I relationship (Leonidou, Samiee, Aykol, & Talias, 2014). As yet, no study has been conducted to review extant empirical research on E-I relationships that would: (a) assess and establish trends of theoretical, methodological, and thematic characteristics of this line of research; (b) synthesize the extant knowledge and assess the status of the pertinent literature; and (c) identify research gaps and suggest ways of how to overcome them.

The aim of this study is to provide such a systematic and holistic review of the extant empirical research on E-I relationships, from its inception up to the present time.[1] More specifically, we want to perform a chronological analysis of the theoretical background, research designs, scope of research, sampling/data collection methods, data analysis, and thematic areas investigated. In doing so, we intend to evaluate the progress and the current state of the pertinent literature along each of these dimensions; diagnose any problematic issues and make suggestions for their improvement; and highlight research gaps and set future research directions, indicating how these gaps could be filled.[2]

Our study contributes to the international business field in several ways. First, it sheds light on the theoretical, methodological, and empirical aspects of E-I relationships, which is one of the most investigated issues in either exporting (Leonidou & Katsikeas, 2010) or importing (Aykol, Palihawadana, & Leonidou, 2013) research over the last decades, due to its critical role in achieving success in the global marketplace. Our review helps to provide an integrated, organized, and synthesized inventory of knowledge on E-I relationships, which could serve as a useful reference point for: (a) academic researchers, who want to study this phenomenon further, as well as neophyte researchers, who seek to acquire fundamental knowledge on the subject; (b) educators, who could incorporate vital and updated input in their international business/marketing courses; and (c) export and import executives, who could benefit from the findings and implications of this line of research.

Second, it explores the chronological evolution of empirical research on E-I relationships to offer insightful trends for both scholars and practitioners in the field. For example, it identifies the most commonly used theoretical perspectives to study this phenomenon and indicates how these have evolved over time. Moreover, it demonstrates changes in the study methodologies employed by researchers on the subject (e.g., research designs, scope of research, sampling/data collection methods, data analysis) and pinpoints areas

of improvement. Furthermore, it consolidates conceptually diverse topics that have been addressed in this line of research and shows how knowledge has proliferated over time. This analysis will help to refine the focus, scope, and quality of future studies on the subject and further advance the level of this field of research.

Third, it critically assesses the level of maturity of this line of research and recommends ways in which it could be further improved on theoretical, methodological, and empirical grounds, by the valuable input received from the articles reviewed. This would help to facilitate the proliferation, dissemination, and application of knowledge on the subject by various interested parties, such as: (a) conference organizers, who could propose unexplored themes to special interest groups and arrange special sessions to address various cutting edge issues relevant to E-I relationships; (b) journal editors, who could suggest potential topics for authors who intend to submit articles for publication in their journals, as well as organizing special journal issues on the subject; and (c) coordinators of professional bodies and associations (e.g., chambers of commerce), who could inform their members about critical issues in managing their relationships with foreign partners through, for example, workshops, seminars, and simulation exercises.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: Initially, we explain the investigation method used in carrying out the present review by offering details about the scope of the review, data collection process, and data analysis procedures. We then present and discuss the findings of this review in six subsections, namely theoretical background, research design, scope of research, sampling/data collection procedures, data analysis, and thematic areas. In the next section, we draw conclusions, highlight the key findings, and provide suggestions for improvement for each aspect covered in this review. Finally, we propose directions for future research on the subject, by drawing attention to under-researched areas and identifying interesting new topics of research.

2. Investigation method

Our review covers all empirical articles published on E-I working relationships in the business literature between the years 1975 and 2017. To be included in the review, articles had to adhere the following criteria: (a) to focus exclusively on relationships between exporters and importers, rather than on other forms of international business relationships (e.g., license agreement, joint venture, strategic alliance); (b) to have been published in a journal of internationally recognized standing, rather than in an edited book, collection of readings, or conference proceedings; (c) to be in a standard, regular form, rather than a comment, reply, or editorial; and (d) to be of a purely empirical nature, rather than a conceptual, methodological, review or meta-analysis.

Articles were identified from electronic databases, namely JSTOR, ABI, EBSCO, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science, using the following keywords: "exporter-importer relationship", "international buyer-seller/supplier relationship", "cross-border buyer-seller/supplier relationship", "overseas buyer-seller/supplier relationship", "international business relationship", and "cross-border business relationship". In total, we were able to find 196 articles published in 43 different journals, the major contributors being the: Journal of International Marketing (14.8%), International Business Review (14.3%), Industrial Marketing Management (12.8%), Journal of International Business Studies (7.7%), and International Marketing Review (6.6%). In terms of time of publication, articles were classified in three periods, as follows: 1975-1997 (31 articles), 1998-2007 (76 articles), and 2008-2017 (89 articles).

Articles were content-analyzed employing a coding frame that involved six parts: (a) theoretical background – that is, various theoretical paradigms associated with this line of research; (b) research design – that is, problem crystallization, topical scope, time dimension,

and variable association; (c) scope of research – that is, countries involved, focus region, product emphasis, industries covered, unit of analysis, and company size; (d) sampling/data collection procedures – that is, sampling design, data collection, sample size, response rate, and key informant; (e) data analysis – that is, construct evaluation, bias controls, and analytical techniques; and (f) thematic areas – that is, relationship initiation/dissolution, environmental influences, internal influences, behavioral dimensions, relationship characteristics, performance implications, specialized issues, and miscellaneous topics.

A major part of the coding frame was based on pre-specified codes extracted from prior research. Specifically, for the theoretical background, codes were derived from the works of Hult (2011) and Aykol, Leonidou, and Zeriti (2012). For the categories of research design, scope of research, sampling/data collection procedures, and data analysis, we used the pre-specified codes that have been incorporated in review studies in other areas of international business research (Aykol et al., 2013; Leonidou, Barnes, Spyropoulou, & Katsikeas, 2010; Leonidou & Katsikeas, 2010). For thematic areas, we identified the codes after a comprehensive analysis of the content of the pertinent literature, and these were subsequently validated through discussions with academic experts in the field.

Data were coded by two experienced researchers, who had undergone rigorous training concerning the study objectives, the nature of categories and codes used, and the coding procedure. To facilitate the coding process, a special coding manual was prepared, which contained a full definition and description of each code, along with an example. The two coders worked independently of each other in coding the selected empirical articles and inter-coder reliability ranged between 89.2% and 100%, which is well above the recommended threshold levels (Kassarjian, 1977). In the event of disagreements between coders, these were settled with the intervention of the principal investigator. Specifically, each coder was asked to explain the

logic behind the code selected and, after discussion with the principal investigator, the most suitable alternative was finally decided on.

The finalized codes were subsequently entered into a software program for statistical analysis. The latter took the form of percentage frequencies presented in cross-tabular format to indicate trends in each of the review categories over the three time periods. Chi-square analysis was also employed to compare the percentages in each of the three time periods, while, in the case of statistical significant differences, a post-hoc test was used to identify the source of the difference. Although most of the categories involved entries of single data, such as the research design (e.g., problem crystallization), for some other categories, such as the scope of research (e.g., focus region), multiple data entries were possible.

3. Study findings

This section presents and discusses the findings of the content analysis along each of the six categories of the review, namely the theoretical background, research design, scope of research, sampling/data collection procedures, data analysis, and thematic areas covered. The results are reported both in aggregate form for all articles reviewed and separately for articles pertaining to each time period.

3.1. Theoretical background

Almost all (99.0%) of the articles on E-I relationships reported that their studies were anchored on at least one theory (see **Table 1**). Theories used most frequently to explain E-I relationships phenomena were the behavioral paradigm (40.3%), transaction cost economics (25.5%), relational exchange theory (17.3%), social exchange theory (12.8%), network theory (9.7%), and resource-based view (9.2%). Other, less commonly employed theories, were: resource-dependence theory, institutional theory, and neo-classical micro-economics theory. Of these,

transaction cost economics, relational exchange theory, resource-based view, resource dependence theory, and institutional theory followed an upward trend, while the opposite is true with regard to the behavioral paradigm, network theory, and neo-classical micro-economics. The downward trend associated with the behavioral paradigm could be related to the adoption of more specific theories by the contributors that are derived from the behavioral paradigm, such as the relational contracting theory.

