



# Paradigms in Qualitative IB Research: Trends, Analysis and Recommendations

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Received: 2 November 2023 / Revised: 8 December 2023 / Accepted: 19 December 2023  
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## Abstract

This paper examines trends, challenges and opportunities in terms of research methodologies in qualitative IB research. In particular, it examines trends for the dominant (positivism/(post)positivism) paradigm versus alternative paradigms (i.e., social constructivism, critical realism and interpretivism) and provides a comparative analysis of data collection and methods. Using mixed methods to collect and analyze data on qualitative articles published in *International Business Review*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of World Business*, and *Management International Review*, we examine trends and differences between the dominant and alternative paradigms and use qualitative content analysis to investigate how alternative paradigm papers are conceptualized and presented. Moreover, we interview authors of non-positivist papers to gain in-depth understanding of the findings. We reveal differences across the paradigms and provide evidence of paradigmatic fit between methods and data collection techniques for the dominant paradigm, but more variation for alternative paradigms. Lastly, we provide prescriptions for IB scholars in terms of methodology diversity and how complex IB phenomena can be pursued vis-a-vis alternative paradigms.

**Keywords** Research methodology · Qualitative methods · Philosophy of science · Alternative paradigms

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# 1 Introduction

Recent studies have contended that international business (IB) research has encountered a “relative decrease in methodological choices” due to increased use of quantitative methods (e.g., Nielsen et al., 2020: 1496), quite possibly because of distrust in qualitative research (Magnani & Gioia, 2023). Even though quantitative methods have helped to produce a significant body of knowledge in the field, our understanding of complex IB phenomena remains incomplete because quantitative methods have been examined largely on the tenets of one empirical *paradigm*, namely positivism. A paradigm is defined as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community” (Kuhn, 1996: 175),<sup>1</sup> being embedded in three main building pillars: ontology, epistemology and methodology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Ontology informs researchers’ values, beliefs and understanding about social reality. Epistemology explains how knowledge is communicated to others (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) and informs the problematization of the research question (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). These two pillars directly influence the methodology, which as an abstract conceptualization acts as “the bridge between the paradigm and the empirical world” (Nielsen et al., 2020: 1481). However, a methodological discussion about the paradigm is still emerging in IB (Guttormsen & Moore, 2023). The importance of the methodology is that it links theory and the researcher’s understanding about reality and a scientific method used to investigate such reality (Bourdieu et al., 1991). A research method constitutes a technique for collecting and analyzing data that is universal, regardless of the methodology used (Bernard, 2017). For example, Reuber and Fischer (2022) demonstrated how case studies—as a method in qualitative research—may be used to advance knowledge though different paradigmatic approaches while Magnani and Gioia (2023) provided evidence on how grounded theory can be used to enhance data analysis for inductive research.

Since the basis of a paradigm rests on researchers’ beliefs and values (Welch et al., 2022) embedded in a scientific community (Kuhn, 1996), a paradigm represents a temporary *scientific mind* (Rheinberger, 2010). Being embedded in the positivist paradigm (Piekkari & Welch, 2017),<sup>2</sup> IB scholars who adopt alternative paradigms face opposition when trying to publish their research (Bonache, 2021). Positivist research subscribes to an objective reality that can be falsified, verified and generalized (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The knowledge is therefore the result of deductive logic criteria (Popper, 2002); a pattern found in both quantitative and qualitative studies (Bonache, 2021). Kuhn’s (1996) idea was that the development of a scientific field is more likely to occur when different paradigms

<sup>1</sup> Burrell & Morgan described a paradigm as a “metatheoretical assumption” that maps research by indicating how the researcher understands the world, operationalizes the pathway to phenomena, and communicates to others (1979: x).

<sup>2</sup> Positivism is also the dominant paradigm in the social science (Platt, 1992) and management (Bonache, 2021) literatures.

are allowed to emerge and even co-exist.<sup>3</sup> The co-existence of paradigms allows greater reflexivity in a research field, encourages comprehensive views to emerge while bridging from the limitations of different paradigms (Gioia & Pitre, 1990), and provides IB scholars with the means to engage in innovative research (Sullivan & Daniels, 2008) and knowledge development (Romani et al., 2018). Although there have been calls for the co-existence of paradigms in the IB literature in order to spur greater innovation, diversity and experimentation (see Piekkari & Welch, 2006), little has been done to address it. Recent discussions have underscored the importance of adopting alternative paradigms to enhance methodological innovation in research (Nielsen et al., 2020; Welch et al., 2022). Piekkari and Welch (2006) edited the first special issue on the importance of qualitative methods in MIR in 2006. In that issue, authors discussed the dominance of positivism (e.g. Söderberg, 2006; Welch & Piekkari, 2006) and that qualitative methods have been used mostly to complement quantitative research (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006), thus not deviating from the status quo. The dilemma arising for users of qualitative methods, however, is to either conform to institutional pressures (by complying with the dominant paradigm) or innovate (by using new research methods or adopting research methods from distant fields). Qualitative research serves as a driving source of paradigmatic diversity and allows an actor-centered approach to help understand phenomena in which reality is subjective, contingent and dynamic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Reuber & Fischer, 2022). As such, it complements the limitations of research conducted as objective and decontextualized (Bonache, 2021; Welch et al., 2022) and as “generative research” (Magnani & Gioia, 2023: 8). Calls for alternative methods to be used in the IB setting (Nielsen et al., 2020) provide a unique opportunity to examine the methodological implications associated with adopting alternative paradigms and understand the complexities inherent to the IB phenomena (Eden & Nielsen, 2020)—e.g., the extent to which there is conformity with respect to the types of research questions asked, methods used, and data collected for an alternative paradigm while the dominant paradigm continues to be highly adopted. Although we acknowledge that Kuhn’s (1996) definition of paradigms encompasses different epistemologies and ontologies, we focus on the methodological aspects of paradigms. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to understand paradigms adopted in qualitative IB research in the following ways. First, we examine trends in paradigm usage by qualitative IB scholars. Second, we explain differences in data collection techniques, methods, and research questions for the dominant paradigm versus alternative paradigms; and examine if paradigmatic fit exists with respect to the dominant and alternative paradigms. Third, we seek to understand authors’ perspectives pertaining to alternative paradigm usage. Fourth, we offer recommendations to promote paradigmatic diversity and awareness and discuss avenues for IB scholars to explore through alternative paradigms and better understand the IB phenomena.

Our study contributes to the ongoing discussions taking place in our scholarly community with respect to qualitative IB research in the following ways. First, we bring a philosophical discussion to the forefront of IB research. In doing so, we

<sup>3</sup> We thank one of the reviewers for this comment.

contribute to the debate of alternative paradigms and their importance to scholarly innovation. We understand incremental theory development is beneficial to a scientific field (Qiu et al., 2012), but we raise awareness and discuss how paradigmatic debate can benefit the field in understanding IB phenomena substantively (Alveson & Gabriel, 2013) and critically (Boussebaa, 2023). We confirm that the positivist/(post)positivist paradigm continues to dominate qualitative IB research. Among three alternative paradigms, we reveal that interpretivism has a delayed adoption, while social constructivism and critical realism have low delayed adoption (Miller et al., 2021). Moreover, we found differences in data collection techniques, methods and research questions between the dominant and alternative paradigms.

Second, our findings provide some evidence of paradigmatic fit between methods and data collection techniques for the dominant paradigm, but more variety for the alternative paradigms, which extends the work of Kornmesser (2014) and Edmondson and McManus (2007) at a more granular level. Third, we prescribe a multi-faceted approach to encourage paradigm co-existence. Lastly, an unexpected finding suggests that paradigmatic co-existence in the IB field can promote diversity in gender, geographical locations, interdisciplinary research, managerial implications and grand challenges, all of which contribute to the field's innovation and a more in-depth understanding of international phenomena.

This study is not only timely but also relevant due to the lack of methodological awareness and insufficient paradigmatic diversification, which inadvertently may impose limitations on the questions asked as well as the complexity of issues studied. For example, lack of diversification prevents the field from examining relationships across multiple levels (Liesch, et al., 2011), investigating the rationality and subjectivity of the decision-makers (Sullivan & Daniels, 2008; Toyne & Nigh, 1998), understanding the role of the individual (Geppert et al., 2016), tackling the grand challenges (Boussebaa, 2023) and connecting with the 'real world' that, in turn, reveals managerial implications (Buckley et al., 2017). In addition, it encourages formulaic and simplified approaches on how the method is described and narrows methodological choices (Reuber & Fischer, 2022), which may lead to methodological inconsistencies [e.g., (mis)applied terminology]. Indeed, a discussion of paradigmatic co-existence can enhance and develop the field further.

