

Research on the Import Activities of Firms 1960–2010

Review, Assessment, and Future Directions

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Abstract:

- The article presents the findings of a comprehensive review of 321 import-related articles published in business journals and books during the period 1960–2010.
- Using a content analysis, the articles were assessed on four dimensions referring to the research design, scope of research, research methodology, and key thematic areas addressed.
- The assessment revealed that this body of research has advanced over time from an exploratory and descriptive phase into one that is characterized by greater maturity and sophistication.
- Based on input extracted from the articles reviewed, as well as from a survey conducted among prolific scholars in the field, various theoretical, methodological, and other guidelines for future research are provided.

Keywords: Importing · International business · Literature review

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Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a phenomenal growth in import trade, which has resulted from: The accelerated globalization of the world economy, intensified competition on a global scale, advancements taking place in the transportation, communication, and information technology, the increasing tendency by many manufacturing firms to move their plants to other countries, and the enhanced strategic role that purchasing plays in many organizations (Knudsen and Servais 2007; Swamidass 1993; Trent and Monczka 2005). A sizeable number of companies have acknowledged the crucial role of importing in acquiring products, raw materials, and even services at lower cost, better quality, and greater variety, thus enhancing their market and financial performance (Trent and Monczka 2002, 2003). Hence, at the moment, it is no more a question of whether to source internationally or not, but of how to manage this process effectively and efficiently (Murray 1996).

Notwithstanding its importance at the micro-business level, a number of controversies surround importing at the macro-economic level, namely: (a) the criticism that, unlike exports, imports do not contribute to economic development, despite indications that these can expand market size and demand domestically (Dodzin and Vamvakidis 2004); (b) the fact that setting trade barriers to protect infant industries incurs costs that in many cases are much higher than the benefits derived from this protection (Irwin 1991); (c) the adoption of protectionist or liberalist trade policies by a country may result in the protection or promotion respectively of one sector of the domestic economy at the expense of another (Bhagwati 1994); (d) the value dilemma confronted by many countries, which, in their attempt to import materials and products at lower cost from abroad, may overlook legislation relating to labor rights in the source country (Locke et al. 2007); and (e) the issues of national security involved when buying goods from a specific country, which in some cases are responsible for sacrificing serious benefits for the domestic economy (Moon 2000).

Despite its crucial nature, compared to other streams of international business research, importing has received relatively little theoretical and empirical attention from scholars in the field (Ghymn et al. 1999; Skarmeas and Katsikeas 2001).¹ In addition, the limited literature on the subject has often been described as too fragmented, disjointed, and unprogrammable to yield any clear trends and guidelines (Ghymn and Jaffe 2004; Liang and Parkhe 1997). Although several insightful attempts have been made in the past to review and assess this body of research (e.g., Babbar and Prasad 1998a, b; Liang and Parkhe 1997; Quintens et al. 2006), they have been relatively limited in both scope and scale. For instance, the design, methodological, and thematic characteristics of importing studies have been tangentially tackled, while no analysis has been performed with regard to the evolutionary changes in this line of research.

In light of the above, the purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive review and establish trends in the extant business literature on importing. In particular, it aims to provide answers to the following research questions: (a) What research designs have been adopted by empirical studies in the field? (b) What is the scope of research into importing, in terms of countries, industries, and firms? (c) What specific research methodologies have been adopted? (d) What key thematic areas and issues have been addressed by

researchers in the field? and (e) What future areas of investigation can be proposed with regard to this line of academic inquiry?

This article contributes to the international business discipline in a number of ways: *First*, it compiles and synthesizes existing knowledge on importing, thus providing a useful inventory of knowledge for future scholars to build upon; *second*, it provides a comprehensive analysis of research designs, methodologies, and thematic areas addressed by researchers in the field; *third*, it critically analyzes the trends in the importing literature since the inception of this body of research; *fourth*, it detects various theoretical, methodological, empirical and other gaps that need to be remedied; and *fifth*, it systematically identifies and prioritizes new thematic areas and issues that would guide scholars who intend to work in this field in the future.

The remainder of the manuscript is divided into six sections. The following section offers a brief account of the evolution of importing within the domain of the international business discipline. In the third section, details of the investigation method employed in carrying out this review are presented. The next section comprises the findings of the study with regard to each of the research questions set, namely research design, scope of research, research methodology, and thematic areas. The final two sections include conclusions and recommendations for further research.

The Evolution of Importing Research

Although importing as an economic activity has existed since time immemorial, its theoretical roots (as in the case of exporting) were first addressed by economists in the pioneering work of Smith (1776), and the subsequent theories of comparative advantage by Ricardo (1817), factor endowments by Ohlin (1933) and Heckscher (1950), demand similarity by Linder (1961), and international product life-cycle by Vernon (1966). Although these theories offer useful insights in explaining international trade from a macro-economic perspective, they provide only a limited understanding of the activities taking place at the micro-business level.

In response, O'Connell and Benson (1963) published the first business-oriented article on importing in the early 1960s, focusing on the benefits of the international sourcing of products, in terms of profitability and competitiveness for US firms. They were not only concerned with the purchasing of products and components from abroad, but also of employees and processes. In this decade, less-developed countries began to raise their productivity levels and export labor-intensive manufacture to developed countries. This posed an import threat to manufacturers based in economically advanced countries (Leff 1974). During this period, very few articles on importing were published, mainly focusing on either macro-economic or industrial aspects of importing (e.g., Abdel-Malek 1969).

In the 1970s, there was a setback in the high rates of economic growth experienced since the end of the Second World War, attributable mainly to the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, increases in oil prices, and economic recession in Western economies (Roberts and Fuller 2010). These problems, coupled with the emergence of new multinational firms from Europe, Japan and other Far East countries, increased competitive intensity and forced many firms to consider sourcing from abroad (Hefler 1981; Kotabe

and Omura 1989; Leff 1974). Western companies, especially those located in the US, embarked on restructuring programs, and this led to international production and later to more sophisticated supply chains (Roberts and Fuller 2010). Despite these crucial developments in the international business scene, surprisingly few academic articles were written on importing, mainly examining the product country-of-origin effects on the behavior of purchasing managers and macro-economic dimensions of importing.

The scope of import-related topics investigated by scholars in the field became more diversified in the 1980s, ranging from foreign source/supplier selection criteria and import motives to the problem of gray markets and the behavioral interactions of importers with their export suppliers. This was the era of neo-liberal economic policies, privatization and deregulation in both developed and developing economies of the world. US dominance in world trade was declining, with more and more competitors from other developed and newly-industrialized countries entering the international arena. Multinational corporations from Europe, Japan, and South Korea began to transfer their production facilities to low-cost locations, and US multinationals followed suit (Ghymn 1983; Kotabe and Omura 1989; Roberts and Fuller 2010).

The 1990s witnessed critical changes in the global business environment that favorably affected import operations, arousing the interest of a growing number of business scholars in the field. These changes were: (a) declining trade barriers, increases in regional trade agreements, amendments to international trade infrastructure, and the ending of decades of the Cold War; (b) the intensification of competition, which necessitated access to raw materials, components or finished goods on a global scale; (c) the increasing tendency to view imports as a way to secure cost, quality, technological and other competitive advantages; and (d) the exploitation of both the firm's own and its suppliers' competitive advantages in international markets, along with comparative advantages in different countries (Kotabe and Murray 2004; Monczka and Trent 1991; Murray et al. 1995).

The 2000s have been marked by significant developments in the world market, which have further boosted the interest of researchers in studying importing phenomena, mainly importer-exporter relationships, external-internal determinants of international sourcing behavior, and strategic aspects of purchasing from abroad. These developments have included: (a) the accelerating globalization of markets and continuation of production despite profound financial crises; (b) the facilitation of international sourcing due to advances in information, communication, and transportation technologies; (c) the emergence of a new breed of international competitors from China, India, Brazil, and Russia; and (d) increasing public concern in many countries about the ethical, environmental, and other socially responsible actions of international firms (Roberts and Fuller 2010).

Investigation Method

The review covers all articles published in English in the business literature since the early 1960s, when this body of research was first introduced. For an article to be eligible for inclusion in the review it had to: (a) appear in academic journals or edited books, as opposed to conference proceedings, or commercial magazines; (b) be published in business, rather than economic, journals;² (c) refer to importing from an importer's, rat-

her than an exporter's perspective;³ (d) adopt an international approach, as opposed to a cross-country comparison of sourcing behavior; and (e) focus on business organizations, rather than individual consumers.