Table 1: Theoretical background of articles on E-I business relationships

Theoretical paradigm	Total (n=196) %	(I) 1975-1997 (n₁=31) %	(II) 1998-2007 (n₂=76) %	(III) 2008-2017 (n₃=89) %	$\chi 2$	p-value	Post-hoc test
Behavioral paradigm	40.3	58.1	36.8	37.1	4.828	**.089**	I>II, I>III
Transaction cost economics	25.5	9.7	27.6	29.2	4.912	**.086**	II>I, III>I
Relational exchange theory	17.3	3.2	19.7	20.2	5.128	**.077**	II>I, III>I
Social exchange theory	12.8	12.9	14.5	11.2	.387	.824	
Network theory	9.7	12.9	9.2	9.0	.436	.804	
Resource-based view	9.2	-	6.6	14.6	6.891	**.032**	III>I
Resource dependence theory	8.2	3.2	6.6	11.2	2.383	.304	
Institutional theory	5.1	-	2.6	9.0	5.402	**.067**	III>I, III>II
Neoclassical microeconomics	4.1	19.4	2.6	-	22.666	**.000**	I>II, I>III
Other	30.1	16.1	27.6	37.1	5.156	**.076**	III>I
None	1.0	-	2.6	-	3.190	.203	

Behavioral paradigm, which denotes that the firm is a coalition of individuals belonging to different sub-coalitions with different goals (Anderson, 1982), was by and large used in this line of research to examine the interrelationships among behavioral aspects of the E-I relationship (e.g., trust, communication, conflict, satisfaction) (e.g., LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Saleh, Ali, & Julian, 2014). Another key application area of the behavioral paradigm included the impact of internationalization-related variables (e.g., psychic distance, internationalization experience, export/import involvement) on behavioral dimensions of the working relationship and on governance mechanisms (e.g., Kaleka, Piercy, & Katsikeas, 1997; Skarmeas, Katsikeas, Spyropoulou, & Salehi-Sangari, 2008).

Transaction cost economics is based on the idea that the efforts of economic actors to reduce transaction costs result in predictable organizational structures (Kamath, Rosson, Patton,

& Brookes, 1987). This theory was mainly employed to explain the impact of transaction costs determinants (e.g., opportunism, transaction-specific investments, uncertainty) on E-I relationship atmosphere (e.g., Barnes, Leonidou, Siu, & Leonidou, 2010; Skarmeas, Katsikeas, & Schlegelmilch, 2002), as well as on governance mechanisms (e.g., control-based versus relational) (e.g., Bello & Gilliland, 1997; Klein, 1989). In addition, this theory was used to examine the role of partner control in reducing the effect of opportunism (e.g., Cavusgil, Deligonul, & Zhang, 2004; Ju, Murray, Kotabe, & Gao, 2011).

Relational exchange theory states that buyer-seller relationships take place over a continuum of discrete transactions versus relational exchanges, with the latter emphasizing long-term relationships based on trust, commitment, cooperation, and non-economic satisfaction (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). The application areas of this theory in E-I relationships research included the examination of the factors contributing to the development of relational exchange/relationalism (e.g., Lee & Jang, 1998; Bello et al., 2003), determinants of relational governance (e.g., environmental, structural, behavioral) (e.g., Gençtürk & Aulakh, 2007; Li & Ng, 2002a), characterization of long-term versus short-term relationships (Haugland, 1999), and performance implications of relational exchanges (e.g., Skarmeas & Katsikeas, 2001; Styles, Patterson, & Ahmed, 2008).

Social exchange theory centers on the exchange of resources between socially interacting parties (Emerson, 1976) and sets reciprocity as the rule of exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Social exchange theory in E-I relationships was used as a conceptual basis for hypotheses denoting which behavior (e.g., information sharing) is displayed in reciprocity to another behavior (e.g., trust) (e.g., Barnes, Leonidou, Siu, & Leonidou, 2015; Blankenburg-Holm, Eriksson, & Johanson, 1996; Ling-yee, 2010). Also, some scholars based their studies on more specific frameworks derived from the social exchange theory, such as psychological contract breach (e.g., Leonidou, Aykol, Fotiadis, Christodoulides, & Zeriti, 2017).

Network theory rests on the idea that the entire economy consists of interdependent coalitions of organizations that are specialized in certain tasks or skills and connected to each other through activity links, resource ties, and actor bonds (Achrol & Kotler, 1999; Håkansson & Snehota, 2006). Studies drawing on this theory mainly focused on the influence of business network connections on behavioral outcomes in E-I relationships (e.g., commitment, knowledge transfer) (Blankenburg-Holm & Eriksson, 2000; Nordman & Tolstoy, 2014), while some scholars also used this theory to explain the nature of specific network connections in China (guanxi) and in Russia (sviazi) (Berger, Herstein, Silbiger, & Barnes, 2017; Yen & Abosag, 2016). Other less frequent uses of this theory concerned the role of network influence on relationship formation (Ellis, 2000), as well as the link between focal relationship dimensions and management of their broader network (Lindstrand, Eriksson, & Sharma, 2009; Löfgren, 2014).

Resource-based view postulates that in order to have a sustainable competitive advantage, the firm must be rich in valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and imperfectly substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). In E-I relationships research, resource-based view was used in order to explain how relational resources and capabilities (e.g., relationship learning, complementary capabilities) influence relationship outcomes and business performance, as well as to examine the behavioral drivers of such resources and capabilities (e.g., Griffith & Dmitrova, 2014; Lages, Silva, & Styles, 2009; Skarmeas, Zeriti, & Baltas, 2016). Some researchers also viewed favorable behavioral dimensions (e.g., trust, commitment, information sharing) as valuable resources on their own and examined their interrelationships with environmental or other relational factors (e.g., Griffith, Myers, & Harvey, 2006; Matanda, Ndubisi, & Jie, 2016).

Resource-dependence theory is based on the premise that the firm depends on external coalitions to obtain the critical resources required for its survival, which instigates the firm to

build relationships with other firms (Anderson, 1982; Heide, 1994). This theory was utilized to explain the links between behavioral dimensions and role performance in E-I relationships (e.g., Karande, Ha, & Singhapakdi, 2008; Skarmeas & Robson, 2008), as well as to investigate the impact of resource dependence on governance mechanisms (Bello & Gilliland, 1997; Zhang, Cavusgil, & Roath, 2003) and various behavioral dimensions such as commitment (e.g., Ahmed, 2009; Karande et al., 2008).

Institutional theory maintains that organizations are open systems that are profoundly affected by their institutional environments and tend to mimic structures and routines which are institutionalized in these environments (Scott, 1994, 2003). Institutional theory was the conceptual basis of studies examining the role of home/host country institutional factors (e.g., regulatory volatility) on E-I relational structure (e.g., contract formalization) (e.g., Svendsen & Haugland, 2012; Yang, Su, & Fam, 2012). Another common application of this theory was the examination of the moderating role of institutional elements (e.g., institutional distance, legal environment hostility) between behavioral, structural, and performance-related variables (e.g., Cavusgil et al., 2004; Ju, Zhao, & Wang, 2014; Miocevic, 2016).

3.2. Research design

About nine-tenths (87.2%) of the articles reviewed used formalized approaches (expressed primarily in terms of hypotheses) to define the research problem (see **Table 2**). In fact, there was a significant increase in the use of formalized approaches among researchers in the field, from 74.2% during the period 1975-1997 to 93.3% in the period 2008-2017. This might be associated with the fact that this stream of research was heavily based on research developments in domestic buyer-seller relationships, which customarily also used formalized approaches. Exploratory studies, on the other hand, were found in only 12.8% of the total articles examined, especially during the early phases of this research, when there was still limited knowledge on

the subject. For example, some of them tried to explore the nature of foreign supplier selection criteria, specific problems taking place in E-I relationships, and changes in relationship characteristics over different stages of export involvement (Katsikeas & Leonidou, 1996; Leonidou & Kaleka, 1998; Pfohl & Large, 1997).