We based the paradigmatic analysis on qualitative articles in four IB journals—*International Business Review*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of World Business*, and *Management International Review*—between 1961 and 2020. We use quantitative analysis to examine trends and differences between the dominant and alternative paradigms. We use qualitative content analysis to investigate how alternative paradigm papers are conceptualized and presented in terms of methodology. Finally, we conducted in-depth interviews with 14 authors of alternative paradigm papers published in these four journals. In doing so, we asked them open-ended questions about the way they conducted their research, approached a phenomenon through alternative paradigms, as well as how they perceived alternative paradigm acceptance in the IB field in particular and academic community in general.

## 2 Paradigms and IB Research

According to Welch and Piekkari (2017), the IB field has long neglected a discussion of methodology, reducing it to “the actual procedure of science” (Popper, 2002: 30, 31). Consequently, the methodological discussion observed in the IB field has become more sophisticated in terms of the techniques used for analysis of data and claims for rigor—reflecting a highly institutionalized approach. As Piekkari and Welch (2017) noted, positivism/(post)positivism has been the dominant paradigm in IB, including in qualitative research. The economic roots of IB (Shenkar, 2004) means that over time, IB research’s methodology crystalized as an objective and rationalist explanation of social events through logical lenses (Comte, 2009). Empirical data is built from a nomothetic methodology—that is, data is collected in a deductive way; it is observable and can be generalized (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The reliance of IB research on the positivist paradigm and nomothetic methodology has prevented the incorporation of a variety of methodological tools (Shenkar, 2004) and left qualitative methods at the periphery. The methodology in IB has emphasized descriptiveness (Liesch et al., 2011) yet marginalized philosophical discussions (Steinmetz, 2005). As a collateral effect, the field lacks interdisciplinary research (Shenkar, 2004; Toyne & Nigh, 1998), innovative and groundbreaking findings (Delios, 2017), social impact (Tihanyi, 2020) and managerial and practical relevance (Delios, 2017).

A discussion of paradigmatic diversity remains in its infancy in the IB field, with only a few studies underscoring the importance of paradigmatic discussion namely on culture (Grosskopf & Barmeyer, 2021; Romani et al., 2018), context (McGaughey, 2006; Welch et al., 2022), language (Piekkari et al., 2022), and construction of meaning (McGaughey, 2006).<sup>4</sup> In order to further understand the IB phenomena, cogent arguments about complexity in the IB setting suggest that some topics necessitate nontraditional lens—different paradigms, research questions, data collection and methods (Eden & Nielsen, 2020).

Alternative paradigms entail research questions, data collection approaches and data analysis that may be less conducive to the dominant paradigm. For example, the varying degrees of complexity in the IB setting have given rise to new research areas while other areas continue to use methods well-suited for the dominant paradigm. The Edmondson and McManus (2007: 1159) framework proposed that mature theories tend to be aligned with “precise models” and research questions tend to emphasize “elaborating, clarifying, or challenging specific aspects of existing theories”. Alternatively, a new area of inquiry requires broader questions and alternative methods that allow researchers to further grasp subjective phenomena (e.g., Barley, 1990). Edmondson and McManus’ (2007) contingency approach strongly suggests that mature theories tend to fit with quantitative data and methods while nascent theories fit with qualitative data and methods. This means that the more we know about a subject, the less variety is obtained in the methods used, the more restricted

<sup>4</sup> Relatedly, McGaughey contended that “Through the act of interpretation, reading becomes a qualitative method of inquiry” (2006: 461).

the field will be to learn from alternative methods and the more uninformative the research will be (Delios, 2017). For example, less variety in the methods used may impair a deep comprehension of phenomena that can only be investigated through qualitative research. Adapting the problematization of research and allowing alternative paradigms may involve greater variety of methods compared with the dominant paradigm.

Methods, data collection techniques, and research questions are likely to differ for papers that use the dominant paradigm versus alternative paradigms.<sup>5</sup> We discuss three alternative paradigms: social constructivism (SC), interpretivism and critical realism (CR). These three alternative paradigms have been used to add layers of subjectivity while focusing on relationism and relativism through an actor-centered approach. SC can help with viewing the MNE as part of a socially constructed reality (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966)—i.e., studies involving socially constructed national representations such as language and culture and their impact on organizational culture and management practices. The focus is on the social group and its interaction with an external reality (Eberle, 1992). It is relational because the group is composed of individuals who socialize and interact with external reality and this relation is transformative—society is a product of these interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Consequently, institutions and culture, as a product of human interaction, are also dynamic and contextualized (Schwandt, 1994) and the method used needs to grasp those relations. Interpretivism focuses on the individual and each person's understanding about the phenomena. Reality is therefore relativist because it is subjected to individual's interpretation (see Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). It requests methods and techniques that allow the researcher to understand individual experiences in their own contexts and can prove beneficial with grasping individuals' subjective experiences, actions and decision making for topics such as ideology, emotion, identity, cognition in expatriates and decision-makers (Weber, 1949). CR, in turn, shares a realist ontology with a positivist tradition, yet differs in terms of subjective epistemology. CR sees a dual, transcendental reality, with objective and subjective characteristics needed to fully understand a phenomena and causal-effect relationships at multiple levels of analysis (Bhaskar, 2016). Reality is variable, structured and dynamic (Bhaskar, 1978) and so the method needs to allow the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a stratified, multiple lens.

For illustration, Table 1 shows five paradigms and their ontological, epistemological and methodological differences. To clarify how an IB topic can be examined through different paradigmatic lenses, we frame questions for each paradigm. To do that we use the phenomena of cross-border mergers (see 'Research Question' column of Table 1). As the question changes, in Table 1 we also suggest which methods may be adopted to gather data in support of the examined phenomenon. As such, Table 1 illustrates *what* we will discuss next, *how* alternative paradigms

<sup>5</sup> Edmondson and McManus (2007: 1162), for example, pointed out that "Interviews, observations, open-ended questions, and longitudinal investigations are methods for learning with an open mind." Relatedly, they suggested that with nascent theory, collecting data can range from "the full immersion of ethnography or, more simply, exploratory interviews with organizational informants."

**Table 1** Linking paradigm & methodology: the scientific framework

Paradigm	Ontology → What phenomenon is there to know?	Epistemology → What and how we can know about it?	Methodology → How can we find out about it?	Research Question → Which research question(s) can we use to find about it?	Method → Which data can we use to find about it? Examples
Positivism	Realist—concrete process/Objectivist	Dualist—findings are true	Experimental/Nomothetic/Deductive	How a merger can impact firm performance	Archival data survey experiment
(post) positivism	Realist—concrete process/Objectivist	Modified dualist—findings are probably true	Experimental/Nomothetic/Deductive	The roles of local managers following a merger	Case study
Critical Realism	Transcendental realist—contextual field of information/Objectivist/Subjectivist	Phenomenon is understood in multiple levels and socially constructed	Deductive/abductive—contextual analysis	How institutions influence mergers as well as workers' roles and the transfer of organizational processes and best practices	Case study; grounded theory
Social Constructivism	Relativist—social construction/Subjectivist	Phenomenon is an understanding about a constructed reality	Dialectic/Inductive/abductive—hermeneutics	The evolution of post-merger working relationships in a multi-cultural setting	Ethnography; action research; grounded theory; participatory research
Interpretivism	Relativist—a projection of human imagination/Subjectivist	Phenomenon is an understanding about an interpreted reality	Idiographic/Inductive/abductive exploration of subjectivity	The impact of a cross-border merger on employees' personal and professional lives	Life story; ethnography; storytelling; phenomenology

Based on Burrell and Morgan (1979), Morgan & Smircich (1980), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Guba and Lincoln (2005), Iofrida et al., 2014 and Grix (2002)



**Table 2** Categorization of qualitative IB papers across different decades and journals<sup>a,b,c</sup>

	$\chi^2$ (df)	Journal	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	Total
Total			n = 13 <sub>(%)</sub>	n = 27 <sub>(%)</sub>	n = 30 <sub>(%)</sub>	n = 57 <sub>(%)</sub>	n = 169 <sub>(%)</sub>	n = 298 <sub>(%)</sub>	n = 594 <sub>(%)</sub>
Qualitative IB papers	186.34 <sub>(15)</sub> (p-value=0.000)***	IBR	0	0	0	26 <sub>(45.6)</sub>	46 <sub>(27.2)</sub>	132 <sub>(44.1)</sub>	204 <sub>(34.3)</sub>
		JIBS	2 <sub>(15.4)</sub>	16 <sub>(59.3)</sub>	17 <sub>(56.7)</sub>	8 <sub>(14)</sub>	22 <sub>(13.0)</sub>	34 <sub>(11.4)</sub>	99 <sub>(16.7)</sub>
		JWB	0	0	0	13 <sub>(22.8)</sub>	71 <sub>(42.0)</sub>	96 <sub>(32.2)</sub>	180 <sub>(30.3)</sub>
		MIR	11 <sub>(84.6)</sub>	11 <sub>(40.7)</sub>	13 <sub>(43.4)</sub>	10 <sub>(17.5)</sub>	30 <sub>(17.8)</sub>	36 <sub>(12.1)</sub>	111 <sub>(18.7)</sub>

<sup>a</sup>JIBS: first volume—1970; JWB: first volume—1997; IBR: first volume—1993; MIR: first volume—1961

<sup>b</sup>Statistical percentages for zeroes (0 s) are not reported

<sup>c</sup>The Fisher tests were undertaken to confirm these results

\* $p \leq .10$ ; \*\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .01$

Authors' calculations

influences research problematization as well as the *degree* of complexity and innovation obtained from such diversity. Moreover, Table 1 shows a variety of methods that can be used by IB scholars when adopting alternative paradigms and how different methods can be applied to different paradigms.