To identify the articles pertinent to the study, a combination of various electronic databases (e.g., ABI Global, EBSCO, Science Direct, and Emerald) was used, from where articles were searched for using the following keywords: "Importer", "importing", "international buying", "international purchasing", and "global sourcing". Articles not contained in online databases were manually located, by checking the reference sections of articles and/or physically examining hard copies of relevant academic journals. The outcome of this procedure was to identify 432 articles, of which 120 were excluded due to misleading keywords and tangentially tackling importing issues. The remaining 312 articles were identified from 68 academic journals (see Appendix A), the top five publication outlets being *Industrial Marketing Management* (10.0%), *Journal of International Business Studies* (8.7%), *Journal of World Business* (7.2%), *Journal of Supply Chain Management* (6.5%), and *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management* (5.3%).⁴ Nine additional articles relating to importing were found in edited books focusing on international business, thus increasing the total number of articles reviewed to 321.⁵

All eligible articles selected were subsequently content-analyzed, based on a coding frame that was structured along four dimensions: (a) *research design*, i.e., problem crystallization, topical scope, time dimensions, research environment, communication mode, control of variables, and variable association; (b) *scope of research*, i.e., countries involved, focus region, product emphasis, industries covered, unit of analysis, and company size; (c) *study methodology*, i.e., sampling design, sample size, data collection, response rate, key informant, construct evaluations, and analytical technique; and (d) *thematic areas*, i.e., a list of 42 issues classified into eleven categories, namely, external/internal determinants of importing, factors facilitating/inhibiting importing, company internationalization and importing, foreign source evaluation and selection, strategic aspects of importing, international sourcing strategy, managing import operations, importer-exporter relationships, economic dimensions of importing, special topics in importing, and miscellaneous issues.

The coding process was undertaken by two researchers with extensive experience in the importing field. Prior to commencing coding, they underwent rigorous training based on a coding manual, which explains in detail the specific issues to be addressed. They also ran a coding practice under the supervision of a senior academic specializing in international business to ensure that the whole process was clearly understood. Each coder had to independently content analyze each of the 321 articles and transfer the data extracted to a special coding form. Inter-coder reliability ranged between 87.7 and 100%, and all disputable cases were settled with the intervention of a senior academic supervisor.

Data from the finalized coding forms were entered on the computer for statistical analysis. Due to the nominal nature of the data collected, descriptive statistics were used taking the form of percentage frequencies for each dimension examined. Although most of these dimensions referred to single data, some of them (e.g., focus region, unit of analysis, key informant, construct evaluation, and thematic areas) also comprised multiple data entries. Moreover, while thematic areas were analyzed for all articles selected,

information on research design, scope of research, and study methodology concerned empirical studies only. To show trends in the evolution of the importing literature, articles were categorized in three time periods, namely 1960–1989 (64 articles), 1990–1999 (125 articles), and 2000–2010 (132 articles).⁶

More than three-quarters (75.7%) of the articles reviewed were written by more than one author, while the proportion of solo authorships has been decreasing over time (for a list of the most prolific authors in the field see Appendix B). In the majority (70.4%) of articles, contributors originated from the same country, while multi-country collaborations, though fewer, exhibited a growing trend. More than half (53.9%) of the authors were based in North America, and to a lesser extent in Europe (27.2%) and Asia (7.3%). The discipline of authors in the field could not be identified in about a third (31.8%) of the articles. Of the remainder, the majority (51.4%) belonged to one discipline, while only a small proportion (16.8%) of articles was conducted by authors from more than one discipline. The most common discipline of authors of import-related articles is marketing (reported in 44.5% of the articles) and to a lesser extent (i.e., 20.6%) management (20.6%) and business (12.5%). With regard to their nature, most (71.9%) of the articles were empirical, a quarter (25.5%) purely conceptual, while the remainder (2.6%) were either methodological or review/meta-analysis. Finally, in the majority (71.3%) of cases, import-related articles targeted both academic and practitioner audiences, while those focusing purely on academics accounted for 23.7% of the total.

Research Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study organized along each of the four research questions set. For analytical purposes, apart from the total frequencies, a breakdown analysis by time period is also provided.

Research Design⁷

With regard to the crystallization of the problem, import-related empirical articles were more or less equally divided between those of an exploratory nature and those adopting a formalized approach (see Table 1). However, while the proportion of the former has been decreasing over time, the reverse is true with regard to the latter. Some possible explanations for this trend could be: (a) the increasing requirement by reputable academic journals for more research designs that incorporate testing of hypotheses; (b) the need for a better structuring and definition of the research problem using input from prior research; and (c) the growing accumulation of knowledge over time, making it possible to better define the associations between the various research constructs. All these contribute toward more systematic and rigorous research programs, with beneficial effects on the advancement of the importing field.

About four-fifths (81.6%) of empirical studies used a statistical approach, which is partly explained by the habit of many scholars in the field to adopt a quantitative, rather than a qualitative, approach in their research. This is in line with the tendencies observed in other fields of international business, such as exporting, where quantitative research

Table 1: Research design of import-related articles

Research design ^a	Total	1960–1989	1990–1999	2000–2010
	(<i>n</i> =212) (%)	(<i>n</i> =32) (%)	(<i>n</i> =82) (%)	(<i>n</i> =98) (%)
<i>Problem crystallization</i>				
Exploratory	50.9	65.6	56.1	41.8
Formalized	49.1	34.4	43.9	58.2
<i>Topical scope</i>				
Statistical	81.6	78.1	89.0	76.5
Case	17.5	15.6	11.0	23.5
Other	0.9	6.2	–	–
<i>Time dimension</i>				
Cross-sectional	97.2	100.0	98.8	94.9
Longitudinal	2.8	–	1.2	5.1
<i>Research environment</i>				
Field	99.5	100.0	100.0	99.0
Laboratory	–	–	–	–
Other	0.5	–	–	1.0
<i>Communication mode</i>				
Survey	94.8	93.8	98.8	91.8
Observational	–	–	–	–
Other	5.2	6.2	1.2	8.2
<i>Control of variables</i>				
Ex-post facto	97.2	90.6	98.8	98.0
Experiment	2.4	6.2	1.2	2.0
Other	0.5	3.1	–	–
<i>Variable association</i>				
Descriptive	40.1	62.5	37.8	34.7
Causal	59.4	34.4	62.2	65.3
Other	0.5	3.1	–	–

^aBased on articles with an empirical content only

also had a dominant role (Leonidou and Katsikeas 2010). Only 17.5% of articles were case study-driven, and these were usually associated with studies requiring a deeper understanding of a specific research problem. However, in the last decade, the proportion of case study-driven importing research has increased sharply, reflecting the need to gain a more in-depth insight into issues such as the initiation of international purchasing by SMEs (Agndal 2006), motivation and organization for importing (Quintens et al. 2005), and control mechanisms employed in a global sourcing context (Hartmann et al. 2008).

With the exception of a few empirical articles (e.g., Agndal 2006; Katsikeas et al. 2009; Skarmeas et al. 2002) that adopted a longitudinal approach, the overwhelming majority (97.2%) were cross-sectional in nature. However, importing (as well as the broader international business field) consists of dynamic phenomena and, as such, cross-sectional studies capture only snapshots of it. The limited usage of longitudinal research designs may derive from the practical difficulties involved in carrying out research over long time periods, the high costs incurred in financing such long-term endeavors, and

the problems relating to sample representativeness (caused primarily by a decline in the number of firms taking part in the study at different points in time and/or potential biases created by responses given in earlier time frames).

The overwhelming majority (99.5%) of the empirical articles covered in our review reported studies conducted in a field environment, as opposed to laboratory research. The latter was virtually non-existent, mainly because the unit of analysis was primarily managers who (as opposed to consumers) are more difficult to study in laboratory conditions. This is further supported by the fact that, with the exception of a few articles based on experiments (e.g., Håkansson and Wootz 1975; Insch and Miller 2005; White and Cundiff 1978), the most common method of controlling variables was on an *ex-post facto* basis (found in 97.2% of empirical articles), rather than by experimental designs.