Table 2: Research design of articles on E-I business relationships

Research design	Total (n=196) %	(I) 1975-1997 (n_1=31) %	(II) 1998-2007 (n_2=76) %	(III) 2008-2017 (n_3=89) %	$\chi 2$	p-value	Post-hoc test
Problem crystallization							
Exploratory	12.8	25.8	14.5	6.7	7.839	**.020**	I>III
Formalized	87.2	74.2	85.5	93.3	7.839	**.020**	III>I
Topical scope							
Statistical	95.4	96.8	94.7	95.5	.212	.899	
Case study	4.6	3.2	5.3	4.5	.212	.899	
Time dimension							
Cross-sectional	96.4	100.0	94.7	96.6	1.790	.409	
Longitudinal	3.6	-	5.3	3.4	1.790	.409	
Variable association							
Descriptive	9.2	16.1	10.5	5.6	3.314	.191	
Causal	90.8	83.9	89.5	94.4	3.314	.191	

With regard to topical scope, the overwhelming majority (95.4%) of the E-I relationship articles adopted a statistical approach, and this was true across all time periods examined. Such an approach was usually applied in the case of studies with large sample sizes that permitted statistical analysis, as well as in studies collecting data through surveys with a specified research instrument. Although case studies provide a useful tool to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena associated with E-I relationships, these were rarely used (reported in only 4.6% of the articles).

Cross-sectional research was the dominant method used by E-I relationship studies during the whole period under investigation (reported in 96.4% of the articles), while only a few articles (especially in those studies using the survey method) reported longitudinal designs. The low use of the latter can be attributed to their relatively high cost, as well as the involvement

of long time periods for completion. However, this is a serious drawback of this line of research, because E-I relationships are dynamic phenomena, which are constantly evolving, and cross-sectional studies only capture a snapshot of the behavioral interactions taking place. In addition, it may lead to disregarding the possibility of changing the sequence of causality between variables over time.

More than nine-tenths (90.8%) of the articles reported that the variables used in their studies were associated in a causal way, that is, their focus was on determining cause-and-effect relationships. On the contrary, descriptive studies (i.e., studies ascertaining the frequency of incidences of a variable or the degree to which two variables covary) represented only a small proportion (9.2%). As opposed to descriptive research, the use of causal studies has shown an increasing trend over time (although not statistically significant), reflecting a growing tendency to build and test theoretically-driven conceptual models.

3.3. Scope of research

More than three-quarters (77.5%) of the articles focused on a single country, and there was an increasing tendency to do so, from 51.6% during the period 1975-1997 to 87.6% in the period 2008-2017 (see **Table 3**). Obviously, single-country studies gathered information from either the exporter or the importer. Another 13.8% of the articles referred to two countries, while the use of three countries or more was rare. In the case of multi-country studies, these involved either cross-national data collection (e.g., Homburg et al., 2002; Blankenburg-Holm & Eriksson, 2000; Khalid & Bhatti, 2015) or studies collecting data from both exporters and importers (e.g., Leonidou, 1989; Rosson & Ford, 1982). There were also instances where multi-country studies were used to compare domestic versus international buyer-seller relationships (e.g., Homburg, Cannon, Krohmer, & Kiedaisch, 2009; Katsikeas & Piercy, 1992) or to

13

compare the intra-cultural with inter-cultural exporter/importer behavior (e.g., Griffith, Hu, & Ryans, 2000).

Table 3: Scope of research in articles on E-I business relationships

Scope of research	Total (n=196) %	(I) 1975-1997 (n₁=31) %	(II) 1998-2007 (n₂=76) %	(III) 2008-2017 (n₃=89) %	$\chi2$	p-value	Post-hoc test
Countries involved							
One	77.5	51.6	76.3	87.6	17.251	**.000**	II>I, III>I, III>II
Two	13.8	32.3	11.8	9.0	10.872	**.004**	I>II, I>III
Three or more	8.7	16.1	11.8	3.4	6.298	**.043**	I>III, II>III
Focus region							
North America	27.0	25.8	43.4	13.5	18.652	**.000**	II>I, II>III
Europe	46.9	64.5	36.8	49.4	7.180	**.028**	I>II
Asia	28.6	19.4	22.4	37.1	5.879	**.053**	III>I, III>II
Oceania	8.2	-	13.2	6.7	5.524	**.063**	II>I
Latin America	6.1	3.2	10.5	3.4	4.189	.123	
Africa	1.0	-	-	2.2	2.429	.297	
Product emphasis							
Consumer	10.7	22.6	9.2	7.9	5.498	**.064**	I>II, I>III
Industrial	33.7	32.3	39.5	29.2	1.965	.374	
Consumer & industrial	30.6	29.0	27.6	33.7	.756	.685	
Services	1.0	-	-	2.2	2.429	.297	
Not available	24.0	16.1	23.7	27.0	1.487	.475	
Industries covered							
Single	12.2	19.4	6.6	14.6	4.191	.123	
Multiple	75.5	67.7	78.9	75.3	1.500	.472	
Not available	12.2	12.9	14.5	10.1	.741	.691	
Unit of analysis							
Exporter	15.8	48.4	11.8	7.9	29.827	**.000**	I>II, I>III
Importer	11.7	51.6	5.3	3.4	56.680	**.000**	I>II, I>III
Exporter & importer(dyad)	4.6	9.7	3.9	3.4	2.205	.332	
Export venture	50.5	22.6	51.3	59.6	12.603	**.002**	II>I, III>I
Import venture	27.6	12.9	31.6	29.2	4.073	.130	
Other	1.5	-	3.9	-	4.810	**.090**	II>III
Not specified	1.5	-	1.3	2.2	.808	.668	
Company size							
Small	36.2	16.1	32.9	46.1	9.516	**.009**	II>I, III>I, III>II
Medium	41.3	22.6	42.1	47.2	5.774	**.056**	II>I, III>I
Large	27.0	22.6	28.9	27.0	.453	.797	
Not available	49.5	71.0	48.7	42.7	7.383	**.025**	I>II, I>III

With regard to the regions involved, Europe (particularly the United Kingdom) attracted most attention (46.9% of the articles), followed by Asia (particularly China) which was the focus of 28.6%, and North America (particularly the USA) reported by 27.0% of the articles. All other continents (i.e., Oceania, Latin America, and Africa) were relatively under-studied,

probably due to their relatively low share in world trade. Notably, there was a systematic long-standing research interest in E-I relationships in Europe, Asia, and the USA, while for other parts of the world research efforts seem to have been confined to the personal interests of a few scholars at certain times. With the exception of Asia, where there was an increasing emphasis on this line of research over time (reaching 37.1% in the period 2008-2017), no clear developmental pattern was observed in other regions.

A quarter (24.0%) of the articles did not report the nature of the products exchanged between exporters and importers. In most cases (i.e., 33.7% of the articles) the focus was on industrial products, in 10.7% of the articles was on consumer goods, while another 30.6% covered both consumer and industrial products. Very few studies (i.e., 1.0% of the articles) were conducted on services, which is surprising considering the fact that the share of services in international trade has increased drastically in recent decades, reaching 24.7% in 2016 (WTO, 2017).

More than three quarters (75.5%) of the articles were conducted on a cross-section of industries (with an even higher percentage in recent years). This could be associated with a preference for setting the sampling frame as broadly as possible in order to ensure larger sample sizes, to enable variations in the factors of interest, and to improve the generalizability of the results. On the other hand, the focus on a single industry was the case in only 12.2% of the articles reviewed and usually reflected the need to control certain industry effects on the focal constructs and their associations. Some of the most common industries examined were: food and beverages, electronics, machinery, and textiles.

In more than three quarters of the articles, the unit of analysis was the export venture (50.5%) or import venture (27.6%), referring to the exporter's (importer's) relationship with a specific importer (exporter). These were followed by the studies setting their unit of analysis as the exporter (15.8%) and the importer (11.7%). Such studies were more popular during the first

time period and were mostly used in studies focusing on the foreign supplier selection criteria (e.g., Ghymn & Jaffe, 2004). Very few studies (4.6%) designated E-I dyad as their unit of analysis, which could be associated with the financial and practical problems of collecting reliable and comparable data from more than one country.

In half (49.5%) of the articles, the size of the firms participating in their studies was not disclosed. However, in those articles that disclosed this information, the emphasis was mainly on firms of small-to-medium size, with a tendency to place even greater emphasis on these companies over time (reported in half of the articles during the period 2008-2017). This can be attributed to the fact that exporting and importing are the methods of internationalizing most preferred by smaller firms (Löfgren, 2014; Miocevic, 2016). Large companies were the focus of 27.0% of the articles, which was particularly the case with studies conducted in the USA, which included in their samples companies from the Fortune500 list.

