

# **Subsidiary Performance Measurement in International Business** Research

## **A Systematic Review and Future Directions**

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Document Version Final published version

Published in: Journal of Business Research

DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114252

Publication date: 2023

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*Citation for published version (APA):* Gundelach, H., & Nielsen, B. B. (2023). Subsidiary Performance Measurement in International Business Research: A Systematic Review and Future Directions. *Journal of Business Research, 169*, Article 114252. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114252

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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres

# Subsidiary performance measurement in international business research: A systematic review and future directions



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#### ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Subsidiary performance Performance measurement Science mapping Bibliometric analysis Thematic analysis

#### ABSTRACT

Subsidiary Performance (SP) remains central to International Business (IB) research. Yet, exactly how to measure SP is a matter of some confusion in the academic literature. Indeed, to date, no review has offered a systematic overview of the variety of SP measures deployed in the IB literature. Based on a bibliometric study of 193 quantitative research articles published in top-tier journals from 1982 to 2022, this review provides a science mapping overview of SP measurements. By use of bibliographic coupling analyses, the review finds high variability of measurements within thematic clusters of research, for example within studies of knowledge transfer. This variation hampers the ability to both build and test IB theory. Furthermore, it is highly problematic in view of recent debates about replication within the social sciences. Therefore, the review proposes a range of questions to guide researchers in selecting the most appropriate SP measure(s) for future studies.

#### 1. Introduction

Multinationality's effect on firms' performance is a highly researched area within International Business (IB), yet the vast majority of studies measure performance at the aggregated Multinational Corporation (MNC) level (Schmuck et al., 2022). Studies on performance at the aggregated MNC level, however, only partly elucidate the explanation of performance, as contributions from individual subsidiaries outside the home country play a pivotal role in the assessment of MNC performance. The difficulties in studying the multinationalityperformance relationship are well recognized within the IB literature (Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen & Kim, 2020; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2010; Richter et al., 2017; Verbeke & Forootan, 2012), and this is partly due to difficulties related to measuring subsidiary performance (SP). There are two major reasons for this: 1) primary SP data (e.g., interviews or surveys) is often challenging to access due to MNC internal policies as well as cultural, geographical, or language issues (e.g., Ando, 2014; Brouthers et al., 2008; Chung et al., 2008; Slangen & Hennart 2008; Tomassen & Benito, 2009; Williams et al., 2017); and 2) secondary SP data (e.g., financial accounts) may be unsuitable for research due to host countries' institutional factors, such as tax regimes or accounting standards, or spurious variations due to the strategic role of the subsidiary, or irreconcilable data due to transfer pricing policies (e.g., Bebenroth & Froese, 2020; Chan et al., 2008; Demirbag et al., 2007; Gao et al., 2008; Sarabi et al., 2020; Trapczyński & Gorynia, 2017). Whatever the reason, the fact remains that most studies of performance effects of internationalization (or multinationality) neglect to account for (measure) SP specifically, and this mismatch between levels of theory and data (Nielsen, 2014) may, in part, help explain the highly inconsistent empirical findings (see Schmuck et al., 2022 for a recent review). An alternative explanation may be due to often oversimplified operationalizations of performance (at both MNC and subsidiary levels) and the great variety with which performance is measured across studies (Verbeke & Forootan, 2012).

In light of the current debate about replication within social sciences (e.g., Bettis et al., 2016; Camerer et al., 2018; Dau et al., 2021; Edlund et al., 2022; Goodman et al., 2016), it is essential to facilitate the advancement of those cumulative and comparative studies that support a vibrant IB research agenda (Nielsen et al., 2020). The great variation of SP measures (e.g., Return on Assets (ROA), Return on Sales (ROS), Return on Investment (ROI), Return on Equity (ROE), market share growth, survival, and productivity) utilized in SP studies hampers the IB community's ability to develop and test sound theories about subsidiary activities and their association with performance. Moreover, while

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.114252

Received 30 March 2022; Received in revised form 28 June 2023; Accepted 31 August 2023 Available online 22 September 2023