The ruling communication mode was surveys (94.8%), while the remaining few articles (e.g., Arnold 1999; Gelderman and Semeijn 2006; Nellore et al. 2001) usually included data triangulations. While the former was mainly associated with studies of a statistical nature, the latter was adopted by case studies. Data triangulations often included a combination of semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentary material. These were particularly used by studies exploring in-depth “why” and “how” questions of various import-related phenomena, such as the dynamic process associated with global sourcing strategies (Kotabe et al. 2008) and global sourcing in network structures (Trautmann et al. 2009).

With regard to the association of the variables examined, three-fifths (59.4%) of the empirical articles were causal, as opposed to the remainder that were of a descriptive nature. A notable trend here is the decreasing proportion of descriptive studies over time, in favor of studies of a causal nature. This reflects the growing sophistication of more recent importing studies and their need to examine more thoroughly cause-and-effect relationships among research constructs. To some extent, this can be attributed to the availability of more knowledge on importing issues over time, which allowed for a clearer understanding of associations between constructs. Another reason can be ascribed to the increasing familiarity of researchers with statistical methods (e.g., structural equation modeling) that can test causal relationships between variables.

Scope of Research

About three-quarters (72.6%) of empirical articles examined focused on one country only, while a small proportion used two countries or more (see Table 2). The most popular geographic regions investigated were North America (49.1%) (mainly the USA) and Europe (40.6%) (mainly the United Kingdom), probably reflecting the fact that these two regions have traditionally accounted for the highest proportion of the world's import trade. However, in recent decades, other geographic areas that have attracted attention are Asia and Latin America, due to the emergence of important markets in these regions, such as China, India, and Brazil. With regard to these emerging markets, the thrust of research was particularly on exporter-importer behavioral interactions (e.g., Karande et al. 2008; Labahn and Harich 1997) and the evaluation of international sources and suppliers (e.g., Katsikeas et al. 1997; Yavas et al. 1987). Notably, our analysis revealed a high correlation between the author's location and the geographic focus of the study conducted, which

Table 2: Scope of research in import-related articles

Scope of research ^a	Total (<i>n</i> =212) (%)	1960–1989 (<i>n</i> =32) (%)	1990–1999 (<i>n</i> =82) (%)	2000–2010 (<i>n</i> =98) (%)
<i>Countries involved</i>				
One	72.6	65.6	86.6	63.3
Two	15.1	21.9	9.8	17.3
Three or more	9.0	12.5	3.7	12.2
Not available	3.3	–	–	7.1
<i>Focus region</i>				
North America	49.1	40.6	52.4	49.0
Europe	40.6	46.9	28.0	49.0
Asia	24.1	25.0	15.9	30.6
Africa	0.9	–	1.2	1.0
Australia	6.6	–	4.9	10.2
Latin America	4.7	–	2.4	8.2
Not available	0.9	–	1.2	1.0
<i>Product emphasis</i>				
Consumer	15.1	28.1	12.2	13.3
Industrial	32.1	34.4	28.0	34.7
Consumer and industrial	24.5	12.5	24.4	28.6
Services	2.4	–	3.7	2.0
Not available	25.9	25.0	31.7	21.4
<i>Industries covered</i>				
Single	17.9	12.5	13.4	23.5
Multiple	59.0	59.4	64.6	54.1
Not available	23.1	28.1	22.0	22.4
<i>Unit of analysis</i>				
Importer	61.3	62.5	64.6	58.2
Import venture	19.8	15.6	25.6	16.3
Exporter-importer dyad	9.0	9.4	3.7	13.3
Other	14.6	6.3	13.4	18.4
Not available	1.4	6.3	–	1.0
<i>Company size</i>				
Small	9.9	3.1	7.3	14.3
Medium	12.3	9.4	8.5	16.3
Large	35.4	31.3	34.1	37.8
Not available	59.0	68.8	61.0	54.1

^aBased on articles with an empirical content only

implies that the choice of the focal country may in certain cases be for reasons of convenience, rather than being based on robust selection criteria.

A quarter (24.5%) of empirical articles focused on both consumer and industrial goods, another 32.1% examined exclusively industrial goods, and 15.1% concentrated on consumer products only. The relatively higher emphasis on industrial goods to some extent reflects the structure of the import trade of developed countries, which, as men-

tioned earlier, have been the focus of the overwhelming majority of researchers in the field. The trend in the majority (59.0%) of empirical articles was to investigate multiple industries, although in the last decade there has been a sharp decrease in favor of single-industry studies. This may be related to the need to control for specific industry effects on hypothesized associations between the research constructs examined.

More than three-fifths (61.3%) of the articles had as their unit of analysis the importing firm, while another fifth (19.8%) dealt with specific import ventures (i.e., import activities with a specific foreign supplier). The choice of the latter came mainly as a response to the criticisms made when doing research at the company level, because this often leads to mixing up a variety (and sometimes diametrically opposite) importing situations (Katsikeas et al. 2000). The exporter-importer dyad was the focus of less than a tenth of studies, although this was more prevalent in the most recent studies (e.g., Andersen et al. 2009; Lye and Hamilton 2001; Styles et al. 2008).

Information on the size of firms participating in import studies was disclosed by only two-fifths (41.0%) of the empirical articles reviewed, with most focusing on large-sized firms because of the greater likelihood of them engaging in global sourcing activities than their smaller counterparts. Larger firms, because they have more resources and can cope better with import barriers, are more likely to have a higher import performance, compared to smaller units (Leonidou 1999; Scully and Fawcett 1994). Small and medium-sized firms were the object of studies (e.g., Agndal 2006; Holmlund et al. 2007; Overby and Servais 2005; Quintens et al. 2005) viewing importing mainly as a mode of company internationalization, investigating motivations for and drivers of importing, as well as examining the problems/barriers encountered in purchasing goods from abroad.

Research Methodology

With regard to sampling design, more than a quarter (28.3%) of the empirical articles reported that they covered the total population (see Table 3). Of the remainder drawing a sample from a population, most employed probabilistic methods which have shown a growing tendency to be used over time. This has helped to improve the representativeness of the samples obtained in importing research, as well as to make more objective assessments of the accuracy of study results. The employment of non-probability samples was found in only 19.3% of the articles, and was more evident in research designs using the case study approach, as in the case of Agndal (2006), Quintens et al. (2005), and Hartmann et al. (2008).

The principal data collection method was through mail (58.0% of articles), which was mainly used in studies where respondents were geographically dispersed, as well as in studies with a large sample size. Personal interviews were employed to a lesser extent (29.2% of articles), and were mainly associated with case studies, data triangulations, and studies conducted in certain countries (e.g., China), where mail may not be a reliable means of gathering data. Other data collection methods, such as telephone, drop-in questionnaire, and electronic surveys, were rarely employed. In recent decades, there has been an increase in electronic data collection, mainly because of its low cost, quick response, and convenience.

Table 3: Study methodology adopted in import-related articles

Study methodology ^a	Total (<i>n</i> =212) (%)	1960–1989 (<i>n</i> =32) (%)	1990–1999 (<i>n</i> =82) (%)	2000–2010 (<i>n</i> =98) (%)
<i>Sampling design</i>				
Whole population	28.3	21.9	41.5	19.4
Probability	26.4	12.5	22.0	34.7
Non-probability	19.3	21.9	12.2	24.5
Not available	25.9	43.8	24.4	21.4
<i>Sample size</i>				
99 or less	39.6	59.4	37.8	34.7
100–249	47.6	28.1	51.2	51.0
250–499	8.5	9.4	7.3	9.2
500 or more	2.8	3.1	1.2	4.1
Not available	1.4	–	2.4	1.0
<i>Data collection</i>				
Mail	58.0	28.1	70.7	57.1
Telephone	0.9	3.1	1.2	–
Personal	29.2	53.1	24.4	25.5
Drop-in questionnaire	1.4	–	2.4	1.0
Electronic	2.8	–	–	6.1
Other	3.3	3.1	1.2	5.1
Not available	4.2	12.5	–	5.1
<i>Response rate</i>				
19% or less	15.1	–	19.5	16.3
20–29%	16.0	15.6	20.7	12.2
30–39%	14.2	–	12.2	20.4
40% or more	26.4	31.2	30.5	21.4
Not available	28.3	53.1	17.1	29.6
<i>Key informant</i>				
CEO/President	17.5	15.6	17.1	18.4
Import/international purchasing executive	62.7	43.8	67.1	65.3
Export executive	6.6	6.3	4.9	8.2
Other	17.0	15.6	13.4	20.4
Not available	15.6	25.0	9.8	17.3
<i>Construct evaluation</i>				
Cronbach's alpha	30.2	–	30.5	39.8
Composite reliability	9.0	–	3.7	16.3
Validity	30.7	3.1	30.5	39.8
Common method bias	4.2	–	1.2	8.2
Not available	59.4	90.6	62.2	46.9