3.4. Sampling/data collection

More than one-third (34.2%) of the articles examined reported that they covered the whole population of firms selected, although this gradually decreased over time (see **Table 4**). Another 45.9% of articles drew their sample based on probability sampling procedures (e.g., mainly simple random sampling methods), which was particularly evident in most recent research. Non-probability sampling was employed in rare cases (9.2% of the articles), usually taking the form of purposive or convenience samples. The latter were basically related to qualitative studies using small sample sizes (e.g., Andersen, Christensen, & Damgaard, 2009; Lye & Hamilton, 2001; Voldnes, Grønhaug, & Nilssen, 2012).

Table 4: Sampling/data collection procedures in articles on E-I business relationships

Sampling/data collection Procedures	Total (n=196) %	(I) 1975-1997 (n_1=31) %	(II) 1998-2007 (n_2=76) %	(III) 2008-2017 (n_3=89) %	χ^2	p-value	Post-hoc test
Sampling design							

Whole population	34.2	64.5	31.6	25.8	15.659	**.000**	I>II, I>III
Probability sample	45.9	6.5	46.1	59.6	26.105	**.000**	II>I, III>I, III>II
Non-probability sample	9.2	3.2	13.2	7.9	2.944	.229	
Not available	10.7	25.8	9.2	6.7	9.029	**.011**	I>II, I>III
Data collection							
Mail	59.7	45.2	75.0	51.7	12.494	**.002**	II>I, II>III
Telephone	1.0	-	1.3	1.1	.395	.821	
Personal	26.0	54.8	21.1	20.2	15.902	**.000**	I>II, I>III
Drop-in questionnaire	1.5	-	1.3	2.2	.808	.668	
Electronic	11.2	-	-	24.7	29.794	**.000**	III>I, III>II
Secondary data	0.5	-	1.3	-	1.587	.452	
Sample size							
99 or less	19.9	45.2	23.7	7.9	21.182	**.000**	I>II, I>III, II>III
100–249	58.2	38.7	63.2	60.7	5.831	**.054**	II>I, III>I
250–499	17.9	9.7	10.5	27.0	9.233	**.010**	III>I, III>II
500 -999	3.6	3.2	2.6	4.5	.426	.808	
1000 or more	0.5	3.2	-	-	5.350	**.069**	I>II, I>III
Response rate							
19 or less	16.3	9.7	18.4	16.9	1.265	.531	
20–29	27.0	12.9	25.0	33.7	5.306	**.070**	III>I
30–39	15.3	16.1	13.2	16.9	.451	.798	
40 or more	30.6	45.2	31.6	24.7	4.578	.101	
Not applicable	6.6	6.5	7.9	5.6	.345	.842	
Not available	4.1	9.7	3.9	2.2	3.248	.197	
Key informant							
CEO/president	31.1	16.1	35.5	32.6	4.027	.134	
Import executive	38.8	58.1	35.5	34.8	5.780	**.056**	I>II, I>III
Export executive	63.8	64.5	63.2	64.0	.023	.989	
Marketing manager	12.8	-	9.2	20.2	9.853	**.007**	II>I, III>I, III>II
Other	3.6	6.5	2.6	3.4	.952	.621	
Not applicable	0.5	-	1.3	-	1.587	.452	
Not available	2.0	9.7	1.3	-	11.097	**.004**	I>II, I>III

Mail questionnaires were the most preferred method of data collection (reported in three-fifths of the articles), and this was particularly true during the period 1998-2007. Face-to-face interviews were reported in a quarter (26.0%) of the articles, but there was a significant reduction in the use of this data collection method from 54.8% in the period 1975-1997 to 20.2% in the period 2008-2017. Electronic data collection was the third most popular method, having exclusively appeared in recent years due to the widespread use of the internet, which offers lower costs and time savings in sending/receiving questionnaires. Other data collection methods, such as telephone and drop-in questionnaires, were rarely employed in this line of research.

In four-fifths (80.1%) of the articles, sample size exceeded 100 units, with the majority (58.2%) reporting samples ranging from 100 to 249. In general, there was a growing trend to

use larger sample sizes, probably because: (a) this could increase the representativeness of the sample, especially in studies covering multiple industrial sectors; (b) the heavy reliance on structural equation modeling analysis requires a minimum five cases per scale item ratio to yield reliable results; (c) the use of electronic data collection methods facilitates reaching a larger part of the target population; and (d) the emergence of more reliable databases (e.g., Dun & Bradstreet) enables researchers to secure a wider number of participants in their studies.

With regard to response rates, in 30.6% of the articles this was 40% or above, although there was a decline from 45.2% in the 1975-1997 period to 24.7% in the 2008-2017 period. Another 15.3% of the articles reported response rates ranging from 30 to 39%, while a 20 to 29% response rate was mentioned in another 27.0% of the articles. These relatively high response rates should be expected, given that in the majority of cases data were gathered using mail/electronic questionnaires, which are usually associated with higher response rates. Only a small proportion (16.3%) of the articles reviewed stated a response rate below 20%. Interestingly, the response rate pattern observed in our review is consistent with the findings of other general, large-scale review studies of both exporting (e.g., Leonidou & Katsikeas, 2010) and importing (e.g., Aykol et al., 2013).

With the exception of the few articles that adopted a dyadic approach, research on E-I relationships relied on single key-informant data. Due to the nature of this line of research, export executives were the most frequently used informants (reported in 63.8% of the articles). Import executives comprised the second most frequent key informant group (38.8% of the articles), although there was a reduction in their use over time. Another 31.1% of the articles used CEOs/presidents as their key informants, which was the case mainly with studies focusing on smaller-sized firms. The use of marketing managers was reported in 12.8% of the articles, while key informants in other company positions (e.g., purchasing manager, account manager, and operations manager) were reported less frequently.

3.5. Data analysis

Checking for non-response bias was reported in more than half (52.0%) of the articles, which is very high in light of the fact that this was usually associated with mail/electronic surveys used in 76.4% of the articles (see **Table 5**). Notably, the use of non-response bias tests experienced an upward trend over time. The examination of key informant bias took place less frequently (reported in 28.6% of the articles), and usually took the form of controlling the suitability of respondents to provide the required information through a set of questions. Testing for common method bias was mentioned in a third (34.7%) of the articles reviewed, and there was a sharp upward trend in its use, reaching 69.7% during the period 2008-2017. The most frequent common method bias tests employed were: Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), confirmatory factor approach (Venkatraman & Prescott, 1990), and the marker variable technique (Lindell & Whitney, 2001).

Table 5: Data analysis in articles on E-I business relationships

Data analysis	Total (n=196) %	(I) 1975-1997 (n₁=31) %	(II) 1998-2007 (n₂=76) %	(III) 2008-2017 (n₃=89) %	χ^2	p-value	Post-hoc test
Controlling for bias							
Non-response bias	52.0	6.5	48.7	70.8	38.689	**.000**	II>I, III>I, III>II
Key informant bias	28.6	29.0	15.8	39.3	11.131	**.004**	III>II
Common method bias	34.7	3.2	6.6	69.7	88.097	**.000**	III>I, III>II
Construct evaluation							
Cronbach's alpha	51.0	32.3	55.3	53.9	5.216	**.074**	II>I, III>I
Composite reliability	40.8	6.5	21.1	69.7	58.102	**.000**	II>I, III>I, III>II
Construct validity	76.5	51.6	67.1	93.3	28.341	**.000**	III>I, III>II
Not applicable	8.2	9.7	10.5	5.6	1.430	.489	
Not available	7.7	25.8	9.2	-	22.092	**.000**	I>II, I>III, II>III
Statistical technique							
Descriptive	9.8	25.8	8.0	5.7	10.954	**.004**	I>II, I>III
Uni/Bivariate	13.4	41.9	16.0	1.1	33.590	**.000**	I>II, I>III, II>III
Multivariate	20.6	12.9	32.0	13.6	9.684	**.008**	II>I, II>III
Modeling	56.2	19.4	44.0	79.5	41.113	**.008**	II>I, III>I, III>II

The fact that the overwhelming majority of the studies were of a statistical nature, necessitated the purification of the data collected. Half (51.0%) of the articles proceeded with an analysis of the reliability of the constructs used, this being more evident during the last two decades. Composite reliability was also estimated in two-fifths (40.8%) of the articles, which was particularly true in more recent studies. Another three-quarters (76.5%) analyzed the discriminant and convergent validity of the scales used, with almost all the studies conducted during the period 2008-2017 proceeding with this test. This is a reflection of the increasing tendency to test theoretically-driven conceptual models, which required scholars to ensure the quality of the constructs used in order for the assessment of their associations to make sense (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2009).