### 3 Methodology

To study paradigms in qualitative IB research, we rely on certain metrics in order to understand the qualitative publication landscape in IB. We implemented a modified experimental logic as methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and followed systematic protocols using a mix-method approach to collect and analyze the data. We follow a (post)positivist approach because it fits ontologically for the majority of the team, and we opted for a logical-deductive form of research that followed procedures on how we should quantitatively collect the data in the first part of this study. A (post)positivist approach allows us a level of interpretation to analyze how theories and research questions varied in alternative paradigm papers in the second and third stages of this research. The use of mixed-methods helps us to explore in more depth the insights we gain from the first stage of our research as well as to complement and confirm our findings in the qualitative stage (Jick, 1979). The methodological choices reflect our team's research diverse ontological and epistemological views, and methodological approaches.

In the first stage, we undertook a quantitative approach and conducted a systematic and comprehensive content analysis of qualitative papers published in *International Business Review* (IBR), *Journal of International Business Studies* (JIBS), *Journal of World Business* (JWB), and *Management International Review* (MIR) between 1961 and 2020. Specifically, we reviewed all volumes and issues available for the four journals: IBR (1993–2020), JIBS (1970–2020), JWB (1997–2020) and MIR (1961–2020). We focused on these four journals, following Piekari et al.'s (2009) classification and their contention that they are the top academic journals



in the IB community. They represent diversity in terms of acceptance of qualitative work (e.g., JWB and IBR publish more qualitative research), origins and editorial policy (Piekkari et al., 2009). Moreover, they represent the oldest journals in the field (Welch & Welch, 2004). Further, they provide insights into methodological practices adopted by IB scholars during the given time period.

We identified all qualitative papers (omitting editorials, commentaries, critical reviews of literature, mixed-methods and quantitative empirical papers). Table 2 summarizes the results of this process: 204 (34.3%) qualitative papers in IBR, 99 (16.7%) in JIBS, 180 (30.3%) in JWB, and 111 (18.7%) in MIR. Our final sample includes 594 qualitative IB papers as observed on Table 2.

After identifying the qualitative papers in the sample journals, our research team members independently (and then jointly) searched for occurrences associated with paradigms and coded each article. While some authors clearly stated the paradigm adopted (e.g., SC and CR), most studies, particularly on the (post)positivist tradition did not. At an early stage, we decided to combine positive with (post)positivist papers since they shared many similarities reflecting more of a continuum of ideas than two distinct paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In addition, from the beginning of data collection, we understood that the use of templates to collect and analyze research (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994) were associated to positivism/(post)positivism (Mees-Buss et al., 2022; Piekkari & Welch, 2017). There were specific words used in positivist/(post)positivist papers to communicate research methods such as bias, sample, validation, hypotheses (we found qualitative papers having hypothesis, reliability, small *n* research and consistency). Despite claims that SC and interpretivism share some attributes due to their subjective approach to the phenomena (Schwandt, 1994); we follow Schutz's (1978) argument that distinguishes the two separate categories and the focus of SC in relationism rather than relativism (Eberle, 1992). Specifically, we point out that interpretivism postulates individual subjective interpretation to explain the real-world phenomena while SC focuses on a collective-constructed reality such that social meaning is a fixed entity influenced by social values and ideologies (Schutz, 1978).

To overcome any paradigmatic ambiguity, we discussed the insights and multiple meaning associated with the words commonly used by authors to represent certain paradigms. During the coding process, we evaluated the papers based on our interpretation of researchers' description of methods and methodological procedures. To reduce potential bias, all papers were coded twice by different members of our research team. In addition, we coded phrases in which authors explained the methodological positioning of the paper and in some cases, the paradigm used in the research. Appendix 1 shows how phrases were coded and provides insights for how we classified non-positivist/(post)positivist papers.

The team discussed inconsistencies found during data collection until a consensus prevailed. This approach allowed us to constantly refine and expand our initial coding frame and helped us to resolve any challenges associated with the coding process of our textual material. Furthermore, it enabled us to look holistically at what was (or not) actually present in the examined text and the way scholars used specific terms and conveyed their meaning. Even though we took steps available to minimize the bias, we acknowledge there is subjectivity involved in this process. We

**Table 3** Qualitative papers across different decades and journals: paradigm<sup>a,b</sup>

	$\chi^2_{(df)}$	Paradigm categories	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	Total
IBR	8.218(8) <sub>(p-value=0.412)</sub>	Positivist/(post)positivist Interpretivism Social constructivism Critical realism Multiparadigmatic	0 0 0 0 0	0 0 0 0 0	0 0 0 0 0	24 <sub>(92.3)</sub> 0 1 <sub>(3.8)</sub> 0 1 <sub>(3.8)</sub>	40 <sub>(87)</sub> 6 <sub>(13)</sub> 0 0 0	115 <sub>(87.1)</sub> 11 <sub>(8.3)</sub> 4 <sub>(3.0)</sub> 1 <sub>(0.8)</sub> 1 <sub>(0.8)</sub>	179 <sub>(87.7)</sub> 17 <sub>(8.3)</sub> 5 <sub>(2.5)</sub> 1 <sub>(0.5)</sub> 2 <sub>(1.0)</sub>
Total			n = 0(%)	n = 0(%)	n = 0(%)	n = 26(%)	n = 46(%)	n = 132(%)	n = 204(%)
JIBS	28.081(20) <sub>(p-value=0.107)</sub>	Positivist/(post)positivist Interpretivism Social constructivism Critical realism Undefined	2 <sub>(100)</sub> 0 0 0 0	16 <sub>(100)</sub> 0 0 0 0	17 <sub>(100)</sub> 0 0 0 0	8 <sub>(100)</sub> 0 0 0 0	21 <sub>(95.5)</sub> 1 <sub>(4.5)</sub> 0 0 0	20 <sub>(58.8)</sub> 6 <sub>(17.6)</sub> 1 <sub>(2.9)</sub> 3 <sub>(8.8)</sub> 4 <sub>(11.8)</sub>	84 <sub>(84.84)</sub> 7 <sub>(7.1)</sub> 1 <sub>(1.0)</sub> 3 <sub>(3.0)</sub> 4 <sub>(4.0)</sub>
Total			n = 2(%)	n = 16(%)	n = 17(%)	n = 8(%)	n = 22(%)	n = 34(%)	n = 99(%)
JWB	5.185(6) <sub>(p-value=0.320)</sub>	Positivist/(post)positivist Interpretivism Social Constructivism Critical Realism	0 0 0 0	0 0 0 0	0 0 0 0	12 <sub>(92.31)</sub> 1 <sub>(7.7)</sub> 0 0	67 <sub>(94.4)</sub> 4 <sub>(5.6)</sub> 0 0	81 <sub>(84.4)</sub> 12 <sub>(12.5)</sub> 2 <sub>(2.1)</sub> 1 <sub>(1.0)</sub>	160 <sub>(88.9)</sub> 17 <sub>(9.4)</sub> 2 <sub>(1.1)</sub> 1 <sub>(0.6)</sub>
Total			n = 0(%)	n = 0(%)	n = 0(%)	n = 13(%)	n = 71(%)	n = 96(%)	n = 180(%)
MIR	13.467(20) <sub>(p-value=0.856)</sub>	Positivist/(post)positivist Interpretivism Social Constructivism Critical Realism Undefined	10 <sub>(90.9)</sub> 0 0 0 1 <sub>(9.1)</sub>	11 <sub>(100)</sub> 0 0 0 0	13 <sub>(100)</sub> 0 0 0 0	10 <sub>(100)</sub> 0 0 0 0	27 <sub>(90.0)</sub> 3 <sub>(10.0)</sub> 0 0 0	30 <sub>(83.3)</sub> 3 <sub>(8.3)</sub> 1 <sub>(2.8)</sub> 1 <sub>(2.8)</sub> 1 <sub>(2.8)</sub>	101 <sub>(91.0)</sub> 6 <sub>(4.6)</sub> 1 <sub>(0.9)</sub> 1 <sub>(0.9)</sub> 2 <sub>(0.9)</sub>
Total			n = 11(%)	n = 11(%)	n = 13(%)	n = 10(%)	n = 30(%)	n = 36(%)	n = 111(%)

<sup>a</sup>Statistical percentages for 0 s are not reported<sup>b</sup>The Fisher tests were undertaken to confirm these results\* $p \leq .10$ ; \*\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .01$

identified two papers that adopted a multi-paradigmatic approach and six that we did not reach a consensus and therefore classified them as undefined. After completing the paradigmatic classification, we grouped the papers by decades to show the adoption rates of different paradigms over time and across the sample journals as shown in Table 3.