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several ratios (e.g., ROA, ROS, ROI) quantify essential aspects of SP and are sound measures of performance, they measure distinctively different aspects of subsidiary activity. Moreover, not only are such operationalizations different in terms of the outcomes they measure, but the antecedents (i.e., independent variables) are also likely to influence various SP measures very differently, rendering comparisons (replication) and theoretical advancements difficult at best. This review provides a systematic overview of the plurality of measures employed in contemporary articles in high-quality academic journals. Our findings that a total of 79 different items were used to measure SP in our sample of 193 empirical studies between 1982 and 2022 show the great variety and inconsistency of operationalizations of SP. Moreover, our results also illustrate the seemingly random deployment of SP measures irrespective of the subject under study or its thematic anchoring, pointing to a need for more systematic justification for the choice of SP measurement to increase comparability and replicability of results.

This article has two main objectives; firstly, we provide a state-ofthe-art systematic review of the variety of measurements of SP employed across 193 studies and demonstrate inadequate theoretical and empirical justification for the selection of specific measures in particular studies. We illustrate how and why this is problematic in relation to both comparisons *between* studies and cumulative knowledge *across* studies of subsidiary performance. Secondly, we utilize the insights of our analyses to suggest concrete ways forward for scholars who are interested in capturing (measuring) various aspects of subsidiary performance. These recommendations provide future scholars with important criteria against which they can argue, select, and measure performance outcomes at the subsidiary level.

The review focuses on the intellectual structure (Donthu et al., 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2022) of the relationship between SP measures and the research field by using a systematic literature review protocol (Paul et al., 2021) to review articles indexed in The Web of Science and Scopus. Specifically, this review combines bibliometric and thematic analyses to provide science mapping uncovering relationships among citing publications (Mukherjee et al., 2022) regarding the employment of specific SP measures within particular thematic clusters. Hence, this study addresses the following research question (RQ): *How to select and justify thematically congruent measurements of SP in IB research*. Based on findings from our systematic review, we provide researchers with a set of questions to guide their selection of SP measurements in future research.

The remaining parts of the review proceed as follows. First, the article presents theoretical aspects of performance measurement to build a structure for the ensuing review. Second, the method section explains the process for the selection of articles included in the review and the methods applied to identify and cluster relevant studies and their corresponding SP measures. Next, we present the findings of our study, followed by a concluding section with considerations for research design and a proposal of a range of questions to guide the selection of SP measures in future research. Finally, limitations are briefly discussed.

#### 2. Theory

There is little consensus as to the measurement of firm performance in business and management studies. Indeed, a recent firm performance meta-analysis traversed the following terms: "firm performance", "operational performance", "financial performance", "organizational performance", and "business performance" (Saridakis et al., 2017, p. 1). Some authors have pointed to the synonymity of Organizational Performance, Financial Performance, and Corporate Economic Performance (for a discussion, see, Hamann et al., 2013); others have noted the distinction between Operational and Organizational Performance (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986) or view the former as an antecedent of the latter (Atif et al., 2017). This lack of consistency in firm performance measurement provides only limited guidance regarding the measurement of SP performance. The multi-faceted nature of SP requires a comprehensive yet straightforward analytical structure to undertake a systematic review of the variation of measures. Based on principally methodological literature, we have identified three key aspects of performance measurement. The first is termed 'Domain' and decomposes the performance measure into its constituent parts based on its financial or operational origin (Dossi & Patelli, 2010; Rowe & Morrow, 1999). The second is 'Mode', which classifies the performance measures into either a positivistic operational measure or one based on perceptual observations (Dess & Robinson, 1984; Talpová & Scalera, 2015). The third aspect, 'Dimension', captures the important issue of whether a uni- (single) or multi-item measure is used (Bergquist & Rossiter, 2007; Boyd et al., 2013; Boyd et al., 2005; Churchill, 1979).