The most common analytical method used was structural equation modeling, reported in more than half (56.2%) of the articles reviewed. In fact, this analytical method gained momentum over time, identified in 79.5% of the articles written in the last decade. This widespread use of SEM analysis is expected, given the observed emphasis to test theoretically-anchored conceptual models in causal research designs. Multivariate statistical methods, especially hierarchical regression analysis, were employed in a fifth (20.6%) of the articles. The use of descriptive statistics (e.g., percentage frequencies) or univariate/ bivariate statistics (e.g., ANOVA test) was reported on a less frequent basis, and was mainly evident during the early phases of this line of research.

3.6. Research topics

Since its inception in the mid-1970s, the literature on E-I relationships has tackled a wide range of topics, which can be grouped into eight thematic areas and in descending order are the following: behavioral dimensions, relationship characteristics, environmental influences,

internal influences, performance implications, specialized issues, relationship

initiation/dissolution, and miscellaneous topics (see **Table 6**).[3]

Table 6: Research topics of articles on exporter-importer business relationships

Research topics	Total (n=196) %	(I) 1975-1997 (n_1=31) %	(II) 1998-2007 (n_2=76) %	(III) 2008-2017 (n_3=89) %	χ^2	p-value	Post-hoc test
Relationship initiation/dissolution	7.7	19.4	10.5	1.1	12.263	**.002**	I>II, I>III, II>III
Partner selection/evaluation	4.6	19.4	3.9	-	19.777	**.000**	I>II, I>III, II>III
Relationship dissolution	3.1	-	6.6	1.1	5.274	**.072**	II>III
Environmental influences	34.7	19.4	35.5	39.3	4.085	.130	
Macro-environmental forces	30.6	12.9	31.6	36.0	5.806	**.055**	II>I, III>I
Micro-environmental factors	13.3	12.9	11.8	14.6	.277	.871	
Internal influences	33.7	19.4	38.2	34.8	3.583	.167	
Organizational factors	26.5	9.7	27.6	31.5	5.674	**.059**	II>I, III>I
Managerial characteristics	4.1	-	5.3	4.5	1.629	.443	
Internationalization aspects	9.2	12.9	10.5	6.7	1.315	.518	
Behavioral dimensions	81.1	74.2	81.6	83.1	1.220	.543	
Latent variables	42.3	12.9	43.4	51.7	14.223	**.001**	II>I, III>I
Manifest variables	65.3	67.7	68.4	61.8	.890	.641	
Outcome variables	48.0	38.7	35.5	61.8	12.599	**.002**	III>I, III>II
Relationship characteristics	56.6	35.5	56.6	64.0	7.637	**.022**	II>I, III>I
Relationship demographics	11.2	9.7	13.2	10.1	.470	.791	
Relationship structure	44.4	25.8	46.1	49.4	5.341	**.069**	II>I, III>I
Inter-partner compatibility	14.8	6.5	13.2	19.1	3.182	.204	
Performance implications	23.5	6.5	22.4	30.3	7.387	**.025**	II>I, III>I
Financial performance	11.2	-	11.8	14.6	4.970	**.083**	II>I, III>I
Market performance	4.1	-	3.9	5.6	1.859	.395	
Overall performance	11.7	6.5	10.5	14.6	1.651	.438	
Specialized issues	17.9	12.9	15.8	21.3	1.480	.477	
Interpersonal issues	12.8	9.7	14.5	12.4	.478	.787	
Dark side elements	3.6	-	1.3	6.7	4.868	**.088**	III>II
Network ties	5.1	3.2	5.3	5.6	.278	.870	
Miscellaneous	8.7	-	9.2	11.2	3.710	.156	

Issues pertaining to the initiation/dissolution of the E-I relationship were the object of

7.7% of the articles reviewed, especially of those published during the early phases of this

research. The emphasis was primarily on: (a) foreign partner selection criteria, both economic

and relational (Håkansson & Wootz, 1975; Katsikeas & Leonidou, 1996; Vernon-Wortzel,

Wortzel, & Deng, 1988); (b) factors influencing the establishment of a relationship, such as the

existence of interpersonal networks (Ellis, 2000); and (c) evaluating the performance of the

working relationship (e.g., Pfohl & Large, 1997). The dissolution of the relationship was the focus of a small proportion (3.1%) of the articles. The emphasis here was on the factors leading to a termination of a relationship (Li & Ng, 2002a; Zhang, Griffith, & Cavusgil, 2006), as well as on switching to other foreign partners (e.g., Petersen, Benito, & Pedersen, 2000; Pressey & Selassie, 2007).

Environmental influences on the E-I relationship attracted the attention of more than a third (34.7%) of the articles, and these were divided into macro-environmental and micro-environmental factors. With regard to the former, the focus was on environmental uncertainty (Katsikeas, Skarmeas, & Bello, 2009), cultural characteristics (Pressey & Selassie, 2003), and institutional elements (Cavusgil et al., 2004). The effect of macro-environmental forces on the working relationship was examined in either a direct (Andersen & Buvik, 2001; Bello et al., 2003; Katsikeas et al., 2009; Leonidou, Barnes, & Talias, 2006; Skarmeas et al., 2002) or moderating (Aulakh & Gençtürk, 2008; Leonidou, Aykol, Fotiadis, Christodoulides, & Zeriti, 2017; Sousa, Ruzo, & Losada, 2010) way. Micro-environmental influences were examined less frequently (by 13.3% of the articles) and mainly referred to market characteristics (e.g., volatility), industry uncertainty, and competition characteristics (Bello & Gilliland, 1997; Celly, Spekman, & Kamauff, 1999; Matanda & Freeman, 2009; Yang et al., 2012). The contingency role of micro-environmental factors was also investigated (Griffith & Zhao, 2015; Ju et al., 2014; Leonidou, Aykol, Fotiadis, Christodoulides, & Zeriti, 2017).

Another third (33.7%) of the articles examined internal influences on the E-I relationship, the bulk referring to organizational factors, such as own/partner's firm's demographics (e.g., age, size, product characteristics), own/partner firm's resources and capabilities (e.g., resource inadequacy, market orientation), and own/partner firm's business/ marketing strategy (e.g., pricing, quality) (Alteren & Tudoran, 2016; Bello & Gilliland, 1997, Ford, 1984; Khalid & Bhatti, 2015; Lages et al., 2009; Leonidou, Katsikeas, & Hadjimarcou,

2002; Li & Ng, 2002a). Managerial influences were examined less frequently (4.1% of the articles) and covered the effect of the manager's skills, values, and behavior on relationship atmosphere, partner interactions, and relationship marketing activities (Shankarmahesh, Ford, & LaTour, 2004; Sichtmann & von Selasinsky, 2010; Sousa et al., 2010). A final group of internal influences (found in 9.2% of the articles) referred to the firm's internationalization characteristics, such as the role of export/import involvement or development stage and international knowledge/experience. Scholars also investigated their impact on partner selection criteria, relational atmosphere, and relationship structure (Aulakh & Gençtürk, 2008; Katsikeas, Al-Khalifa, & Crick, 1997; Katsikeas, Skarmeas, & Katsikea, 2000; Klein & Roth, 1993; Leonidou et al., 2002; Leonidou & Kaleka, 1998; Li & Ng, 2002b; Rosson & Ford, 1982; Saleh et al., 2014).