We revisited the papers to code the methods used by the authors (e.g., case study, ethnography, action research, critical incident, delphi, netnography) and understand if there was any methodological variation associated with the paradigm used—13 categories emerged.<sup>6</sup> We grouped the 13 methods into seven new categories based on the defining elements found in those methods. The *researcher subject relationships* (RSR) category combined action research, netnography, ethnography, and phenomenography because the researchers are engaging with their and other subjectivities (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The *narratives* category grouped sensemaking, storytelling, photo-elicit, and critical discourse categories because these methods build narratives to understand specific events (e.g., Gabriel, 2000; Söderberg, 2006). We left five other methods as stand-alone categories: critical incident, case study, Delphi, and grounded theory. At this stage, we coded for techniques of data collection (e.g., interviews, observation, and secondary data).

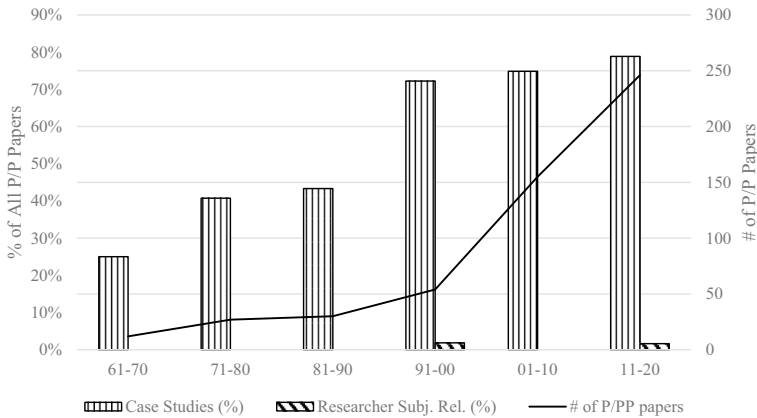
At the second stage, we further scrutinized qualitatively all alternative paradigm papers to understand how they differentiate from positivist/(post)positivist papers. We undertook a qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) of the introduction and methodology sections for articles with the alternative paradigms (i.e., interpretivism, social constructivism, and critical realism) to identify the most common research topics and corresponding research questions/objectives. We aimed to understand how authors conceptualized their research and whether alternative paradigms facilitated a more nuanced and multidimensional influence to emerge. To confirm that we selected the two most common IB themes in alternative paradigm papers and compared them with positivist/(post)positivist papers of the same topic. We concluded that papers using alternative paradigms were more complex, nuanced, and possessed an actor-centered focus. They also justified their methodological choices in more depth.

At the third stage of the research, and in order to complement the information we gained from the second stage, we interviewed the authors from 14 of the 29 papers published between 2015 and 2020. We selected such a time frame because in papers published more than ten years ago, scholars had difficulties in remembering the process and their choices. In some instances, multiple authors joined the interview. In another interview, an expert on paradigms participated. Seven interviewees were male and ten were female. Moreover, twelve interviewees lived in Europe, three lived in America (North and South) and one lived in Australia. Seven of the papers were published in JWB, five IBR, one in JIBS and one in MIR. In addition, ten papers used interpretivism, two papers used critical realism and two others used social constructivism. These characteristics align with what was published in the IB journals during the time period: 11 papers published in JWB; 10 papers in IBR; five

<sup>6</sup> For papers that we were unable to identify the method used, we classified them as “not sure”.

**Table 4** Content analysis for the interviews

First order theme	Second order theme	Aggregate dimension
Travel cost	Financial cost	Obstacles for conducting research with alternative paradigms
Hours of research		
Pressure to publish	Time cost	
Time length spend on fieldwork		
Time spent to learn a new method		
Time spent in writing a qualitative results section		
Long review process		
Getting access to the company	Personal cost	
Following the company		
Time spent to build trust with the participants	Relational cost	
Getting involved on the tensions and on the relationships between participants	Emotional cost	
Results being contested by participants	Legitimacy cost	
Question of rigor		
Question of validity		
Question on credibility		
Question on method used		
Resistance to change		
Conventions on the mainstream		
Female	Gender diversity	
Male		
Study other theories	Geographical location	
Study other countries		
Individual element	Access to subjectivities	Opportunities for conducting research with alternative paradigms
Subjectivity from participants		
Subjectivity from researchers		
Micro-level		
Sociology	Interdisciplinary research	
Psychology		
Anthropology		
In-depth understanding	Alternative paradigms	
Complexity		
More creative		
Be critical on the mainstream		
Flexibility		
Being reflexive		
Nuances about the phenomena		
Data richness		
Grand challenges	Closer to the phenomenon	
Managerial implications		



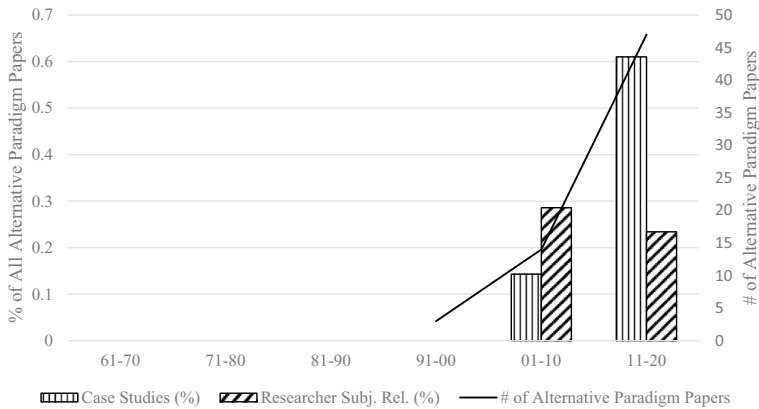
**Fig. 1** Positivist/(post)positivist paradigm: methods comparison

papers in JIBS, and three papers in MIR. Twenty of these papers used interpretivism; five used CR and four used SC—three of the corresponding authors lived in Latin America, three in Australia, two in Asia and 21 in Europe. During the interviews, the participants shed light on how research was problematized, the methodological choices available to the scholars, and how the scholars' backgrounds influenced those choices. We then analyzed the interviews through qualitative content analysis using words in sentences as the basic unit of analysis in the first order concepts (Schreier, 2012). We aggregated the second themes along two dimensions: obstacles for IB research and opportunities for the field, as we demonstrate in Table 4.

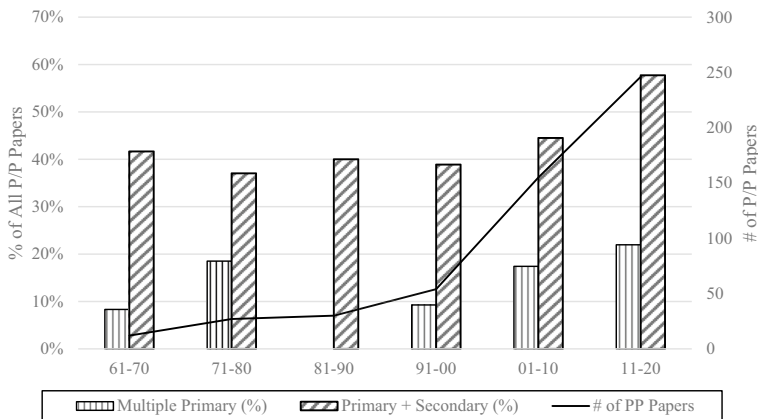
## 4 Results from Stage 1

In the sample journals, we identified 594 papers that used qualitative methods: 524 positivist/(post)positivist papers; 47 interpretivism papers; nine SC papers; six CR papers, two multi-paradigmatic papers, and six undefined. Our analysis shows that qualitative papers first appeared in JIBS and MIR in the 1960s. In JWB and IBR, qualitative papers first appeared in 1990s. In JIBS, all qualitative papers published between 1960 and 1990 employed a positivist/(post)positivist paradigm. The first alternative paradigm qualitative IB papers appeared in the 1990s in IBR and JWB. According to Table 3, IB researchers published only one interpretivism papers (in JWB) and one SC paper appeared in IBR in the 1990s. The first paper using a multiple paradigmatic approach was published in IBR in the 1990s.