Table 3: (continued)

Study methodology ^a	Total (<i>n</i> =212) (%)	1960–1989 (<i>n</i> =32) (%)	1990–1999 (<i>n</i> =82) (%)	2000–2010 (<i>n</i> =98) (%)
<i>Analytical technique</i>				
Descriptive	33.0	56.2	29.3	28.6
Uni-/Bivariate	23.1	31.2	28.0	16.3
Multivariate	22.2	9.4	30.5	19.4
Modeling	21.7	3.1	12.2	35.7

^aBased on articles with empirical content only

More than half (59.0%) of the empirical articles had a sample exceeding 100 units, with a slight increase in sample sizes seen over time. Although more than a quarter (28.3%) of the articles did not disclose their response rates, in the majority of cases these were reported to have exceeded the 20% mark. Most of these studies checked for non-response bias, adopting mainly Armstrong and Overton's (1977) test. The importer/international executive officer was the most common key informant in this line of research (reported in 62.7% of empirical articles). This is because most of the importing studies were conducted in larger organizations, where importing tasks are usually performed by specialized personnel. Other key informants were the CEO/president (17.5%) and export manager (6.6%).

Less than a third of the articles measured the reliability and validity of the constructs employed, while the assessment of common method bias was reported in only a few cases (e.g., Barnes et al. 2010; Bianchi and Saleh 2010; Griffith et al. 2010), especially in the last decade. There has been a sharp increase in studies over time performing construct evaluation. In general, the evaluation of research constructs has been more noticeable in articles published recently, which can be attributed to the widespread use of structural equation modeling for data analysis purposes, as well as the stringent methodological requirements imposed by many publication outlets.

Empirical studies on importing employed a variety of statistical tools to analyze their data. Descriptive (e.g., frequencies) and uni/bivariate (e.g., one-way ANOVA, correlations) methods of analysis were the most commonly used, especially by articles conducted during the early phases of importing research. Multivariate statistics were more prevalent during the period 1990–1999, usually taking the form of discriminant analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and multiple regression analysis. The use of structural equation modeling was more common in the last decade, following a similar trend in other streams of international business, such as exporting (Leonidou and Katsikeas 2010).

Thematic Areas

In general, the area which stimulated most research interest was importer-exporter relationships, followed by external/internal determinants of importing, and strategic aspects of importing (see Table 4). Special topics in importing, factors facilitating/inhibiting importing, international sourcing strategy, and foreign source evaluation/selection were relatively mildly examined. Finally, there was much less focus on topics relating to the

Table 4: Thematic areas addressed in import-related articles

Thematic areas	Total (n=321) (%)	1960–1989 (n=64) (%)	1990–1999 (n=125) (%)	2000–2010 (n=132) (%)
<i>External/internal determinants of importing</i>	23.4	17.2	21.6	28.0
Environmental effects on importing	15.6	15.6	15.2	15.9
Industry effects on importing	2.8	1.6	1.6	4.5
Organizational effects on importing	11.2	3.1	8.0	18.2
Managerial effects on importing	1.9	1.6	3.2	0.8
<i>Factors facilitating/inhibiting importing</i>	15.0	7.8	23.2	10.6
Attitudes toward importing	0.6	3.1	–	–
Import motives/stimuli	9.0	6.3	14.4	5.3
Import barriers/problems	9.0	1.6	15.2	6.8
<i>Company internationalization and importing</i>	8.4	3.1	10.4	9.1
Importing and internationalization process	3.7	1.6	4.0	4.5
Stages of import development	5.9	1.6	8.0	6.1
<i>Foreign source evaluation and selection</i>	12.5	14.1	16.8	7.6
Import information/research	2.5	3.1	4.8	–
Evaluation of foreign source attractiveness	10.6	12.5	13.6	6.8
Foreign sourcing expansion mode	0.3	–	–	0.8
<i>Strategic aspects of importing</i>	19.6	3.1	20.8	26.5
International purchasing strategic alliances	2.2	–	2.4	3.0
Sourcing resources/capabilities/competitive advantages	5.6	–	4.0	9.8
Standardized versus adapted foreign sourcing	0.6	–	0.8	0.8
Governance mechanisms in importing	5.3	–	5.6	7.6
Performance implications of import strategy	11.5	3.1	13.6	13.6
<i>International sourcing strategy</i>	14.3	4.7	19.2	14.4
Import products/services	7.2	3.1	10.4	6.1
Import pricing/financing	4.0	3.1	4.8	3.8
Import distribution	1.9	–	1.6	3.0
Import logistics	5.3	–	8.8	4.5
Import promotion	0.6	–	0.8	0.8

Table 4: (continued)

Thematic areas	Total (<i>n</i> =321) (%)	1960–1989 (<i>n</i> =64) (%)	1990–1999 (<i>n</i> =125) (%)	2000–2010 (<i>n</i> =132) (%)
<i>Managing import operations</i>	9.0	3.1	8.8	12.1
<i>Planning for imports</i>	0.9	–	1.6	0.8
Organizing for imports	5.3	1.6	4.0	8.3
Implementation of imports	4.0	1.6	4.8	4.5
Controlling for imports	0.6	–	0.8	0.8
<i>Importer-exporter relationships</i>	30.5	21.9	28.8	36.4
Partner selection criteria	10.3	9.4	14.4	6.8
Relationship initiation/development	5.3	3.1	5.6	6.1
Behavioral interactions	19.6	12.5	13.6	28.8
Relationship performance	3.1	–	0.8	6.8
<i>Economic dimensions of importing</i>	6.2	25.0	1.6	1.5
Import trade analysis/performance	1.6	7.8	–	–
Imports as an indicator of foreign market potential	0.9	4.7	–	–
Import trade liberalization/protectionism	1.9	7.8	–	0.8
Foreign exchange rate effects on imports	0.6	3.1	–	–
Imports and economic development/welfare	0.9	1.6	0.8	0.8
Other economic aspects of importing	0.3	–	0.8	–
<i>Special topics in importing</i>	16.8	28.1	20.0	8.3
Parallel imports	3.7	4.7	6.4	0.8
Country of origin	12.1	23.4	13.6	5.3
E-Buying	0.9	–	–	2.3
<i>Miscellaneous issues</i>	6.9	–	8.8	8.3
Sourcing of services	1.6	–	1.6	2.3
Negotiation process	1.6	–	2.4	1.5
Organizational learning	1.6	–	1.6	2.3

management of import operations, company internationalization and importing, economic dimensions of importing, and other miscellaneous issues.

External and internal determinants of importing is one of the areas which stimulated interest in research to a great extent. Determinants include environmental, industrial, organizational and managerial effects on import behavior. In general, environmental factors encompass uncertainty, culture, environmental volatility, psychic distance, and other market characteristics (Carter and Narasimhan 1990; Katsikeas et al. 2009; Murray and Kotabe 1999; Onkvisit and Shaw 1988; Skarmeas et al. 2008). Organizational factors include firm size, product type, age of the firm, experience in importing and import intensity (Deng and Wortzel 1995; Karande et al. 2008; Katsikeas et al. 1997; Knudsen and Servais 2007; Leonidou 1999; Yavas et al. 1987). Managerial effects attracted very

little research attention throughout the whole period examined, and concentrated mainly on previous foreign country exposure, ethnocentric and cultural background, and country-of-origin perceptions (Andersen and Chao 2003; Liang 1995; Thorelli and Glowacka 1995), but extant research is still lacking a clear understanding of the distinguishing objective and subjective traits that characterize the profile of the import manager.