Behavioral dimensions of the E-I relationship provided the thrust of the attention of scholars in this line of research, as demonstrated by the fact that it was referred to in more than four-fifths (81.1%) of the articles. These dimensions could be divided into three groups: (a) Latent variables, that is, feelings associated with the relationship, with the most frequently examined being trust and opportunism (Cavusgil et al., 2004; Katsikeas et al., 2009; Wu, Sinkovics, Cavusgil, & Roath, 2007) and, to a lesser extent, relational uncertainty, understanding, and benevolence (Lee, Sirgy, Brown, & Bird, 2004; Leonidou et al., 2006; Leonidou, Kaminarides, & Hadjimarcou, 2004); (b) Manifest variables, that is, actions performed in the relationship, with the emphasis placed on communication, commitment, cooperation, conflict, and adaptation (Leonidou et al., 2011; Nes, Solberg, & Silkoset, 2007; Skarmeas, 2006); and (c) Outcome variables, that is, the end result of what is attained in the relationship, namely satisfaction and relational performance (Bello et al., 2003; Homburg et al., 2002; Skarmeas & Robson, 2008).[4] While early studies focused on the nature of behavioral dimensions in E-I relationships (Katsikeas & Piercy, 1991), compared domestic versus

international buyer-seller relationships (Katsikeas, 1992), and examined interrelationships among behavioral constructs (e.g., Johnson, Sakano, & Onzo, 1990; LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Leonidou, 1989; Rosson & Ford, 1980), with the passage of time the emphasis shifted to incorporating behavioral variables into theoretically-driven models (e.g., Skarmeas et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2003), connecting behavioral constructs with other international dimensions, such as cultural distance (e.g., Leonidou et al., 2006; Obadia, 2013; Skarmeas et al., 2002), and examining how internationalization aspects can shape relationship atmosphere (e.g., Leonidou & Kaleka, 1998).

Another important area (investigated by 56.6% of the articles) referred to relationship characteristics, which experienced a constant increase in scholarly interest over time. Most of the studies predominantly focused on the structure of the relationship, as defined in terms of various constructs, such as dependence, relational norms, relationship-specific investments/assets, and transaction-specific investments/assets. All these structural factors were conceived as drivers and/or moderators of the relationship atmosphere (e.g., commitment, conflict, opportunism) (Katsikeas et al., 2009; Obadia, 2010; Skarmeas et al., 2002) and relational performance (e.g., effectiveness, efficiency) (Bello et al., 2003; Bello & Gilliland, 1997; Klein, 1989; Zhang et al., 2003). Relationship demographics (e.g., age/duration of the working relationship) were studied less frequently and basically played a moderating role on the link between various behavioral and/or structural constructs (e.g., Barnes et al., 2015; Buvik, Andersen, & Gronhaug, 2014; Deligonul, Kim, Roath, & Cavusgil, 2006; Lee et al., 2004; Leonidou, Aykol, Fotiadis, & Christodoulides, 2017), while some other studies attempted to examine how various behavioral or structural constructs vary according to relationship stages (e.g., exploration, expansion, commitment) (Akrout, 2014; Terawatanawong, Whitwell, & Widing 2007). A final group of studies dealt with inter-partner compatibility issues, specifically focusing on similarities/differences between exporters and

importers in terms of various characteristics (e.g., goals, values, cultural sensitivity) and how this affects the working relationship (e.g., Cheung, Myers, & Mentzer, 2010; LaBahn & Harich, 1997; Saleh et al., 2014; Skarmeas & Robson, 2008).

Performance implications of E-I relationships were taken into consideration by more than a fifth (23.5%) of the articles reviewed, especially among more recent studies. Most of the studies tried to examine the financial implications (e.g., sales, profits, ROI) of the behavioral interactions between exporters and importers (e.g., Barnes at al., 2015; Ju et al., 2014; Obadia, 2010; Racela, Chaikittisilpa, & Thoumrungroje, 2007). In rare cases, financial performance was also set as an antecedent of the E-I relational atmosphere, such as commitment (Chetty & Eriksson, 2002; Obadia, 2010). Some other studies also investigated the effects of the atmosphere governing the working relationship on market performance (e.g., customer satisfaction, customer retention, customer loyalty) (Griffith et al., 2014; Jean et al., 2010; Jean et al., 2015), as well as on overall export/import performance (e.g., strategic) (Ling-yee & Ogunmokun, 2001; Ural, 2009). Interestingly, with a few exceptions (e.g., Matanda & Freeman, 2009; Styles & Ambler, 2000), research findings indicated that the prevalence of a healthy relationship atmosphere not only improves relational performance, but also international business performance.

Various specialized issues were the focus of another 17.9% of the articles reviewed. The link between inter-personal issues (e.g., personal trust, personal friendship, and personal affection) and inter-organizational factors of the E-I relationship provided the thrust of the attention. This was particularly true when studying relationships with Chinese business partners, where guanxi (i.e., personal connections of business relationships) is the dominant way of doing business (Barnes, Yen, & Zhou, 2011; Mavondo & Rodrigo, 2001; Ling-Yee & Ogunmokun, 2001; Yen, Barnes, & Wang, 2011). Another 5.1% of articles (especially those published recently) dealt with network ties, with the emphasis placed on: (a) the influence of

network connections on establishing relationships (Ellis, 2000) and building trust and commitment (Blankenburg-Holm et al., 1996; Blankenburg-Holm & Eriksson, 2000; Havila, Johanson, & Thilenius, 2004); (b) factors driving the usage of customer networks (Lindstrand et al., 2009); and (c) developing measurement scales for network-associated variables (Berger et al., 2017). Another important issue, which, however, received attention only recently is the dark side of the E-I relationship, mainly focusing on the antecedents and outcomes of certain negative aspects of E-I relationships, including contract violation, infidelity, and betrayal (Griffith & Zhao, 2015; Leonidou, Aykol, Fotiadis, & Christodoulides, 2017; Leonidou, Aykol, Fotiadis, Christodoulides, & Zeriti, 2017).

The remaining (8.7%) articles dealt with miscellaneous topics, such as: negotiations between exporters and importers (Calantone, Graham, & Mintu-Wimsatt, 1998), ethical considerations in the exporter-importer interaction process (Carter, 2000; Leonidou, Leonidou, Coudounaris, & Hultman, 2013), relationship learning between exporters and importers (Cheung et al., 2010), and the role of country image on relational exchange (Durand, Turkina, & Robson, 2016).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Our preceding review of the extant empirical literature on E-I relationships has amply demonstrated that this stream of international business research has, over time, developed into a mature body of scholarly knowledge, offering useful theoretical and managerial implications.[5] Theoretically, it has: (a) offered new concepts, thoughts, and ideas that have helped to better conceptualize buyer-seller interactions in an international business setting; (b) introduced new constructs and operationalizations to better measure various facets of the working relationship; and (c) emphasized the significance of various situation-specific factors when analyzing this relationship. Managerially, it has: (a) provided insightful knowledge to business practitioners

26

of how to initiate, manage, and maintain their relationships with foreign partners in order to yield mutually beneficial results; (b) stressed the role of understanding cross-border differences between interacting parties to be able to effectively handle the nuances of the international exchange process; and (c) underscored the instrumental role of relationship building and development in facilitating the firm's advancement in foreign markets (see **Appendix** for a summary of managerial implications).

The comprehensive and integrated approach adopted by our review has helped to bring to the surface some fresh useful insights into the E-I relationship phenomenon. First, from a theoretical perspective, as opposed to other areas of exporting, it was revealed that research on E-I relationships has an extensive theoretical backing, as indicated by the wide array of explicit (e.g., behavioral paradigm, transaction cost economics, relational exchange theory) or implicit (e.g., neoclassical microeconomic theory, political economy paradigm, organizational learning) theories employed. This can be attributed to the fact that many of the ideas and constructs used in this field were acquired from the domestic business literature, where these theories have been extensively used. Interestingly, the use of theoretically-based studies has almost become a norm in recent years, which is a healthy development.[6] Hence, researchers should continue to back their studies with appropriate theories with an explanatory potential on E-I relationships phenomena, paying particular attention to some promising but neglected theories, such as the organizational learning, dynamic capabilities, and stakeholder theories.

With regard to research design, the fact that the overwhelming majority of studies had a formalized nature indicates that the knowledge accumulated so far enables researchers to build new hypotheses based on the findings of prior research. Also, the use of statistical studies, as opposed to case studies, is connected with the formalized approach mentioned earlier. However, case studies are also helpful in providing rich and in-depth insights into the research problem, and should therefore not be neglected. The cross-sectional nature of this line of research is one

of its weaknesses, since working relationships are dynamic phenomena and therefore a longitudinal study will better elucidate the associations between behavioral interactions, structural characteristics, and performance over the relationship life-cycle. The heavy emphasis on causal variable associations denotes that the center of gravity of this line of research was to understand E-I relationships based on conceptual models, incorporating antecedents, mediating, and outcome variables.