In the 2000s, the four journals published 169 qualitative papers, of which only 14 papers were alternative paradigm papers (all used interpretivism). In the 2010s, these IB journals published 298 qualitative papers, including 47 alternative paradigm papers: 32 interpretivism papers, eight SC papers, six CR papers, and one multiple-paradigmatic paper. We observe a substantial increase in the number of qualitative papers in the three last decades using alternative paradigms (1990, 2000,



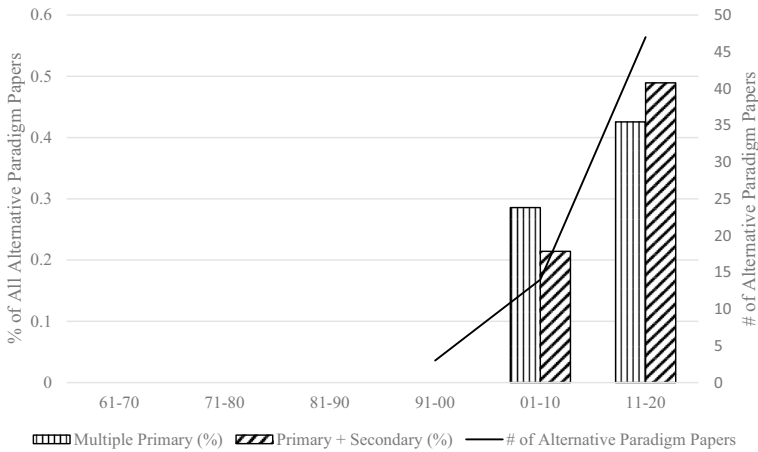
**Fig. 2** Alternative paradigms: methods comparison. There were only three alternative paradigm papers in the 1990s. Two of them used case study; one used grounded theory



**Fig. 3** Positivist/(post)positivist paradigm: data collection

and 2010), albeit relatively low compared to the number of positivist/(post)positivist qualitative papers. The chi-square test results indicate a significant difference in terms of paradigms used by IB researchers across journals over the time period (chi-square = 186.34;  $p < 0.001$ ), yet no evidence of paradigmatic diversity within journals—especially with an increasing use of interpretivism over the past decade. SC and CR exhibited low adoption during the past decade. However, the JWB, IBR, and MIR results failed to show significant differences in paradigmatic diversity across the decades.

We combined the methods used by authors into new categories to allow for further analysis. The *researcher-subject relationships* category (that combined action research, netnography, ethnography, and phenomenology) accounted for 23% of



**Fig. 4** Alternative paradigms: data collection. There were only three alternative paradigm papers in the 1990s. One paper used multiple primary data; one paper used primary + secondary data

the methods used in the alternative paradigm papers, but only 1% of the positivist/(post)positivist studies used the same method. *Narratives* (combination of storytelling, photo elicit, and critical discourse) was used in 6% of the alternative paradigm papers, and only 0.2% of the positivist/(post)positivist studies used the same method approach.

Case study was the most frequently used method by positivist/(post)positivist (72%) and alternative paradigm studies (52%). In the 1960s, case studies were used in only 25% of positivist/(post)positivist papers, but there was a sharp increase in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (41%, 43%, and 72%, respectively).<sup>7</sup> Case study usage increased since 1990s among the positivist/(post)positivist papers—in the 2000s and 2010s, case study was adopted by 75% and 79% of the papers, respectively (see Fig. 1), thus suggesting that the case study is an institutionalized method those publishing in IB irrespectively the paradigm used, but strongly for positivist/(post)positivist papers. In contrast, researcher subject relationships exhibited a low adoption rate in positivist/(post)positivist papers (roughly 2% percent in the 2010s).

Figure 2 presents the analysis of methods for qualitative papers that used alternative paradigms. Alternative paradigm papers used case studies in 14% of the studies during the 2000s and 62% of them in the 2010s. Researcher subject relationships remained non-adopted until the 2000s, when they were used in 29% of the alternative paradigm papers. In the 2010s, 23% of the alternative paradigm papers used researcher subject relationships. We contend that the time-based costs associated with ethnography (i.e., immersion) may dissuade IB scholars from employing this

<sup>7</sup> We were unable to identify the methods used by researchers in 75%, 59%, 53%, and 26% of the positivist/(post)positivist papers published in the 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990, respectively.



method despite its benefits in dealing with IB complexity (i.e., observing processes and interactions in an actual work setting).

Next, we examine data collection in qualitative papers that used a positivist/(post)positivist paradigm (Fig. 3) and alternative paradigms (Fig. 4), the latter of which first appeared in IB journals during the 1990s. The use of both primary and secondary data sources held steady from the 1960s to 1990s: roughly 40% of positivist/(post)positivist papers. As the use of the positivist/(post)positivist paradigm increased in the 2000s, there was a modest increase in primary-secondary data sources (45%). But in the 2010s, the use of primary and secondary data increased to 58%. For alternative paradigm papers, 21% of these papers use both primary and secondary data in the 2000s—rising sharply to 49% in the 2010s.

Our analysis further revealed that the use of multiple primary data sources ranged from about 8 to 22% in positivist/(post)positivist papers. We attribute the low adoption to the costs of multi-primary data collection (financial and time-based), while technological innovations (online data sources) have made secondary data easier to access and thus less costly to IB researchers. However, multiple primary data usage was substantially higher for alternative paradigm papers—29% in the 2000s and rising to 43% in the 2010s.

We compare these two groups based on use of the case study method by calculating the Pearson  $\chi^2$  test, which indicates significant differences in the use of the case study method ( $\chi^2=10.03$ ;  $p=0.002$ ) with adoption higher for the dominant paradigm compared with the alternative paradigms. Next, we compare the two groups according to the use of methods involving *researcher subject relationships*. The Pearson  $\chi^2$  test results indicate a significant difference in the use of *researcher subject relationships* ( $\chi^2=94.81$ ;  $p=0.001$ ). Next, we examined data collection techniques across the two paradigm groups. We compare these two groups according to the use of archival data collection. A Pearson  $\chi^2$  test ( $\chi^2=0.175$ ;  $p=0.676$ ) shows no significant difference. Lastly, we examine usage of multiple primary data sources across the two groups. The Pearson  $\chi^2$  test results show a significant difference in the use of multiple primary data sources ( $\chi^2=16.07$ ;  $p=0.001$ ), driven by alternative paradigms.

To understand these results, we compared the two groups based on the use of both primary and secondary data sources. The Pearson  $\chi^2$  test results show no significant differences across the dominant and alternative paradigm groups ( $\chi^2=1.301$ ;  $p=0.254$ ). In sum, these findings reveal that a key point of difference for data collection is the use of multiple primary data sources, but not the use of archival data or the use of both primary and secondary data. These findings provide evidence of less variety for the dominant paradigm with respect to data collection and methods. However, the results suggest that alternative paradigms tend to use both primary and secondary data yet exhibit higher use of multiple primary data sources—which provides evidence of increased variety for data collection techniques in alternative paradigm papers.

## 5 Results from Stage 2: Research Questions/Objectives

Our textual analysis compared papers epistemologically to understand how they problematize research questions/objectives. We observed that alternative paradigms are used commonly to ask questions related to cultural influences (33%) and entry-mode/internationalization (22%). We also found topics such as the influence of resources and knowledge transfer (14%); the influence of international institutions in the business (7%), and fewer papers in strategy, gender, corporate governance, emotions/identity, HRM, consumption, entrepreneurship and networks.

In IB, like other social sciences, human traits tended to be dismissed and conceptualized as objective (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). Without understanding the meaning of individual action, social science remains unintelligible (Weber, 1949). Reducing human behavior to quantifiable measures and using bounded rationality limits our understanding of subjectivity. As such, to comprehend actions or phenomena, it is paramount to interpret human actions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Papers using alternative paradigms tended to operationalize the context and acknowledge the impact from different levels as well as explain the methodological choices available. These papers explained paradigm and method appropriateness, and how usage of an alternative paradigm contributed to theory development. Even though these papers had not always stated explicitly their ontologies and epistemologies, the description of the methodology clarifies the researchers' values in terms of ontology and the conceptualization in terms of epistemology. These papers problematize differently their research questions as they contextualize it, adding more nuanced relationships into the observed phenomenon and acknowledging the roles of individuals. To understand how IB studies that use alternative paradigms differ in terms of problematization, we examine the published papers in the two most frequently studied topics—culture/language and entry mode/internationalization—and compare them with positivist/(post)positivist papers. Our analysis shows that language, as a sub-product of culture, represents the most frequent topic among alternative paradigm papers. We acknowledge that work by Welch and Piekkari (2006) and editorials on language (JWB in 2011; JIBS in 2014) have contributed to this trend. In these papers, culture is informed by individual perception, identities and group interactions. The majority of these papers align with the interpretivist paradigm, which claims that language should be understood through meaning and subjectivities (Weber, 1949).