Factors facilitating/inhibiting importing were classified in three broad areas: Attitudes toward importing, import motives/stimuli, and import barriers/problems. Attitudes toward importing were studied to a very limited extent, consistent with sporadic research on managerial effects on importing mentioned earlier (e.g., Andersen and Chao 2003; Hallén 1982). Motives/stimuli to import accounted for a significant proportion of research and the same is also true for barriers/problems relating to the initiation and development of the importing process, although their popularity has recently diminished. Indeed, these two topics were very popular during the 1990s, when scholars tried to better understand why some firms engage in import operations while others refrain from doing so. Some of the import stimuli examined included, *inter alia*, cost pressures, lack of domestic suppliers, unsolicited offers, new/superior products, an urge to keep up with technological advances, and competitors gaining an advantage from foreign sourcing (Alguire et al. 1994; Birou and Fawcett 1993; Cavusgil et al. 1993; Hallén 1982; Katsikeas 1998; Katsikeas and Al-Khalifa 1993; Katsikeas and Kaleka 1999; Leonidou 1997, 1998; Liang and Parkhe 1997; Quintens et al. 2005). On the other hand, import barriers originated mainly from external (e.g., unfavorable exchange rates, political/legal factors, nationalistic attitudes) or internal (e.g., lack of logistics support, lack of dependable suppliers, untrained import personnel) forces (Fawcett and Scully 1998; Frear et al. 1992; Ghymn et al. 1993; Katsikeas and Dalgic 1995; Leonidou 1999; Min and Galle 1991; Pfohl and Large 1993).

Company internationalization and importing encompasses both importing as a mode of internationalization and import development stages of the firm. Although exporting has been viewed as the first stage of firm internationalization (Johanson and Vahlne 1977; Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul 1975), studies conducted in the last two decades indicate that importing might also be a mode of entering international markets and facilitate exporting as a result of contacts created and knowledge and experience gained in foreign markets (Holmlund et al. 2007; Karlsen et al. 2003; Welch and Luostarinen 1995). On the other hand, import development stages are conceived as a continuum incorporating domestic sourcing, importing as a response to environmental forces, importing as a strategic task, and integration and coordination of global sourcing activities (Rajagopal and Bernard 1993; Swamidass 1993; Trent and Monczka 2002). These stages are characterized by an interchange of increasing resource commitments and the experience of growing complexities by the firm (Katsikeas et al. 2000; Katsikeas and Dalgic 1995; Monczka and Trent 1991; Samli et al. 1998; Trent and Monczka 2002). In most cases, research on import internationalization was influenced by theories explaining the export development process, although there was no clear conclusion as to whether this is the result of a stage-by-stage approach, internalization of the firm's activities, or any other factor.

Foreign source evaluation and selection comprises analytical areas of import information and research, and evaluation of foreign source attractiveness. Import information and research has attracted little research attention, with the emphasis being primarily on the extent to which the information search process is organized (Liang and Stump 1996), as

well as on the effect of systematic information gathering on selecting reliable overseas suppliers (Fawcett and Scully 1998; Nijssen et al. 1999). In contrast, evaluation of foreign source attractiveness, despite its diminishing popularity, has been examined by a significant proportion (10.6%) of the studies reviewed. In fact, since the mid-1970s, a number of scholars have extended the application of organizational buying behavior to cover international purchasing issues, especially after realizing that the importer plays a key role in the international trade equation (Leonidou 1989a). Such studies usually focus on a set of criteria required to evaluate foreign source selection, such as price/cost, technological advancement, brand equity, delivery efficiency, product quality, reliability/durability, and technical assessment (Andersen and Chao 2003; Chang and Kim 1995; Frear et al. 1995; Ghymn and Jacobs 1993; Leonidou 1988; Lye and Hamilton 2000; White 1979).

A substantial amount of research was channeled into *strategic aspects of importing*, where there seems to be a growing research interest, irrespective of time. Most studies try to shed light on the performance implications of import strategy (Bozarth et al. 1998; Chrysochoidis and Theoharakis 2004; Kotabe et al. 1998; Mol et al. 2005; Murray et al. 1995; Petersen et al. 2000; Skarmas and Katsikeas 2001), since this reflects the firm's success or failure in international purchasing activities. International purchasing and strategic alliances, as well as standardized versus adapted foreign sourcing, drew much less interest. Governance mechanisms focused on the decision on internal *versus* external and intra-firm *versus* inter-firm sourcing, given the transaction costs involved (e.g., Buvik and Andersen 2002; Enderwick 2009; Kotabe et al. 1998; Murray and Kotabe 1999). Following its wide acceptance in the domestic organizational literature, studies have been increasingly conducted on the applications of resource-advantage theory in the importing context, with particular emphasis on the association between resources and/or capabilities, strategy, competitive advantage, and performance (Griffith et al. 2010; Ha-Brookshire and Dyer 2009; Yalcinkaya et al. 2007).

International sourcing strategy embraces the types and characteristics of products to be imported (Chassin and Jaffe 1987; Cho and Kang 2001; Min and Galle 1991), asset specificity issues relating with global sourcing (Kotabe 1993; Kotabe and Murray 2004; Kotabe et al. 1998), costing/pricing of import operations (usually examined in conjunction with foreign exchange rate fluctuations) (Naeslund 1981; Vickery et al. 1993), delivery of products from abroad to the home market (Das and Handfield 1997; Levy 1995; Murphy and Daley 1994; Zeng 2003), and promoting products to the importing country (Bradley 2001; Jones et al. 1992). Of these, the most frequently examined were issues pertaining to products/services and logistics, while those examined least referred to distribution and promotion. The latter can be explained by the fact that the focus of interest by importing scholars was mainly on the issues involved up to the point at which the importer takes the title of the products purchased, rather than on the marketing activities involved afterwards.

Managerial facets of import operations are expressed in the form of planning, organizing, implementing, and controlling activities associated with importing. This stream of research has drawn relatively less, although rising, attention from scholars, especially those coming from the management discipline. Import planning dealt mainly with the content of a global sourcing plan (Cavusgil et al. 1993) and the extent to which global sourcing is planned (Samli et al. 1998). Organizing for imports usually referred to

the centralization *versus* decentralization of the international purchasing activity and the management of commodity teams (Arnold 1999; Faes et al. 2000; Giunipero and Monczka 1997; Hult and Nichols 1999; Trautmann et al. 2009). Implementing import operations mainly involved carrying out import-related processes within the firm (Hausman et al. 2010; Hult 1997). Finally, the controlling of imports was examined by one study only, namely that of Hartmann et al. (2008), which discussed different types of control mechanisms to implement global sourcing.

Relationships between importers and exporters were the dominant field of research within importing throughout the whole investigation period, with the thrust of research centering on behavioral interactions between international buyers and sellers. Borrowing from the literature in B2B relationships in general marketing, the focus was on cause-and-effect linkages between such constructs as trust, power, dependence, communication, and conflict (Andersen et al. 2009; Barnes et al. 2010; Bianchi and Saleh 2010; Johnson et al. 1993; Katsikeas et al. 2000, 2009; Labahn and Harich 1997; Lee et al. 2004; Leonidou 1989b; Nevins and Money 2008; Rosson and Ford 1982; Skarmeas 2006; Skarmeas et al. 2008; Skarmeas and Robson 2008; Styles et al. 2008). Relationship performance is the outcome of the interactions between these constructs, and, despite its importance, this was studied in only a few articles (Labahn and Harich 1997; Lee et al. 2007; Lye and Hamilton 2000; Nevins and Money 2008; Skarmeas et al. 2002; Styles et al. 2008). The second most popular area refers to the criteria for selecting foreign suppliers, such as the partner selection criteria, like attractive prices, advanced technology, product quality, on-time delivery, promotional support, credit terms, working relationship quality, and responsiveness to customer needs (Bradley 2001; Cavusgil and Yavas 1987; Gudum and Kavas 1997; Håkansson and Wootz 1975; Katsikeas and Leonidou 1996; Min 1994; Piercy et al. 1997; Wortzel et al. 1988). This came as a natural extension of the developments that have taken place in the domestic industrial buying field, which provided an impetus to importing researchers to realize that what matters most is the evaluation of the foreign supplier *per se* rather than the sourcing country as a whole. In the relationship initiation and development area, some of the issues investigated were the initial method of contacting foreign suppliers and the role of increasing commitments in progressing to more advanced import stages (Ghauri et al. 2008; Katsikeas and Al-Khalifa 1993; Spekman 1991).

Studies on *economic dimensions of importing* took place mainly during the first time period under investigation, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when a number of scholars questioned the role of imports at a country level. Relevant studies reflected this by concentrating on the following issues: (a) the trade performance of the USA for strategically important goods (like petroleum and high-technology products) *vis-à-vis* competing nations (Green and Lutz 1980; Moore 1983; McKinney and Rowley 1985); (b) the impact of import liberalization *versus* protectionism within the context of free trade areas and agreements removing trade barriers on import behavior (e.g., Baggs and Brander 2006; Feketekuty 1973); (c) treating imports as an indicator of foreign market potential in certain countries (Green and Larsen 1986); (d) foreign exchange rate effects on import development (Burtle 1974); and (e) the role played by imports on a country's economic development and welfare (Mullen 1993).