There is also a need to widen the scope of research by using multiple countries, which will help to make cross-national and/or cross-cultural comparisons of E-I relationship phenomena, as well as to test the moderating effects of macro-environmental factors, such as economic development, cultural factors, or political systems. The fact that there has been a shift of research emphasis from North America and Europe to Asia is encouraging, although there is room to carry out studies in other neglected (but important) countries, such as Russia, India, and Brazil. Since, nowadays, many economies are service-oriented, more light needs to be shed on the relationship phenomena between exporters and importers of services. With regard to the unit of analysis, the fact that previous studies have focused either on exporters or importers necessitates the use of a dyadic approach in future research. This is because perceptual differences are possible among partners coming from different and distant countries. Since the interacting boundary spanners and power-dependence links in E-I relationships may differ according to firm size, it would be useful to draw comparisons between smaller and larger size firms.

With regard to sampling/data collection procedures, extant research has significantly improved with the increasing use of probability samples of a relatively large size. These trends should intensify in future, because they ensure the representativeness of samples and generalizability of results. Of significance is the fact that there has been a gradual shift from mail and personal data collection methods toward electronically collected data. However, this

trend should be treated with caution because the reliability of the sampling frames might be questionable, the survey may not reach the recipient due to technical problems, and there is the possibility of higher non-response bias. Although the informants used by extant research seem to be relevant as regards E-I relationships, it is important to receive information from multiple informants within the same organization, as well as from both members of the exporter-importer dyad (preferably from matched pairs).[7]

In the case of data analysis, it is also encouraging that our review has shown that scholars in the field have increasingly controlled for non-response bias, since high non-response rates may jeopardize the validity and representativeness of results (Malhotra, 2006). In addition to these bias controls, researchers should also assess endogeneity bias, because E-I relationships research does not use experimental designs, but tests the causal relationships among variables (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). The increasing evaluation of constructs, in terms of data purification, is also a positive aspect of this line of research, which should continue in future. It is also remarkable that studies in the field analyzed their data using advanced statistical methods, although it is recommended to take into consideration possible non-linear (e.g., hyperbolic) associations between constructs.

Finally, our review has revealed that research on E-I relationships has progressively covered a wide array of thematic areas, ranging from relationship initiation and relationship characteristics to behavioral factors and structural characteristics. The selection of most of these topics was influenced, and is still influenced, to a great extent by developments in the domestic buyer-seller literature, which is well-established and advanced. However, the status of current research on E-I relationships is such that a reverse trend may appear in future, with ideas developed in this field now easily transferrable to a domestic business context. Despite the valuable knowledge accumulated by extant research on E-I relationships, there is still room to extend our analysis to other important research topics. Some useful sources for such topics

could be found in both business (e.g., marketing, management, human resources) and non-business (e.g., psychology, sociology, political) fields.

5. Future research areas

Our review of the E-I relationship literature has revealed new areas of research that need to be investigated (see **Table 7**). First, concerning relationship initiation, it is worth exploring how new information technologies can change the selection and evaluation of foreign business partners. As technology gradually decreases the cost of information and facilitates access to it, it would be interesting to discover whether search and evaluation processes are now more rational. Another interesting research area would be the role of social media in finding new business partners abroad, as well as the conducive role of electronic word-of-mouth in the selection process. Certain issues relating to the termination of the E-I relationship remain unexplored, such as the drivers of this termination (e.g., contextual, behavioral, situational), the stages of the termination process, and the outcomes of termination.

Table 7: Future research areas

Thematic area	Suggested research topics
Relationship initiation/ dissolution	•The role of the new information technologies in evaluating/selecting foreign business partners •The impact of social media in finding new foreign business partners •The role of electronic word-of-mouth in evaluating/selecting international business partners •Antecedents of the E-I relationship termination (e.g., contextual, behavioral, situational) •Stages of the E-I relationship termination process •Consequences of the E-I relationship termination
Environmental influences	•The effect of environmental uncertainty (e.g., political, economic, technological) on E-I behavioral interactions and relational performance •The role of economic integration, cultural diversity, and institutional distance in establishing/ managing E-I relationships •The influence of competition, country of origin, and strategic posture on the functioning of the E-I relationship •Contingency effects of foreign market characteristics (e.g., market structure) on the association between structural, behavioral, and performance-related variables
Internal influences	•The effect of firm resources on the foreign partner's value and dependence •The role of firm's dynamic capabilities in E-I relationship maintenance and development •Relational performance implications of inter-partner strategic misalignment •The influence of managerial personal characteristics (e.g., personality traits) on E-I behavioral interactions •Interaction differences of 'born global' versus traditional exporters with their foreign buyers •The link of the firm's international commitment and with E-I relationship quality • Implications of reverse company internationalization on E-I relationship atmosphere
Behavioral dimensions	•Antecedents and consequences of influence strategies in E-I relationships •Drivers and outcomes of long-term orientation in E-I relationships

	•Adoption of interpersonal relationship phenomena (e.g., suspicion, betrayal, accommodation) in cross-cultural business relationships •Connecting inter-organizational level dimensions (e.g., organizational trust) with inter-personal dimensions (e.g., personal trust) •The role of cultural-specific relational constructs (e.g., guanxi, sviazi, wasta) in E-I working relationships
Relationship characteristics	•The impact of firm/partner complementarity of resources/capabilities on dependence •Evolution of governance mechanisms across different E-I relationship stages •The moderating role of cultural intelligence on the link between cultural distance and relationship quality •Cultural differences between exporters and importers and their influence on power dynamics, relational distance, and relationship formalization
Performance implications	•Coordination, resource/capability complementarity, and co-creation of value as mediators between E-I behavioral interactions and export/import performance •The impact of the firm's financial performance on its perceived foreign partner value •The role of financial performance changes on foreign partner dependence •Export/import performance changes at different stages of the relationship cycle
Specialized Issues	•The effect of interpersonal interactions between exporter's and importer's boundary spanners on inter-organizational relationship interactions •Dark side dimensions of the E-I relationship (e.g., psychological contract breach) and their antecedents and outcomes •The role of network-related factors (e.g., network position, network power, network management) in creating E-I relationship value
Miscellaneous	•Antecedents and outcomes of ethical issues in E-I working relationships •The connections between country image and foreign partner's evaluation, relationship quality, and relational performance •The association between foreign partner cultural characteristics and E-I negotiation strategies and outcomes •The role of governance mechanisms on E-I relational learning and relationship quality

Given the fast-changing and multifarious nature of the international business environment, more research should be channeled into how the various types of environmental uncertainty (e.g., political, economic, technological) influence exporter-importer interactions and the resulting performance. The influence of various unexplored macro-environmental issues, such as economic integration, cultural diversity, and institutional differences, on forming and managing E-I relationships also warrants attention. With regard to micro-environmental factors, there is still room to explore further the role of competition, country of origin, and strategic posture on the functioning of the working relationship. More light needs also to be shed on the moderating role of the foreign market structure, economic/commercial infrastructure, and communication/distribution channels on the E-I relationship.

Certain key organizational issues could raise some interesting research questions about E-I relationships. For example, how do company resources influence the foreign partner's value and dependence? How can the firm's dynamic capabilities contribute to relationship

maintenance and enhancement? How can a strategic misalignment between the interacting parties affect E-I relationship performance? In terms of managerial influences, it would be worth examining the role of the manager's personal characteristics, such as personality traits, value system, and emotional intelligence, on behavioral interactions with the foreign partner. Certain internationalization parameters should also be connected with the investigation of E-I relationships, such as differences between 'born globals' and traditional exporters in their interaction with foreign import customers, the association between foreign market commitment and relationship quality, and reverse internationalization effects on relationship atmosphere.

International business scholars could also highlight certain understudied, but important, behavioral constructs concerning E-I relationships, such as influence tactics, long-term orientation, and accommodation. New behavioral constructs, such as suspicion, betrayal, and forgiveness, could also be derived from other business (e.g., management) and non-business (e.g., psychology) disciplines. Moreover, it would be useful to draw a distinction between behavioral constructs operating at the inter-organizational level (e.g., organizational trust), as opposed to those found at the inter-personal level (e.g., personal trust) and try to find possible links. Furthermore, it is important to take into consideration various cultural-specific constructs associated with the way business relationships are conducted in different parts of the world, such as 'guanxi' for Chinese (Yen et al. 2011), 'sviazi' for Russians (Berger et al., 2017), and 'wasta' for Arabs (Berger, Silbiger, Herstein, & Barnes, 2015), and try to draw differences/similarities with Western relationships.