In studies of entry mode/internationalization, our analysis of alternative paradigm papers, researchers treat cultures and institutions as dynamic, and therefore exhibit high complexity that is subjected to interpretation and changeability. This research allows for the understanding of roles that employees play in decisions and interactions. The interpretivist papers reveal the complexities in entry mode studies brought about by individuals' perceptions and behaviors. Those papers also consider the historical and political element of individual relations. The phenomenon is presented more holistically and nuanced through its complexities.

The study of culture demands a diversity of paradigms and different methods (Gertsen & Zølner, 2020) to allow regional variations to be explored (Romani et al., 2018). When we analyze the nine IB papers with a SC lens, we observe culture as multifaceted and dynamic—subjected to a mosaic of different identities and perceptions. By positioning culture as socially constructed by individuals, the researchers demonstrated the role that individuals play in conferring culture its meaning and significance. Using a SC paradigm, studies portray a more comprehensive picture of social interactions—the shaping of organizational cultures, the role of identities—while considering how culture is prone to change and how much influence it has for different contexts.

## 6 Results from Stage 3: Extended Analysis

With the information from the first and second stages of our research, we developed a semi-structured interview protocol, and contacted authors who published the alternative paradigm papers that we analyzed in the second stage. We ask them about the conceptualization of their research and adoption of alternative paradigms—in particular, SC, CR and interpretivism in the IB field. The first aggregated dimension focuses on the obstacles faced in IB research; mainly associated with examining IB phenomena using alternative paradigms. The first obstacle pertains to the costs linked to produce qualitative research: financial costs (e.g., travel-related expenditures and hours of research); time-related costs (e.g., pressure to publish in a short timeframe, time spent on data collection, and time spent on learning a new method); personal costs (e.g., getting access to companies and interviewees); relationship costs (e.g., time to build trust with participants); emotional costs (e.g., get involved in disputes while in the fieldwork); and legitimacy costs (e.g., data credibility with reviewers). These costs seem to disincentivize scholars from pursuing time consuming and higher commitment methods such as ethnography:

*My background is in anthropology, I was trained in the ethnographic field. It is what I brought to the party, but then I also discovered it takes a really long time to do it, so the more responsibility I had in my organization the less time I had to do that and also I find very straining to be involved in that settings because people are hard to other groups and you have to intervene, sympathise, or criticise, all those things that are emotionally draining sometimes.* (Author 5)

*Quantitative was seen as the only proper method where you can do objective research...As qualitative researchers, we have to work much harder when we publish a paper to justify our results, because science is about having evidence-based conclusions. Senior scholars in the Anglo-Saxon cultures may find difficult to accept. There is an issue on accepting other paradigms and you see with reviewers that can be really harsh. There are situations you know you will never be able to convince the reviewer because they do not understand what I do. Shouldn't we accept different things as long as they are done rigor-*

*ously? But there are some conservative academics that believe there is just one proper way of doing it. (Author 7)*

The high costs were the reason that some scholars changed their approach as their careers progressed (for example switching to the dominant paradigm) to study IB phenomena:

*Philosophically, and this research was many years ago, I was very interpretivist then... I do all sorts now, partially because of pressures to publish. This type of material [...interpretivist] does not always publish as easily, sadly. Sometimes quantitative studies publish more easily. I am no longer philosophically that pure. In my own approach, I am more pragmatic. (Author 8).*

The second obstacle in IB research is marginalization of the individual as subject. In that way, organizations are seen as entities in their own, rather than objects driven by individual action. Although this facilitates data collection on quantitative methods, it also brings a fundamental problem as examples of anthropomorphism:

*In my mind, the whole idea that organizations can be imaged as autonomous actors that can do stuff, have sorts and feelings and resentments, I find them basically absurd. I entirely do not buy it. It is people who do those things and they do it in organizations. (Author 5)*

The third obstacle entails gender and geographical locations. Being a woman can shift the investigative focus to phenomena that are more subjective while geographical locations impose restrictions in terms of the language spoken. As such, the current literature does not fully explain the importance and relevance of these gender and geographic contexts. Four female scholars observed that women are interested in individual level analysis that, in turn, leads them to observe phenomena in different ways—usually by adopting an alternative method.

*What I see from female researchers is more common for us to see the soft side of a phenomenon. (Author 1)*

The interviewees suggested that the majority of rational, hypothetic-deductive research has been associated with male scholars and that qualitative research tends to be conducted by female scholars in the business literature. Interestingly, while all but two of the female interviewees obtained their bachelor's degrees in areas related to management, five male scholars originated from other sciences (Anthropology, Philosophy, Sociology, Political Sciences, and Engineering) and two others received training in qualitative studies during their education doctoral studies. These scholars asserted that some of phenomena in IB cannot be explored without contextualizing; most of templates used in Western countries are ineffective in emerging economies. The participants also perceived interdisciplinary research as an obstacle because of the difficulty in 'convincing' peers of its importance and how different disciplines can be used to build a convincing framework. The lack of fit in terms of literature and methodology limits the contributions of their research and how much they understand they can say in the field. The study of emerging phenomena in countries other than the triad demand

alternative methods, as social challenges are usually phenomenon driven (Wickert et al., 2021). Only through alternative methods scholars in those regions can explore the real world, its complexity and relevance (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013) and social impact (Tihanyi, 2020) “beyond their domain” (Sullivan & Daniels, 2008: 1082). For example:

*There is a lot we can do from context, especially from the context of emerging countries. It is funny because they [...journal editors/reviewers] welcomed those contextualized studies, but they still expect us to use traditional methods. And these traditional methods were based in Western context. And to me, it is a serious mismatch. You use variables that were tested in the context of North America, and you use it in China, and excuse me, but it doesn't match. It doesn't work... how [are we supposed] to understand the context, if we do not allow different types of studies, and different methods of study... We are still very limited by certain ways of doing studies which have been [...used] for the last 30 or 40 years (Author 10).*

The second aggregated dimension focuses on opportunities. The interviewees mentioned interdisciplinary research and alternative paradigms—as well as investigate subjectivities and possible closure to phenomena—as opportunities for the IB field to innovate and further understand the complexities. They also noted that interdisciplinary research and alternative paradigms can deal with the calls for methodological diversification. The field may then draw from the sociology, political science, and anthropology literatures in specific contexts, thus incorporating more nuances, subtones, and insights that help to answer complex questions. The idea is that alternative paradigms can complement positivist research by addressing some limitations (e.g., gaps and biases) and allowing more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. The interviewed authors noted that the flexibility found in different methodologies—by using a subjective epistemology—allowed them to explore phenomena with a higher level of complexity; and therefore, they see that the majority of studies with strong contributions used qualitative research methods.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the use of qualitative empirical data brings scholars close to reality and allows them to make contributions that help managers with decision making while addressing the grand challenges.

*[...To use other paradigms] understand grand challenges. If we want to move towards big trends in the field and new patterns, we need new theories, and broader acceptance of diversity of theories. One way of doing that is [...by using] different paradigms, different methods. (Author 13)*

<sup>8</sup> An analysis on Academy of Management Journal (AMJ) and Academy of Management Discoveries (AMD) best papers from 2017 to 2022 (totalizing 10 papers) confirmed that assertion. We observed that five were qualitative studies, with two ethnographies, and three involved experiments. Five explored the grand challenges and all involved multiple level of analysis in their studies. This finding aligns with our participants' observations that if the field just built on existing models, there will be limited innovation with incremental contributions.

*I think being dogmatic at this point in time is not helping the field at all.*  
(Author 9)

In sum, the stage 3 results indicate that there are barriers for papers that use alternative paradigms, consistent with a scientific ecosystem that claims to embrace paradigmatic diversity yet continues to embrace one dominant paradigm. Moreover, the results reveal gender- and location-based differences in the use of alternative paradigms in IB qualitative research.

## 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Alternative Paradigms Promoting Diversity in IB Research

Our analysis showed that alternative paradigms represent a promising avenue for IB research, as they can challenge the status quo of a discipline by pushing boundaries vis-à-vis alternative paradigms (Koopman, 2018). As such, embracing alternative paradigms (as well as different methodologies) can stimulate different forms of problematization in the IB field, thus critically revisiting long-standing areas of interest in IB and forging new and emerging research pathways that can provide more in-depth understanding about IB as a social phenomenon.

We contend that CR, SC and interpretivism allow for research questions/objectives that probe more deeply into processes and social interactions reflecting a higher level of complexity. The IB field can develop innovative and groundbreaking findings by using these alternative paradigms leading to theory development. CR, for example, may be well suited to exploring complex systems that are multiple related where elements cannot be distinguished analytically from each other (Brown, 2014). As such, CR may be more effective in IB settings that involve the influence of multiple layers or a combination of different levels of analysis. The inter-relationships between micro, meso and macro levels remain insufficiently conceptualized and decontextualized in the IB literature (Welch et al., 2022). SC can help scholars to understand the role of culture and institutions—not as given, but as socially determined and dynamic (Romani et al., 2018).