#### 2.1. Domain

One of the most influential articles about performance measurement within the strategic management literature opens with a tirade: "there appears to be little hope of reaching an agreement on basic terminology and definitions" (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986, p. 801). Despite (or perhaps perpetuated by) the authors' woeful prophecy, their Classificatory Scheme (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986) has been widely used in performance research. It incorporates three domains: (1) Financial Performance, (2) Business Performance, and (3) Organizational Effectiveness. The authors define Financial Performance as the narrowest definition of the construct, basing it on well-known financial measurements and assuming that financial goals are central to the studied firms' system of targets. The second level concept of Business Performance includes "key operational success factors that might lead to financial performance" (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986, p. 804). Later, overall Effectiveness was introduced to reflect a somewhat broader perceptual interpretation of performance (Hult et al., 2008). Hence, the third layer is Organizational Effectiveness, which they loosely define as "The broader domain reflected in most conceptual literature in strategic management and organization theory" (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986, p. 803). Notwithstanding, neither the original nor later articles have a precise and universally accepted measure of Organizational Effectiveness to be used in organizational research (Hitt, 1988). As a result, the broad performance construct has mostly been superseded by the narrower domain of Organizational Performance, which comprises financial, product market, and shareholder return performance (Richard et al., 2009). However, several SP studies have operationalized Overall Effectiveness by subsidiary survival or exit, albeit "a concern about using survival as a measure of performance is that failure, as measured, might not always indicate poor performance" (Shaver, 1998, p. 577).

#### 2.2. Mode

The decision regarding whether to use subjectively or objectively derived data when measuring SP is fundamental in achieving an acceptable level of measurement validity. Without venturing into a philosophical debate of the objectivity of performance data (for a discussion about financial data objectivity, see, e.g., McKernan, 2007; Shapiro, 1997), we follow the conventional classification of performance as 'objective' when referring to secondary (archival) data and 'subjective' when referring to primary (survey or interview) data. Early hesitance to use subjective measures, e.g., "Where accurate objective measures of performance (particularly economic) are available, their use is strongly supported and encouraged" (Wall et al., 2004, p. 112) was countered later as convergent validity was proven satisfactory between objective and subjective performance measures (Singh et al., 2016). Subjective data should not, however, be seen as a convenient substitute for objective measures but rather as a way to incorporate otherwise unobtainable multi-dimensional and non-economic aspects of performance (e.g., 360 degrees performance or triple-bottom-line aspects).



Fig. 1. Analytical Framework.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that both primary and secondary data can be subjective or objective,<sup>1</sup> thus emphasizing the importance of considering the objectivity characteristics in study designs. To circumvent the discussion about objectivity, a performance classification founded on cognitive processes was developed, and it was sub-divided into operationally defined and perceptual measures (Keto-kivi & Schroeder, 2004). Dealing with issues of objectivity and systematic informant bias, this division is purely between a precisely defined performance measure and an informant's perceived performance response. A third mode of obtaining performance data was added in the form of 'Quasi-perceptual measures' to account for research based on perceptual measures of items that are operationally defined, such as asking respondents about their firm's ROA (Ketokivi & Schroeder, 2004).

#### 2.3. Dimension

The selection of uni- or multiple-dimensional measures of the dependent variable (DV) has been sparsely dealt with in SP studies. Hence, we turn to the general strategy literature, where an early performance study was based on a single DV (ROE), noting that the choice "was not made lightly" (Hatten et al., 1978, p. 597) but was justifiable due to a longitudinal study design. Later, scholars stressed the need to move away from the previous practice of using mostly single-item scales to achieve "a stronger degree of correspondence between constructs and their measures" (Venkatraman & Grant, 1986, p. 81). Notwithstanding, in their assessment of performance measurement errors, Boyd et al. (2005) found that almost 40 percent of DVs were measured by a single item. Conversely, around 60 percent were categorized as multiple-item measures such as indexes and scales. The result of their assessment was that construct validity could be increased by using multiple indicators (Boyd et al., 2005).