With regard to relationship characteristics, certain issues still warrant attention. For example, what is the influence of firm/partner complementarity of resources/capabilities on dependence? What types of governance mechanisms are applicable in the business venture between exporters and importers over different relationship stages? What is the moderating role of cultural intelligence on the link between cultural distance and relationship quality? A

relevant, but neglected, aspect concerning E-I relationships is that of cultural differences between the interacting parties in terms of Hofstede's (1991) dimensions (i.e., individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, long-term orientation) which may explain variations in power dynamics, relational distance, and relationship formalization.

More research should also enquire into the performance implications of E-I relationships. While previous studies demonstrated that harmonious business relationships have a positive effect on export/import performance, whether financial-related or market-related, there is little information as to how these relationships generate these performance outcomes. In other words, the mediating mechanism that transforms behavioral interactions into financial and market success needs to be identified. Some possible intervening factors may relate to coordination, resource/capability complementarity, and co-creation of value, which subsequently lead to the effective and efficient implementation of business venture strategies. Moreover, the antecedent role of performance on the E-I relationship, such as how an increase in one party's financial performance can increase its value and influence the other party's dependence, needs to be examined. It would also be interesting to explore differences in the export/import performance of each party at different stages of the relationship cycle.

With regard to more specialized issues, it would be enlightening to explore how the interpersonal interactions between export salespeople and import staff influence the relationship atmosphere at the inter-organizational level. More research is also needed to unveil new dimensions of the dark side of E-I relationships (e.g., psychological contract breach), as well as the preconditions for their appearance and the outcomes of their manifestation. Network-related variables (e.g., network position, network power, network management) represent critical factors that affect the value of the working relationship, which also require investigation. Finally, more studies should be conducted on ethical issues concerning the

interaction between exporter and importer, not only because unethical practices are endemic in

international business due to information asymmetry and distance, but also because what is

ethical in one culture may be unethical in another.

Notes

1. To our knowledge, this study is the first to provide such a comprehensive and extensive review of the literature on E-I relationships. The only exception is a recent publication by Leonidou et al. (2014), covering 76 empirical studies, which investigates the antecedents and outcomes of E-I relationship quality. However, this is a pure meta-analytical study, which exclusively focuses on relationship quality issues (which is just one of the many thematic areas covered by our review).

2. We have taken ideas on how to conduct our review from various well-cited international business reviews, such as those by Leonidou and Katsikeas (2010), Leonidou, Barnes, Spyropoulou, and Katsikeas (2010), and Aykol, Palihawadana, and Leonidou (2013). Building on prior reviews, which have been well-proven and widely-accepted by the relevant academic community, provides safeguards concerning the appropriateness of the study method used in this review.

3. In many cases, hypothesized associations between constructs of E-I relationship research were moderated by various factors, with the most commonly employed being: relational (e.g., relationship length, relationship stage, relationship contracting), managerial/organizational (e.g., management's cultural sensitivity, organizational capabilities), and environmental (e.g., psychic/cultural distance, inter-country institutional differences, environmental uncertainty). In addition, some of the most frequently used control variables in E-I relationship studies were: firm size, company age, international experience, industry type, relationship length, and inter-partner dependence.

4. With regard to the role of the various relationship qualities as mediators, this has been examined by Leonidou et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis, which revealed that the existence of high opportunism, conflict, and distance in an E-I relationship can endanger its quality (expressed in terms of cooperation, trust, and commitment). Conversely, adequate communication and adaptation in the working relationship has a positive effect on relationship quality. In turn, the existence of high quality in the E-I relationship helps to strengthen both its relational and financial performance.

5. There are also several implications for public policy makers (e.g., supra-national organizations, government agencies, parastatal organizations) that can be derived from research on E-I relationships, such as: (a) reducing environmental uncertainty in both home and host countries through the development of more stable and solid political, legal, institutional, and other systems, that would prevent interacting parties from taking opportunistic, unethical, and other negative actions that can jeopardize the smooth functioning of their working relationship; (b) assisting exporters and importers to better understand the peculiarities of foreign cultures as regards the development of business relationships, as well as providing a matching service whereby firms could identify foreign partners that are most suitable for them; and (c) designing special training programs (e.g., conflict resolution, cultural assimilation, communication techniques) that would help both exporters and importers to manage their business relationships in the best possible way.

6. Drawing from multiple theories to examine E-I relationships, although helping to enable this phenomenon to be seen from many different, and sometimes complementary, angles, increases the likelihood of it leading to inconsistent findings, because of: (a) the different assumptions underlying each theory that may contradict those of other theories; (b) the different selection of antecedents, mediators, outcomes, moderators, and controls to fit the purposes of each theory; and (c) the different way of operationalizing and measuring the relevant constructs from the perspective of each theory.

7. Although in the case of small firms, there is usually one person who can provide information about the working relationship with the foreign partner, in large organizations, there is a high potential for multiple persons to deal with the same foreign partner (especially if this is also a large sized). In the latter case, information from all informants involved in the specific relationship could be sought and its aggregate value estimated (by finding the average of each informant's response) (Phillips, 1981). Of course, a basic prerequisite for this, is for each of the

key informants to be familiar with, knowledgeable of, and confident about the various issues concerning the working relationship with the specific foreign partner (Van Bruggen, Lilien, & Kacker, 2002). To our knowledge, none of the studies reviewed employed such an approach, probably due to the difficulties involved in collecting data from multiple informants within the same organization.

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Appendix: Key managerial implications of research on E-I relationships

1. To have a productive and sound E-I relationship, it is important to deal with foreign partners who are characterized by goal compatibility, trustworthiness, willingness to make idiosyncratic investments, and availability of complementary resources and capabilities.
2. Reliable E-I relationship partners can be identified using systematic international market research, asking for assistance by governmental services (e.g., foreign trade missions) and parastatal organizations (e.g., chambers of commerce), and interacting with the broader network of the prospective foreign partner.
3. E-I relationships should be monitored at regular intervals in order to take preventive actions, especially as regards relationships experiencing stagnation/saturation, having foreign partners with low stability, and undergoing strong pressures from external factors (e.g., market volatility).
4. There is a need to set clear objectives and metrics for the E-I relationship, and evaluate its quality at different stages of its life-cycle, as well as assess its impact on both relational and financial performance.
5. For an E-I relationship to be healthy and prosperous throughout its life-cycle, it is critical to establish from the very beginning the right set of relational norms, such as those of solidarity, flexibility, mutuality, and role integrity.
6. The type of governance mechanism of the E-I relationship (e.g., relational, contractual, etc.) should be adjusted according to changes taking place in both the macro-environment (e.g., political-legal, economic, technological) and micro-environment (e.g., market, industry, competition).
7. To build harmonious E-I relationships and achieve superior performance, it is necessary to acquire (e.g., through careful recruiting) and/or improve (e.g., through rigorous training) essential managerial skills (e.g., cultural sensitivity) and organizational capabilities (e.g., relational learning).
8.Understanding partner differences in terms of behavior, expectations and requirements, translating these differences into behavioral and strategic actions across the company, and making the necessary adaptations to achieve fit with the foreign partner, is a key success factor in the E-I relationship.
9. Both relational and psychic distance in the E-I relationship can be reduced by acquiring familiarity with the foreign partner's country and institutional properties, understanding its working environment and organization, ensuring continuous communication with the partner, and strengthening social bonds with its personnel.
10. The wide geographic separation between members of the E-I relationship necessitates the existence of two-way communication, which should be based on: exchanging frequent, accurate, and timely information, encouraging partners to clearly convey expectations, problems, and complaints, and hiring boundary spanners with good communication skills.
11. The appearance of opportunism, conflict, betrayal, and other negative aspects of the E-I relationship could be avoided or restrained by putting effort into attaining mutually beneficial goals, building appropriate safeguard mechanisms (e.g., conflict resolution), and fostering a constant flow of adequate and clear information.
12. Trust, commitment and cooperation are of paramount importance in order to maintain harmony in the E-I relationship, which can be enhanced by being fair, honest, and benevolent in interactions with the foreign partner, devoting adequate financial, human, and allied resources to the working relationship, and supporting each other in difficult times and emergencies.
13. The satisfaction of the foreign partner in the E-I relationship needs to be assured by: clarifying relational expectations, taking into consideration cultural differences; maximizing relational rewards (e.g., flexibility) and minimizing relational costs (e.g., stress); and improving managerial and organizational resources devoted to the relationship.