We also encourage the field to engage in ongoing dialog on the philosophy of science and its different paradigms; and promote a constructive discussion of paradigmatic alignment and studies' methodologies rather than an exclusive focus on the methods. More than a methodological fit (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), the IB field needs to consider paradigmatic fit, looking beyond the methods used and aiming on the development of paradigmatic awareness. Restricting our focus to more sophisticated tools and methods rather than a methodological and paradigmatic discussion is likely to only perpetuate incrementalism (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013). Such discussion can broaden the contribution of new methodologies in IB research. There are still many 'blind spots' that needs to be unveiled, strengthening our understanding about IB phenomena (Grosskopf & Barmeyer, 2021). The IB field can still benefit from the positivist approach in a number of areas such as how industry recipes influence the use of non-traditional entry modes such as virtual presence,

innovation outposts and managed platforms (Brouthers et al., 2022) or perhaps how female CEOs of emerging market firms seek advice. For these and other objectively oriented studies, data collected through interviews, survey and/or secondary data can help to address the phenomenon. However, our claim in this paper is that the use of alternative paradigms can help the field to evolve in a number of areas. Social Constructivism can help to understand how social interactions and meaning influence companies and differ depending on national structures as institutions and culture are dynamic. Rather than using “Hofstede’s imagined culture” (McSweeney, 2024: 1) or treating culture as ideal types, the study of culture demands an understanding about socialization that can best be observed through alternative paradigms and methods that allow subjectiveness (Gertsen & Zølner, 2020). In that way we can enrich our understanding of culture (Romani et al., 2018) as multifaceted and dynamic—subjected to a mosaic of different identities and perceptions (Stoyanov et al., 2018). Moore (2011), for example, used ethnography to study social dynamics in shaping organizational culture. By positioning culture as socially constructed, researchers demonstrated the role that individuals play in conferring culture meaning and significance (Weber, 1949). Understanding culture through SC lenses can help IB scholars to better understand social influences on international post-merger and acquisitions integrations (e.g., Söderberg, 2006), institutional influence on the organisation values (Hamprecht & Schwarzkopf, 2014) or relations of power within different internationalisation entry modes, for example. By assuming the transformative ongoing social process, IB studies will better suit in explaining the role of culture in shaping and limiting organization-based collective learning (e.g., Hong et al., 2006) and exploring the active participation from people in knowledge sharing and learning in the context of the MNE (Heizmann et al., 2018). SC can also address the IB epistemic blindness by considering the ongoing influence of colonialism on the IB phenomena (Banerjee, 2022) as well as the indigenous influence in producing contextualize research that move away from a universal approach based on Europe and the United States (Bruton et al., 2022). Studies on SC are best suited for inductive and abductive methodologies and, to some extent the use of dialectic (see Kriz & Welch, 2018) allowing contrasting forces to emerge and being attributed meaning. Ethnographic, participatory observation, and action research methods can be used to grasp the social interaction among the individuals involved in the phenomena. Although ethnography and participatory research can be found in some IB studies, action research has been seldomly used. Netnography can also be used to understand international social behavior and socialization, particularly with the social phenomenon of AI and virtual teams.

Second, by using CR, scholars can better understand the inter-relationships between micro, meso and macro levels, which remain understudied by IB researchers (Welch et al., 2022). The IB field, for example, has rarely considered MNEs as political arenas. As such, the literature has understudied power dynamics within headquarters and subsidiaries, between subsidiaries, and among partners in strategic alliances or in IJVs. The IB field has overlooked the complexity of power dynamics in MNEs (Geppert et al., 2016) by neglecting institutional and individual mechanisms used to exert power. Articles using CR can introduce the importance of the context from multiple levels to enable a holistic understanding about



power dynamics that occur inside MNEs, the role of managers and workers in those dynamics and how institutions and culture constrain or enhance the power resources available. Moreover, CR can explain IB as a context-dependent discipline. As multiple levels are involved and the phenomenon is observed as transversal, methodologies allowing abductive approaches (such as case studies or grounded theory) can help the researcher to grasp the interaction of objective and subjective influences.

Third, the interpretivist paradigm can help IB to understand individual action while acknowledging that MNEs are not autonomous entities that perform and learn—individuals are behind those actions. Reducing human behavior to quantifiable measures and bounded rationality limits our understanding of the role individuals have within international companies. An actor-centered approach can help to understand managers' roles as a source of power and their roles as decision-makers, rule-makers, and members of a team. Using alternative paradigms enables us to grasp how managers learn and transfer knowledge and how they make decisions rather than referring to companies as decision makers (e.g., company learning, company know how, company decision-making). We can better understand therefore how individuals use language and the role of multilingualism in MNEs' communications (see Steyaert et al., 2011) and how different languages may affect the individual (Śliwa et al., 2023). We can also better understand the influence of identity and emotions in the international context. Cultural identity drives individual behavior and integration in the global environment (Yagi & Kleinberg, 2011); and the influence that individual emotions have on post-acquisition integration (Hassett et al., 2018). The individual in the interpretivist paradigm is at the center of the phenomenon, and therefore the methodology needs to analyze their subjectivities, interpretations and experiences. Methods that allow these particularities to be examined (e.g., life history, ethnography, and the use of interviews) can help scholars to grasp the phenomenon.

We also assert that by promoting paradigmatic awareness, the field will better understand the differences between methodology, method and techniques while helping scholars to be more reflexive in their research (Guttormsen & Moore, 2023) and creating an efficacious bridge that link methodology to method. Such awareness can help scholars to be more consistent in justifying their chosen methodologies and the field to be more cognizant of the benefits of paradigmatic diversity.

Lastly, we claim that paradigmatic co-existence can help IB to enhance diversity in six fronts. First, paradigmatic co-existence can promote geographical diversity. The study of IB has been concentrated in the North American context (Arikan & Shenkar, 2022). Our results show that most alternative paradigm papers involve authors who work in Europe, Australia and Latin America. Aguinis et al., for example, proposed that the paradoxes observed in Latin America can serve as a “natural laboratory” to build and test management theories' (2020: 615). By promoting geographical diversity, we can learn from location-specific insights, realities and literatures in order to develop distinct frameworks (Baruch, 2001) and deepen our understanding of a particular IB context (Welch et al., 2022) while providing social and managerial relevance (Tihanyi, 2020). We can also help to understand the

ongoing colonial effect that differentiates global North–South research (Banerjee, 2022)<sup>9</sup> particularly because MNEs have played a role in colonialism. Nevertheless, the topic remains underdeveloped in the IB field (Boussebaa, 2023).

Second, paradigmatic co-existence can promote gender diversity. Our qualitative analysis and extant literature show (e.g., Harding, 1987; Mills et al., 2023) that research in the hard sciences tends to be conducted by men, whereas research in soft humanities tends to be carried out predominantly by women. For instance, Piekkari et al. (2022) observed that women conduct most of the language studies in IB. Women are more inclined to use an interpretive approach that focuses on the individual, which deviates from the mainstream literature and creates theoretical challenges (Knights & Richards, 2003).

Third, paradigmatic co-existence can enhance methodological awareness. Specifically, we inferred from our quantitative data that terminological variation stem from the limited discussion on philosophy of science and insufficient paradigmatic awareness. Indeed, we revealed greater variation for the alternative paradigm than for the dominant paradigm. When ‘methodology’ is used to refer to a set of tools for collecting data rather than to paradigmatic stances, the methodological question and its epistemological link become lost (Bourdieu et al., 1991), suggesting that the integrity of the bridge between epistemology and method has been compromised. Such misunderstandings prevent questions from being problematized with higher complexity, and assume a philosophical debate is undesirable. By promoting an epistemological debate, we can make the complementarity of other methodologies clearer (Steinmetz, 2005), and therefore ask questions and problematize in different ways.

Fourth, paradigmatic co-existence can improve our understanding of global phenomena that require interdisciplinary research (Buckley et al., 2017). IB scholars have long called for paradigmatic diversification and scope as well as the use of humanist paradigms for the field to advance theories and leave an indelible “impact beyond their domain” (Sullivan & Daniels, 2008: 1082). Still, IB has modestly adopted interdisciplinary studies and methodologies; mostly involving underexplored phenomena (Buckley et al., 2017).

Fifth, paradigmatic co-existence can bring IB closer to reality, particularly with respect to managerial implications and grand challenges. IB scholars can produce impactful research on the grand challenges as “they relate to the interaction of organizations and individuals across borders within the context of the global business system” (Buckley et al., 2017: 1046). As grand challenges are mostly phenomena driven, the use of alternative paradigms is critical (Wickert et al., 2021). In addition, alternative paradigms can help bring IB closer to practitioners (Tihanyi, 2020).