In a similar analysis at the MNC level, Combs et al. (2005) noted that previous works "point toward a broad consensus that performance is multidimensional" (p. 267). Nevertheless, a review of firm performance studies in leading academic management journals found that just under half defined performance by uni-dimensional measures (Richard et al., 2009). Of the remaining studies, 67 percent used multiple separate analyses, and 48 percent used aggregation either via factor analysis or by averaging.<sup>2</sup> The authors concluded that "organizational performance is not a one-dimensional theoretical construct nor is it likely to be characterizable with a single operational measure" (Richard et al., 2009, p. 722). Merely adding or deleting arbitrarily chosen SP measurement items to satisfy a factor analysis procedure is an inadequate substitute for a proper operationalization of the SP construct from the outset. Rather, SP measures must be theoretically defined and operationalized accordingly.

#### 2.4. Analytical framework

The analytical framework for assessing the measurement of SP is based on the above analysis of theoretical concepts and encompasses Domain, Mode, and Dimension, as shown in Fig. 1. The figure highlights the possible combinations of considering all three aspects of measurement, which will form the basis of the assessment of SP measurement.

#### 3. Methodology

This review draws its methodological inspiration from a recent upsurge in the utilization of the systematic literature review approach within business studies (e.g., Brozovic, 2018; Dembek et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2021; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2018; Kumar et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2022). A recent taxonomy of systematic literature reviews classifies reviews as either domain-, theory-, or method-based (Mukherjee et al., 2022; Palmatier et al., 2017). The method-based reviews aim at providing a full insight into the deployment of methodological approaches in a particular scientific field, such as an overview of the use of fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis used (fQCA) in business and management research (Kumar et al., 2022) and performance assessment methods used in the circular economy literature (Sassanelli et al., 2019). The present method-based review examines the congruence between IB themes and measurements of SP through bibliometric analysis (Donthu et al., 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2022; Zupic & Čater, 2014). Bibliometric analysis provides an ability to identify relationships between large quantities of bibliographical data, and it "employs a quantitative approach for the description, evaluation, and monitoring of published research" (Zupic & Čater, 2014, p. 430). This type of analysis is widely used to provide comprehensive retrospective reviews of an academic field (e.g., a review of the development of Open Innovation by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that this distinction is somewhat artificial as many archival studies are based on primary data such as surveys, collected, however, by third parties. Moreover, we also note that 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' with regards to sources of data is only used as a classification here with no reference to quality of data per se.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "Per centages may add up to >100% due to multiple categorizations per article" (Richard et al., 2009, p. 720).



Fig. 2. SPAR-4-SLP Protocol for Review of Subsidiary Performance Measurement (adapted from Paul et al., 2021).

Randhawa et al., 2016) and reviews of the impact of an academic journal by clustering its publications to form an overview of its content (e.g., Donthu et al., 2020). To provide a transparent and systematic process, this review has adopted a systematic approach based on a recently developed protocol for systematic literature reviews, the SPAR-4-SLR (Paul et al., 2021). The combination of SPAR-4-SLR and bibliometric analysis enables comprehensive retrospective research of an academic field, as demonstrated in a recent study of the research on financial literacy (Goyal & Kumar, 2020). The systematic bibliometric approach and the utilization of a review protocol provide transparency and enable replication, thereby adhering to the overall aim of this review. In the following sections, we explain the review protocol and the underpinning analytic methodology.

#### 3.1. SPAR-4-SLR protocol

The adopted 'Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Review' (SPAR-4-SLR) protocol was recently developed to "guide and justify decisions in systematic literature reviews" (Paul et al., 2021, p. 1). The structured approach to assemble, arrange, and assess relevant literature is illustrated in Fig. 2.