Special topics in importing involve three main areas of inquiry: Parallel importing, country of origin, and e-buying. Parallel importing was investigated by a diminishing number of studies over time, which concentrated on the reasons for and strategic reactions to gray imports (e.g., Cavusgil and Sikora 1988; Duhan and Sheffet 1988), as well as on their impact on the product's brand image (Bucklin 1993; Eagle et al. 2003). Country-of-origin studies highlighted the impact of 'made in' labeling in making sourcing decisions, especially as regards the selection of foreign countries from which to import (Andersen and Chao 2003; Dzever and Quester 1999; Quester et al. 2000; White 1979). E-buying emerged as a new mode of carrying out business in B2B ventures, capitalizing on its simple and low-cost approach to international buying processes (Globerman 2003).

Finally, *miscellaneous issues* include: (a) the global sourcing of services (Kotabe and Murray 2004; Murray et al. 2009); (b) face-to-face negotiation processes (Kale and Barnes 1992; Min and Galle 1993; Sharland 2001); (c) organizational learning as a predictor of customer satisfaction, relationship commitment, purchasing process cycle time, and sustainable competitive advantage in a global sourcing context (Hult 1998, 2002); (d) legal/criminal issues involved in importing, such as smuggling (Gillespie and McBride 1996); (e) the role of information technology in making importing more effective and efficient (Hausman et al. 2010); and (f) environmental regulations pertaining to sourcing from abroad (Dobilas and McPherson 1997). However, despite their importance, none of these topics attracted adequate attention from scholars in the field.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A central conclusion derived from the previous analysis is that import research has experienced a major transformation over time, which has gradually pushed it from an exploratory and descriptive phase into one characterized by greater maturity and sophistication. However, as opposed to the well advanced field of exporting (Leonidou and Katsikeas 2010; Leonidou et al. 2010), the number of import-related publications was much less and had a relatively lower impact.⁸To some extent, this can be attributed to the fact that traditionally public policymakers have looked more favorably at the exporting, rather than the importing, side of the international trade equation, for reasons relating to the preservation of their foreign exchange reserves, offering of more job opportunities, and securing of fast rates of domestic economic growth.

Our study has traced a tendency for a more empirical type of research to investigate importing issues, appealing to both academics and practitioners. However, the heavy reliance on empirical research has somewhat overshadowed the building of theory on the subject, to the extent that this body of research could be described as partially atheoretic. Hence, more theoretically-anchored research designs is needed, using paradigms developed in other areas of business research, such as industrial organization theory, agency theory, and the resource-based view. Also, the fact that research on importing in general has been relatively low in terms of citation impact should alert researchers in the field to take such measures as: (a) choosing research topics at the cutting edge of importing with the potential of making a strong contribution to the international business literature; and

(b) publishing their manuscripts in mainstream or specialized publication outlets with a high impact factor.

Studies on the subject are becoming increasingly more formalized and causal, which indicates a growing sophistication in research designs. Although a recent increase in the share of case studies is apparent, studies using a statistical approach still have a dominant role. However, the use of case studies could prove beneficial by bringing an in-depth understanding of issues in the field, while at the same time helping toward advancing theory. Moreover, the fact that empirical studies were principally cross-sectional in nature, offers only a snapshot picture of import-related phenomena that are highly dynamic and can be captured only with the employment of longitudinal studies.

There is also an increasing emphasis on geographic areas with a high involvement in international trade, multiple industries, and firms of large size. However, focus regions should not only have an American or European emphasis, but be extended to cover other important emerging countries, such as Russia, India, and China. The increasing trend toward multi-country studies identified in this research should be continued in future, since it will enhance the external validity of findings. The importing of services also warrants attention, since its under-researched status contradicts recent trends in the global market toward more service-oriented economies. Further, the limited emphasis placed by importing studies on smaller firms should be reconsidered, in light of the facilitating role that the internet can play nowadays for these firms to perform cross-border sourcing activities.

The study revealed a growing use of probability sampling designs, larger sample sizes, higher response rates, better construct evaluation, and more sophisticated analytical methods. All these indicate a tendency toward more robust research methodologies, which have to be further enhanced in future. However, particular attention should be paid to controlling for bias relating to non-respondents, key informants, and self-reporting. Better construct definition and operationalization, as well as the use of the most appropriate tools for statistical analysis, are also important.

Finally, the study indicated that the topical areas covered by research into exporting are quite diverse, tackling numerous topics, with some of them experiencing an upward and others a downward trend over time. Notably, the bulk of the research activity over the fifty-year period examined centered on three major areas: (a) *importer-exporter relationships*, reflecting the increasing importance attached by import managers to behavioral aspects of their working relationship with foreign suppliers in achieving business success; (b) *external/internal determinants of importing*, stressing the instrumental role of both firm-specific and environmental factors in shaping import behavior; and (c) *strategic aspects of importing*, emphasizing the role of various strategic factors, including those comprising the elements of the sourcing strategy, in achieving superior performance in foreign markets.

Future Research Avenues

Although extant importing research has improved our knowledge on many different aspects of sourcing from abroad, there is still room to expand research activity into new

Table 5: Future directions of research into importing

Thematic area	Rank order ^a	Research topics ^b
External/internal determinants of importing	10	<p>Cultural effects (e.g., distance, values, traits) on import-related phenomena</p> <p>Impact of foreign source structures and/or industrial networking on import strategy/performance</p> <p>Managerial differences between importers and non-importers</p> <p>Organizational effects (e.g., firm size, product type, level of import intermediation) on import behavior</p> <p>Objective/subjective characteristics of importers</p> <p>Historical and other ties between countries as a driver for importing</p>
Factors facilitating/inhibiting importing	7	<p>Role of managerial attitudes on initiation, development and ending importing operations</p> <p>Inclusion of contextual variables (e.g., location, culture, time) into import research settings</p> <p>Stimuli/barriers to importing in conjunction with import development, sourcing strategy and performance</p> <p>Managerial attitudes (e.g., ethnocentricity, risk-aversion, xenophobia) toward imports</p>
Company internationalization and importing	4	<p>Relationship between importing and other modes of company internationalization</p> <p>Asset specificity, opportunism, and uncertainty as predictors of different purchasing modes</p> <p>Initiation aspects of import operations</p> <p>Selection of specific purchasing modes</p> <p>Stages of the import development process</p> <p>Role of organizational characteristics and managerial traits on importing</p>
Foreign source evaluation and selection	6	<p>Sources and types of information required in import operations</p> <p>Design of information systems for supplier selection and monitoring post-purchase behavior</p> <p>Methods of import information acquisition</p> <p>Information use and dissemination within the importing organization</p> <p>Effect of bounded rationality on foreign source selection process and judgmental heuristics employed</p> <p>Concentration versus spreading in foreign sourcing</p> <p>Criteria for identifying foreign source countries</p>
Strategic aspects of importing	1	<p>Standardization versus adaptation of import strategy</p> <p>Link between organizational resources/capabilities and unique advantages sought by the importing firm</p> <p>Organizational skills needed to transfer knowledge among the units of globally-sourcing firms</p> <p>Role of import-related strategic alliances in enhancing inter-organizational performance</p> <p>Adaptive capabilities required by importers to fit to different institutional contexts</p> <p>The effect of strategic alliances on the bargaining power of suppliers</p> <p>Operation and organization of strategic alliances in importing</p> <p>Type of complementary capabilities between importers and exporters</p> <p>Motivation to build strategic alliances in importing</p>

Table 5: (continued)