Finally, paradigmatic co-existence can facilitate multi-level analysis. In particular, we claim that there is room for an actor-centered approach in the IB field. Ultimately, firms only exist because of the human element. An actor-centered approach (Geppert et al., 2016) clarifies the role played by individuals in “decision making, strategizing, and implementation” (Arikan & Shenkar, 2022: 1486) while

<sup>9</sup> Banerjee (2022) discussed the decolonization of management theory.

challenging the anthropomorphism ideas that ‘*firms learn*’, ‘*firms have experience*’, and ‘*firms perform*’. MNEs, like other organizations, are political arenas (Blaziejewski & Becker-Ritterspach, 2016) so there is room in the field to discuss worker and manager roles.

With an abundance of research opportunities conducive to alternative paradigms, the IB community needs to work steadfastly to decrease costs as well as reduce translational distance and complexity distance (Miller et al., 2021).<sup>10</sup> We contend that the academy leadership needs to promote/support adoption of alternative paradigms, particularly through editors and reviewers; offer qualitative methods training; and establish policies that help scholars to publish research that uses alternative paradigms. Otherwise, paradigmatic diversity will remain low, paradigms will remain underutilized, and incrementalism will prevail, thus delaying indefinitely research that tackles IB complexity. Indeed, alternative paradigms can handle complex IB questions and thus are the key to unlocking innovation in IB research. Innovation by field members requires a concerted effort by the scientific community to embrace new paradigms. Only then will more scholars feel incentivized to conduct qualitative research with alternative paradigms.

## 7.2 Contributions

This study makes four contributions to the IB research methods literature. First, we contribute to the debate on alternative paradigms as it relates to IB scholarship. We also show evidence of limited paradigmatic co-existence—i.e., the positivist/(post)positivist paradigm still dominates qualitative IB studies although the interpretivist paradigm has gained some acceptance while social constructivism and critical realism lag in terms of adoption. As noted above, we discuss the potential causes of this diversity problem and introduce ways that qualitative IB researchers can contribute to paradigmatic co-existence in the form of other paradigms (especially, SC and CR, but also Critical Theory). Our intention here is to promote paradigmatic awareness, so that we can initiate a constructive debate on the role of alternative paradigms in promoting research that deals with complex, multi-layered and context-dependent phenomena. We therefore present areas in which alternative paradigms and methods can benefit IB research.

Second, we provide evidence of paradigmatic fit with respect to research questions/objectives, methods and data collection techniques for the dominant paradigm but increased variety for alternative paradigms. This aspect of our study extends Edmondson and McManus’ (2007) work on methodological fit to the paradigm level. In this respect, there are opportunities to leverage methodological innovation from other fields (e.g., greater use of ethnography, netnography and phenomenography). For instance, we reveal a strong trend in the use of

<sup>10</sup> Miller et al., (2021: 1) defined translational distance as “the degree of perceived applicability, an innovation developed in one scholarly field has for a different scholarly field” and *complexity distance* as “the degree of perceived difficulty associated with a given methodological innovation (e.g., data collection and analytical technique) compared to existing applications within a given scholarly field”.

primary-secondary data collection in qualitative studies with comparable adoption from the dominant and the alternative paradigm. However, multi-primary data collection had low adoption in general, but was used predominantly with alternative paradigms. Moreover, we show a positive trend in case study adoption, for both positivist/(post)positivist and alternative paradigms, albeit a significantly higher adoption rate with the dominant paradigm. We found low adoption for researcher subject relationships (e.g., ethnography and action research) and other qualitative methods, yet researcher subject relationships were used predominantly in alternative paradigms. We contend that the bridge between the conceptualization of phenomena and the empirical data—what we understand to be methodology—has been compromised and needs attention.

Third, we prescribe a multi-pronged approach to encourage paradigm co-existence by (a) fostering open communication among IB scholars; (b) training reviewers on qualitative research, particularly those using alternative paradigms; (c) reassessing the delivery of research methods in doctoral programs; and (d) encouraging interdisciplinary research. Lastly, we uncovered opportunities to promote diversity in gender and location vis-à-vis alternative paradigms.

Our contributions need to be viewed with the following limitations in mind. First, we analyze trends for four IB journals. Even though these journals vary with respect to acceptance of qualitative research and to some extent, their foci, we encourage researchers to examine qualitative research in other IB journals especially those with a niche strategy. Second, our analysis reveals a dominant paradigm—i.e., positivism/(post)positivism—but only moderate adoption second paradigm (interpretivism), while two other paradigms exhibited low adoption. We need to acknowledge that other paradigms such as post-modernism and critical theory were not adopted in the four sample journals. Although these findings limit the scope of the cross-paradigmatic analysis, they underscore a growing opportunity to embrace more qualitative IB research with alternative paradigms. We hope that our analysis and recommendations will further encourage our scientific community to embark on discussion and adoption of alternative paradigms in IB research.

## Appendix 1

Coding process of alternative paradigms in IB.

Paradigm	Quotes	Authors
Interpretivism	Of the three non-functionalist discourses discussed above, we chose to adopt an interpretive reading of the transcripts; however in the Discussion section we reflect on what dialogic and critical readings of the data might tell us. Interpretive discourse is driven by an interest in the way that scientists construe knowledge, particularly tacit knowledge, and how they make sense of the events around them (p. 46)	Mabey and Nicholds (2015)
	This study used a phenomenological, inductive approach (p. 297)	Hulbert et al. (2013)
	Following the interpretive research tradition, what individual owner-managers do in relation to their internationalisation activities, and how they act with respect to timing, pace and patterns of internationalisation, are underpinned by how they <i>understand</i> firm internationalisation (p. 675)	Lamb et al. (2011)
	Interpretative research involves different means of data collection to triangulate data and reinforce findings (p. 636)	Abdalla and Zambaldi (2016)
	I have taken an interpretive approach to explore how managerial learning evolves during internationalization and how social capital can foster learning. This approach has let me illuminate managerial interpretations and meaning attachment to this phenomenon, providing descriptions from the viewpoint of subjective experiences (p. 882)	Doornich (2018)
	This complexity suggests that naturalistic inquiry is an appropriate way to investigate the phenomena (p. 264)	Nardon and Aten (2008)

Paradigm	Quotes	Authors
Critical Realism	Methodologically, this research is a qualitatively based comparative analysis that relies on critical realism (p. 578)	Finchelstein (2017)
	We adopt this approach within a critical realist position to gain a fuller and more comprehensive understanding in a poorly researched area (p. 491)	Park and Harris (2014)
	Our research approach is informed by a critical realist epistemology (p. 974)	Geary and Aguzzoli (2016)
	In doing so, we heed Welch and colleagues' (2011) call for qualitative research taking a critical realist approach: understanding the dynamics of a particular complex setting so as to generate contextual explanations that encompass both human intentionality (the explanations and reasons articulated by our interview subjects) as well as their position in the social structure (p. 885)	Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens (2018)
Social Constructivism	The philosophical commitments of this research belong to the constructivist paradigm.. Subsequently, the ontological premise of this project belongs to relativism, which implies that there are numerous locally constructed realities existing out there (p. 4)	Galkina and Yang (2020)
	A process study is a form of 'contextualised explanation' ...: it seeks to build an explanation as to why and how events proceeded as they did. While still relatively uncommon in IB research, the importance of process research is well recognised in the management field (p. 501)	Kriz and Welch (2018)
	The epistemological considerations of radical constructivism claim that reality is to be understood as a process. Reality is being continuously constructed within a socially interactive "process of negotiations" (p. 369)	Rüegg-Stürm and Gomez (1994)
	In consideration of this our study offers an explanation of time as a social construction, which is experienced differentially, rather than an irrefutable and constant fact of life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) (p. 147)	Middleton et al. (2011)

Paradigm	Quotes	Authors
	This social constructivist approach to culture (Lee, Kim, & Park, 2015), focusing on “emerging” or “negotiated” culture or “third culture”... may also help in considering the positive dynamics in cross-cultural encounters which are rarely studied in international business research (p. 1)	Barmeyer and Davoine (2019)
	By organizing and further interpreting these reports in the light of existing concepts as well as contextual factors, we then arrived at our constructions of the respondents’ constructions of their social reality (p. 551)	Zimmermann and Ravishankar (2016)
	In the social constructionist tradition, discourse analysis focuses on the role of the underlying logic of the language used by an actor or a group of actors in shaping our views of the social reality. The media is often used as a tool to shape the public’s view of that social reality. The social constructionist tradition acknowledges that there is no single, objective reality but multiple, contesting realities, each offering alternative views on actors and actions (p. 1066)	Persson et al. (2014)

**Acknowledgements** The authors want to thank Catherine Welch and Rebecca Piekkari for their comments on early versions of this paper. They appreciate comments and discussions with Jeremy Aroles and Shabneez Bhankaraully in early development of this research. The authors also want to thank the participants for the qualitative stage of the research as well as the Editors and reviewers for their helpful comments.

**Data availability** The dataset is being used as part of a multi-study research project. Hence, it can be made available after completion of the research project.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors have not disclosed any financial or non-financial interests that are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication.

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