#### 3.2. Assembling

The initial assembling step of the protocol comprises of setting the scholarly area of the review and specifying the parameters for the initial wide-reaching search through two sub-stages, i.e., 'identification' and 'acquisition' of relevant literature. The process of identification involves identifying the scholarly review domain and the document source and types to be analyzed to answer the RQ. Based on the stated domain of subsidiary performance and our RQ, this review investigates only empirical articles published in academic journals and excludes books, book chapters, and non-academic sources (e.g., newspaper articles, reports, and working papers). In order to deliver a clear and perceptible overview of the measurements of SP in contemporary IB research, only research articles published in high-quality outlets were included, here

defined as articles published in level 3, 4, and 4\* journals (The Association of Business Schools, 2021). Web of Science and Scopus were selected due to their consistent and highly stringent indexing criteria. To cover all pertinent research of SP, the period of publication in our review was unrestricted (only 2023 was excluded). Following an initial vetting of highly cited articles in the SP domain, the search keywords were established. To achieve consistency between the selected studies, only the terms describing the MNCs' foreign entities as either "Subsidiary" or "Affiliate", and performance as either "Performance", "Survival", or "Exit" were selected as search terms in the title, abstract, and keywords fields. An alternative term for MNCs' foreign entities, International Joint Venture (IJV), was omitted as it would bring the ownership dimension into this review, although this aspect is left silent in most of the sampled articles.

#### 3.3. Arranging

The first sub-stage in arranging the articles in the review was to establish the coding scheme to classify and define articles for inclusion and exclusion. The 782 articles identified by Web of Science and Scopus were coded regarding their IB content, the dependent variable, level of analysis, and research method. The second sub-stage of arranging the articles for review, so-called purification, was to define articles for inclusion and exclusion. Based on the coding described above, all articles that were outside the IB field of research were excluded from the dataset. Furthermore, articles with a dependent variable different from SP were excluded. Also, articles that analyzed subsidiaries and their performance at MNC level were not included in the dataset. Finally, all qualitative articles were excluded from further analysis. As a third sub-stage, the remaining articles were coded in accordance with a coding scheme

#### Table 1

List of journal titles.

Journal Title	Frequency
Journal of World Business	25
Journal of International Business Studies	22
International Business Review	21
Management International Review	16
Journal of International Management	14
International Journal of Human Resource Management	12
Strategic Management Journal	12
Journal of Business Research	9
Asia Pacific Journal of Management	6
Global Strategy Journal	6
International Marketing Review	6
Academy of Management Journal	5
Journal of Management	5
Organization Studies	5
Journal of International Marketing	4
Human Resource Management	3
Journal of Management Studies	3
Human Resource Management Journal	2
Journal of Business Ethics	2
Management And Organization Review	2
Administrative Science Quarterly	1
British Journal of Management	1
European Management Review	1
Group & Organization Management	1
IEEE Transactions On Engineering Management	1
Industrial Marketing Management	1
International Journal of Production Economics	1
International Journal of Research In Marketing	1
Journal of Development Studies	1
Journal of Economic Geography	1
Journal of The Academy of Marketing Science	1
Management Science	1
Marketing Science	1
Total	193

based on the analytical framework. The coding scheme encompassed the three central aspects of performance measurements based on the previous analysis of theoretical concepts to classify the measurements of SP in IB research. In the coding scheme, each SP measurement was decomposed into three components: 1) Domain (financial, operational, or overall effectiveness), 2) Mode (operational or perceptual), and 3) Dimension (uni- or multi-dimensional). The coding of the mode and domain components in articles using a multi-dimensional SP measure involved a detailed examination and coding of the individual measures. Some reviewed articles aggregated many aspects of SP into their DV, and the mode and domain codes were then determined by the majority of such aspects. To achieve the highest level of consistency of the articles' cited references, which formed the input for the subsequent bibliographic coupling analysis, the dataset was compiled using Web of Science. The final sample used for the study contained 193 articles published in 33 different journals, as shown in Table 1.