Thematic area	Rank order ^a	Research topics ^b
International sourcing strategy	5	<p>Criteria for selecting specific product lines, products, and brands to import</p> <p>Marketing practices of importers in the downward end of the market</p> <p>Specific factors taken into consideration when determining purchasing prices</p> <p>Type of promotion required to support import activity</p> <p>Decision mechanisms for choosing among alternative sourcing options</p>
Management of import operations	2	<p>Effect of different organizational structures (centralized, decentralized, hybrid) on import performance</p> <p>Control mechanisms of import operations</p> <p>Efficiency and effectiveness of control mechanisms and incentive schemes in different import modes</p> <p>Extent to which importing is perceived as a strategic task</p> <p>Organizational level at which importing activity is planned</p> <p>Mechanism of setting import objectives</p>
Importer-exporter relationships	3	<p>Examination of importer-exporter relationships in different economic, cultural, and industrial settings</p> <p>Relationship initiation and development processes in different regional, cultural, and temporal contexts</p> <p>Financial performance outcomes of the exporter-importer working relationship</p> <p>Identification of antecedents and moderators of importer-exporter relationships</p> <p>Implications of switching costs in the relationship with the foreign supplier</p> <p>Providing incentives/safeguards for making specific investments in working with the foreign supplier</p>
Economic dimensions of importing	9	<p>Effect of importing on the economic growth, export development, and foreign exchange rates</p> <p>Influence of the market structure on the import strategy and performance</p> <p>Impact of importing on the cost structure of firms</p> <p>Characteristics of imports of developing countries</p> <p>Social costs incurred by importing to various stakeholder groups (e.g., employees, government, society)</p> <p>Long-term effects of importing on industry performance</p>
Special topics in importing	11	<p>Motivations to engage in e-buying-based international sourcing</p> <p>Role of internet as a facilitator of imports by smaller-sized firms</p> <p>Managerial profiles in using the internet as a tool for e-buying</p> <p>Possible re-intermediation processes by firms to fill the gaps within the industry</p> <p>Use of internet to convert final consumers into parallel importers</p> <p>Ways in which importing firms position themselves against final consumers</p> <p>Idiosyncrasies of the internet as a new institutional context</p>

Table 5: (continued)

Thematic area	Rank order ^a	Research topics ^b
Miscellaneous issues	8	International sourcing of services Organizational learning processes between partners, alliance members, headquarters and subsidiaries Corporate social responsibility dimensions of global sourcing Interaction between a salesperson and a customer within the international exchange process Exploring the role of e-business as a new mode of import operations

^aThe rank orders of thematic groups, as well as that of specific issues within each group, were extracted from a survey among the top 50 contributors in the importing field

^bIndividual topics within each thematic group are presented in descending order of importance, as this was revealed from the survey among the top 50 contributors to importing research

areas. Table 5 presents avenues for future research in the importing field. These were systematically derived from the content of the sections referring to the future research directions of the articles reviewed. In fact, the bulk of the input originated mainly from articles published in the last decade, although older articles were also used in the case of useful, but unexplored, research recommendations made by scholars in the field. Both thematic groups and the specific research issues identified within each group, were subsequently verified, augmented, and prioritized with input received from a survey conducted among the top 50 contributors in the importing field (as these were revealed in our study).⁹

Although *external/internal determinants of importing* have attracted a great deal of attention in the past, closer examination is required of cultural effects (e.g., cultural distance between importers and exporters, importer's cultural values, and idiosyncratic cultural elements like '*guanxi*') on import-related phenomena. Industry effects on importing issues should also be examined, particularly the impact of foreign source market structures and/or industry networking on import strategy and performance. In the case of internal determinants, some areas that require further attention are the objective/subjective characteristics of importers, managerial differences between importers and non-importers, and the effect of key organizational factors (e.g., firm size, product type, level of import intermediation) on import behavior. There is also a need to explore further the historical and other ties that exist between countries as a potential driver for importing.

With regard to *facilitators and inhibitors*, although many studies have examined consumer behavior issues relating to foreign goods, research is lacking on managerial attitudes (e.g., ethnocentricity, risk-aversion, xenophobia) toward initiating, developing, and ceasing import activities. Stimuli and barriers to importing should also be examined in conjunction with other important parameters, such as level of import development, sourcing strategy elements, and import performance. The inclusion of contextual variables, like location, culture, and time, into research settings could also throw light on the determinants of motivations for and barriers to importing.

Research efforts should also be intensified to shed more light on *company internationalization and importing*, particularly focusing on the initiation aspects of import operations, the stages of the import development process, and the relationship between importing and other modes of company internationalization. A useful avenue of research would be the selection of specific purchasing modes (e.g., indirect *versus* direct import-

ing) and tracking of changes over time. Future research could also explore whether these modes are influenced by asset specificity, opportunism, or uncertainty. The association between import internationalization and organizational characteristics (e.g., firm size, company experience, corporate governance) and/or managerial traits (e.g., cosmopolitan outlook, innovativeness, extroversion) could also be studied.

In the case of *foreign source evaluation and selection*, more emphasis should be given to import information/research aspects, such as: Sources and types of information required in importing, methods of import information acquisition, and the way information is used and disseminated within the importing organization. In evaluating foreign source attractiveness, it is important to throw light on several under-researched topics, as in the case of designing special information systems for supplier selection purposes and/or monitoring post-purchase behavior. Future research can also explore how the decision-maker's bounded rationality affects import source selection and the way judgmental heuristics are used in such decision. It would also be interesting to examine further the foreign sourcing expansion mode, especially the issue of source concentration versus spreading. Some light also needs to be shed on the criteria employed by firms for identifying foreign supply countries.

Although *strategic aspects of importing* was one of the most well-investigated topics in the import literature, many important issues still remain intact. For instance, more research is required on the standardization versus adaptation of import strategy from a multinational firm's perspective. The operation and organization of strategic alliances in importing, the motivation to build these alliances, their effect on the bargaining power of suppliers, and their role in enhancing inter-organizational performance are also worth investigating. Identification of the right import-related resources and capabilities, unique advantages sought by the importing firm, and business performance are other areas that warrant attention. Particular emphasis should be placed on the nature of capabilities required to adapt to different institutional contexts, the organizational skills needed to transfer knowledge among units of globally-sourcing firms, and the identification of complementary resources/capabilities between importers and exporters.

Within the *international sourcing strategy* domain, research attention was drawn to import logistics in particular, with the remaining sourcing elements (e.g., product, price, promotion) being relatively neglected. Hence, more research should focus on better understanding these elements and asking questions like: Why do importers opt for specific product lines, products, and brands? What specific factors are taken into consideration when determining purchasing prices? What kind of promotional support is required by importers? In addition, since exporters have been criticized for leaving the marketing of their products to importers, it would be challenging to study the marketing practices of importers once product ownership is transferred to them. This may include forming and fostering harmonious relationships between the importer and various marketing intermediaries, gathering information for and providing feedback to overseas suppliers, and offering assistance for the effective marketing of imported products in the market.

The *management of import operations* has been a relatively neglected area in prior research. Some useful issues to study here are: The setting of import objectives, the organizational level at which importing activity is planned, and the extent to which importing is perceived as a strategic task. The effect of different organizational structures (centralized,

decentralized, or hybrid) on import performance, as well as the role of organizational change processes in globally sourcing firms could also be explored. Scholars should also concentrate on the control mechanisms of import operations, particularly in the case of multinational corporations where the headquarters-subsidiary relationship in global sourcing is vital. The efficiency and effectiveness of various control mechanisms and incentive programs in different import modes are also worth considering.

With regard to *importer-exporter relationships*, which was the most widely researched area, other constructs with a potentially antecedent (e.g., cultural distance) or moderating (e.g., type of buying situation) effect still need to be identified. It would also be useful to track down changes in importer-exporter relationships using longitudinal research designs, examine behavioral dimensions of the relationship from a dyadic perspective, and investigate the financial performance outcomes of the working relationship. In this respect, relationship initiation and development processes in different regional, socio-cultural, and temporal contexts should also be analyzed. In addition, replication of importer-exporter relationship studies in different economic (e.g., developing versus developed countries), cultural (e.g., low versus high context cultures), and industrial (e.g., low technology versus high technology) settings would help to generalize findings. Two other important issues that warrant attention here are the potential implications of switching costs in the relationship with the foreign supplier, as well as the role of incentives/safeguards for making specific investments in this relationship.

Economic dimensions of importing could be investigated at both macro and micro levels. Regarding the former, scholars might look into the imports of developing countries and examine the effect of importing on economic growth, export development, and foreign exchange rates. The social costs of importing in the domestic market to various groups, like employees, government and society at large, could be another promising field of research. At the microeconomic level, scholars may examine the impact of importing on the cost structure of firms and the long-term effects of importing—both costs and benefits—on industry performance. Researchers could also study the link between market structure and import performance, especially with reference to: (a) the bargaining power of importers against their overseas suppliers; (b) possible price-fixing agreements between foreign suppliers; and (c) the role of network embeddedness in the strategy of importing firms.

Regarding *special topics in importing*, it would be interesting to highlight more the use of the internet by firms as a tool for purchasing from abroad, the potential issues to be addressed being: (a) the motivation to engage in e-buying-based international sourcing; (b) the facilitating role of the internet in e-buying for smaller-sized firms; and (c) the distinguishing characteristics of SME managers using the internet as a tool for e-buying. It would also be worth investigating the recent phenomenon of the internet, converting final consumers themselves into parallel importers. Specifically, some possible ideas for research here may be the ways in which importing firms position themselves against consumers, and possible re-intermediation processes by firms to fill the gaps within the industry. Other research areas could be the idiosyncrasies of the internet as a new institutional context and the way these are reshaping business activities and resource dependencies of importing firms.

Other *miscellaneous issues* requiring research are the interaction between a salesperson and a customer within the international exchange processes, and how this can be affected by different buying situations. Research should also focus on the international sourcing of services (e.g., financial, medical, legal), especially from the perspective of more economically advanced countries. The organizational learning processes between partners, alliance members, headquarters and subsidiaries in international sourcing situations also needs investigation. Another recommendation is to investigate the corporate social responsibility aspects of global sourcing, such as the motivation for or attitudes toward undertaking socially responsible behavior in importing. Researchers could also examine the business ethics issues associated with the importing of developed country firms from countries where enforcement of legislation on labor is less strict than in their own countries. The positive and negative effects of global sourcing on various stakeholder groups (e.g., home and host governments, nongovernmental organizations, and employees) are also worthy of investigation. Finally, the role of e-business as a new mode of import operations warrants additional exploration, especially in light of the growing trend to purchase through the internet.

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Endnotes

- 1 Although purchasing from abroad is becoming inevitable for many firms, an examination of the international business literature reveals a preponderance of export-related articles and a scarcity of research into importing. Obviously, importing, as a field of research, has been relatively disregarded, which is hard to understand since it is equally important to exporting, the other side of the international trade equation (Ghymn et al. 1999; Katsikeas and Kaleka 1999; Katsikeas et al. 2000; Katsikeas and Dalgic 1995; Katsikeas 1998; Katsikeas and Leonidou 1996; Kotabe 1993; Leonidou 1988; Liang and Parkhe 1997; Skarmeas and Katsikeas 2001; Skarmeas 2006).
- 2 Although it would be interesting to include in the review articles published in journals and books specializing in economics, this was beyond the scope of the present research mainly because of the non-managerial way in which they examine import-related issues. However, a review of articles published in journals and books specializing in economics could be the object of a separate study that would complement the findings of this study.
- 3 In some cases, importer and exporter perspectives were interrelated, and whenever this occurred the articles were incorporated in our analysis. However, the study did not include articles with a purely exporting focus, because they have been the object of an extensive review conducted recently by Leonidou and Katsikeas (2010).
- 4 Notably, until the end of the 1980s, the major publication outlets for import-related articles were, with a few exceptions, mainstream business journals. However, since the early 1990s, this trend has changed toward the publication of importing studies in new journals specializing in international business, management, marketing and/or purchasing.

- 5 Some of the issues encountered during the *selection and coding process* of articles were: (a) the existence of misleading keywords and/or titles, that led to the retrieval of articles that were irrelevant for the purposes of this study; (b) the fact that some of the import-related articles published in books were difficult to identify, unless physically inspected; (c) problems in identifying import-related articles published in the early phases of importing research, because of their non-inclusion in electronic databases; (d) the fact that some of the articles did not provide information clearly relating to certain parts of the coding frame; and (e) the non-applicability of certain methodological issues in some articles due to their reliance on secondary data.
- 6 Although the initial idea was to have five research periods, namely 1960–1969, 1970–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1999, and 2000–2010, the number of import-related articles published in the first two periods was too small (only 19) to allow for a separate percentage analysis. For this reason, the first three decades were merged into one time period.
- 7 This section is based on Emory's (1980) classificatory framework of analyzing research designs, which focuses on problem crystallization, topical scope, time dimension, research instrument, communication mode, control of variables, and variable association. This analysis provides a useful indication of the quality, rigor, and sophistication of the research conducted in a specific field.
- 8 Overall, research into importing has not been so impactful, as demonstrated by the fact that 67.6% of the articles reviewed had less than ten citations. The scarcity of citations could relate to the fact that, as opposed to other areas of international business (e.g., exporting, joint venturing, wholly-owned foreign production), the total number of articles written on importing was relatively small. Moreover, most of the research on importing has not been published in top mainstream business journals, which are usually characterized by a high impact factor. Furthermore, the number of scholars interested in international business is much lower than those focusing on mainstream business issues, thus reducing the possibility of extensive citations of their work.
- 9 The survey among the top contributors to the importing field had a threefold objective: (a) to verify the validity of the list of the key thematic areas and specific research topics identified from the literature; (b) to suggest venues of research which were not included in the initial list; and (c) to prioritize future research on importing by ranking the importance of the various thematic groups, as well as the specific research topics within each group.

Appendix A: Publication outlets for import-related articles

Journal	Total	1960–1989	1990–1999	2000–2010
	(<i>n</i> =321) (%)	(<i>n</i> =64) (%)	(<i>n</i> =125) (%)	(<i>n</i> =132) (%)
Industrial Marketing Management	10.0	3.1	5.6	17.4
Journal of International Business Studies	8.7	15.6	9.6	4.5
Journal of World Business (Columbia Journal of World Business)	7.2	29.7	2.4	0.8
Journal of Supply Chain Management	6.5	6.2	9.6	3.8
International Journal of Physical Distri- bution and Logistics Management	5.3	–	7.2	6.1
Journal of Purchasing and Supply Man- agement (European Journal of Purchas- ing and Supply Management)	5.3	–	3.2	9.9
Journal of International Marketing	4.4	–	5.6	5.3
International Marketing Review	4.0	1.6	4.0	5.3
European Journal of Marketing	3.4	4.7	5.6	0.8
Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	2.8	–	4.0	3.0
Journal of Business Research	2.8	1.6	4.8	1.5
International Business Review	2.5	–	3.2	3.0
Management International Review	2.5	3.1	2.4	2.3
Supply Chain Management	1.9	–	0.8	3.8
Journal of Global Marketing	1.9	–	1.6	3.0
Other journals	28.0	31.3	29.6	25.0
Edited books	2.8	3.1	0.8	4.5

Appendix B: Most prolific authors of import-related articles during the period 1960–2010^a

Author	Academic institution ^b	Location country	Absolute number of articles	Adjusted number of articles	Number of SSCI citations
Masaaki Kotabe	Temple University	USA	17	9.0	356
Constantine S. Katsikeas	University of Leeds	United Kingdom	14	6.4	108
Janet Y. Murray	University of Missouri-St. Louis	USA	12	6.1	211
Leonidas C. Leonidou	University of Cyprus	Cyprus	8	6.8	20
Robert M. Monczka	Arizona State University	USA	8	4	109
Dionisis A. Skarmneas	Athens University of Economics and Business	Greece	7	3.2	72
Joseph R. Carter	Arizona State University	USA	7	2.7	27
Kyung-Il Ghymn	University of Nevada	USA	6	3	22
Robert J. Trent	Lehigh University	USA	6	3	93
Stanley E. Fawcett	Brigham Young University	USA	6	2.8	90
S. Tamer Cavusgil	Michigan State University	USA	6	2.5	31
G. Tomas M. Hult	Michigan State University	USA	5	3.8	120
Shawnee K. Vickery	Michigan State University	USA	5	2.0	21
Paul Matthyssens	Antwerp University, Erasmus University	Belgium and The Netherlands	5	1.6	36
Hokey Min	Auburn University	USA	4	2.3	89
Lieven Quintens	Maastricht University	The Netherlands	4	1.2	29
Robert B. Handfield	North Carolina State University	USA	4	2.3	80
Michael J. Mol	University of Reading	United Kingdom	4	1.3	33
Per Servais	University of Southern Denmark	Denmark	4	2.0	5
Gabriel R. G. Benito	BI Norwegian School of Management	Norway	4	1.5	25

^aThe total number of contributors, as identified from the 321 articles reviewed, was 449

^bThis was based on the information appearing in the most recent article of the specific author

^cThe absolute number of articles was adjusted for the articles of relevant authors if there is more than one author per article. In this respect, an article with two authors was assigned a score of 0.5, an article with three authors was credited as 0.333, articles with four authors received 0.25, and so on

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