#### 3.4. Assessing

Analyzing and reporting the results are encompassed in the assessment stage of the protocol. The first sub-stage here, evaluation, is to define the analytical method used to analyze the articles selected for the review. To answer the RQ of congruence, it was important to establish the links between IB research themes and the SP measures. Such relationships are established by science mapping, which is one of the main techniques of bibliometric analysis (Donthu et al., 2021). The 193 reviewed articles were clustered by the bibliographic coupling method, which links publications that share a minimum of one cited reference (see Fig. 3 below). The method is based on the notion that the more references two articles will have in common (overlap of reference lists), the higher the commonality of the research topics (Kessler, 1963). In other words, two articles citing the same references are more related than two articles without any shared references, and the interrelatedness increases with the number of commonly cited references. The measure of interrelatedness is expressed as the number of overlapping cited references and how many other articles in the sample share at least one cited reference (Donthu et al., 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2022; van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

The measure of relatedness and the mapping distance between articles yield a measure of similarity between publications and, hence, a proxy for research topic commonality. The construction and visualization of the bibliographic coupling between the articles were performed



Fig. 3. Bibliographic Coupling (adapted from Mura et al., 2018, p. 666).

with the software VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).<sup>3</sup> To reduce the risk of endogeneity, all references cited in the articles' method section regarding the measurement of SP were removed from the analysis (see Appendix A). Otherwise, the articles would also be placed in the network due to their method references, which is the focus of this study, and the analysis would thus have produced a distorted mapping of the articles. The bibliographic coupling analysis in VOSviewer resulted in a two-dimensional x-y plot where the studies were placed by VOSviewer's distance-based mapping technique into nodes and resultant clusters (for a detailed explanation, see van Eck and Waltman, 2010). The distancebased cluster map reflects the strength of the relationship between the underlying articles.

The three clusters of the reviewed articles were thematically labeled. The labels resulted from an analysis of the articles' titles, abstracts, and keywords using the automatic content analysis software, Leximancer (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Leximancer transforms "lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns in an unsupervised manner" (Smith & Humphreys, 2006, p. 262), and based on examination of the body of text, it produces overall concepts by a weighing algorithm based on frequency and co-occurrence in the text. Automated content analysis by Leximancer has been used to gain insight into IB themes (Devinney & Hohberger, 2016; Liesch et al., 2011), consumer communication studies (Campbell et al., 2011), and literature reviews (Wilden et al., 2018). Leximancer has been proven to yield high reliability and validity (Smith & Humphreys, 2006; Wilden et al., 2017) and has the advantage of "objective data analysis as researcher bias coder subjectivity is removed" (Sotiriadou et al., 2014, p. 230).

In addition to answering the RQ, an additional aim of this review is to produce useful guidelines for future SP research. This intention is in line with the SPAR-4-SLR protocol's *assessing* item concerning future SP research. Based on the overview of existing SP measures and their IB thematic congruence, this review proposes a decision model with a range of questions to serve as a guide for the selection and use of appropriate measures of SP. The ultimate step in the protocol is *reporting*, and this review presents its analyses and findings in a similar fashion to recent systematic literature reviews (e.g., Kumar et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2022) by using a reporting convention including metrics presented in tables, frameworks, networks, as well as narratives.

## 4. Reporting of results

This article assesses the congruence of measures of SP used within articles in similar thematic research areas. We address this firstly by reporting the frequency of use of different SP measures by using the theoretically derived classification in the coding scheme and secondly by examining the thematic relationships between selected individual articles in the clusters and their different measurement of SP.

#### 4.1. The use of different measures of subsidiary performance

#### 4.1.1. Domain of measurement

The first performance aspect is the Domain, which classifies performance measures in accordance with the origin of its items, whether derived directly from financial measurements or indirectly from identifiable operational factors leading to financial performance. The third category, Overall Effectiveness, is based on a broader definition of SP. As shown in Table 2 below, more than 50 percent of the analyzed studies used SP measures within the Financial Domain. Since Dimension plays an important role when ascertaining Domain (Venkatraman &

#### Table 2

Frequency of key aspects of performance measurement per cluster.

Domain_Mode_Dimension		cluster		Total	
		1	2	3	
Financial_Operational_M	Iulti-dimensional	2	2	0	4
Financial_Operationally	defined_Uni-dimensional	6	15	22	43
Financial_Quasi-Percept	ive_Multi-dimensional	26	4	6	36
Financial_Quasi-Percept	ive_Uni-dimensional	10	5	1	16
Operational_Operationally defined_Uni-dimensional		6	0	2	8
Operational_Perceptive_	Multi-dimensional	16	4	7	27
Overall efectiveness_Op	erational_Multi-dimensional	2	2	0	4
Overall effectiveness_Operationally defined_Uni- dimensional		2	26	10	38
Overall effectiveness Perceptive Multi-dimensional		11	3	2	16
Overall effectiveness_Perceptive_Uni-dimensional		1	0	0	1
Domain - subtotals	Financial	44	26	29	99
	Operational	22	4	9	35
	Overall Effectiveness	16	31	12	59
Mode - subtotals	Operationally defined	18	45	34	97
	Perceptive	28	7	9	44
	Quasi-Perceptive	36	9	7	52
Dimension - subtotals	Uni-dimensional	25	46	35	106
	Multi-dimensional	57	15	15	87
Total		82	61	50	193

Ramanujam, 1986), it should be noted that about 60 percent of the studies within the Financial Domain are uni-dimensional. These unidimensional definitions are in 59 studies based on single financial ratios. Several studies refer to past research as justification for their SP definition as a single financial ratio, such as "We use return on assets (ROA), the most common measure of profitability, as our measure of financial performance" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 323), and "ROA is a commonly used measure of foreign subsidiary performance in international business research" (Hsu et al., 2017, p. 549). The authors of a recent partial replication study based on Gaur and Lu (2007) selected a financially based definition (ROE) in lieu of the original authors' definition of 'subsidiary exit' within the Overall Effectiveness Domain and argued that "ROE has been used as a measure of firm performance in a vast number of studies" (Shirodkar & Konara, 2017, p. 187).

SP definitions classified as Operational and Overall Effectiveness were less employed, and the Operational category encompasses aspects of the SP definition that are not financial but include factors leading to financial performance. This study considered all non-financial items as Operational apart from items that are conceptually very broad (e.g., 'overall performance' or 'survival'). The 35 studies defining SP with items in the Operational Domain were mainly multi-dimensional, with seven studies employing only 'Labor productivity' and one using 'net sales per square meter'. Common Operational items were 'Market share', 'Customer satisfaction', and 'New product development'. Twenty-seven studies employed several Operational items as part of their measurement of SP using measures such as 'market share', 'marketing', 'market reputation', distribution', 'reputation', 'market access', product quality', and 'new product development capability' (e.g., Dikova, 2009; Trapczyński & Gorynia, 2017).

#### 4.1.2. Mode of measurement

As shown in Table 2 below, about half of the studies operationalized SP measurement as Quasi-perceptual and Perceptual modes based on surveys for data collection. The survey data fell broadly into two categories: 1) primary data collected on financial data, operational data, or a combination (e.g., sales growth, productivity, customer satisfaction, and market share); or 2) secondary data sourced from databases providing financial data obtained by surveys (e.g., profitability, break-even, or loss). Several studies argued that the use of survey data was "due to the absence of financial performance data reported at the subsidiary level"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The match between levels of theory and measurement is key for such proxies (see Nielsen, 2014) and we recognize that overlap in citations – while relevant and proven to increase context similarity – may hide unseen biases due to the nature and usage of citations. Nevertheless, we follow established studies in this tradition in our approach.

(Fang et al., 2007, p. 1057) or that "suitable measures were largely unavailable" (Hughes et al., 2017, p. 415). One study argued both from an epistemological perspective that "subjective performance data have been shown to be highly correlated with the objective performance data" and also that quasi-perceptual data was used "because of the absence of financial performance data reported at the subsidiary level" (Fang et al., 2010, pp. 38-39). Another study was in line with a number of previous concerns over the usefulness of accounting data and how the measurement of SP lends itself to using survey data, arguing, "Moreover, as subsidiary performance is often determined by uncontrollable factors (such as transfer pricing, subsidies, management fees or exchange rates), perceptual measures have been used to overcome this limitation" (Trapczyński & Gorynia, 2017, p. 702).

Seven studies used survey data from external datasets obtained by the quasi-perceptual mode (i.e., data from financial databases that provide a particular SP indicator). The specific survey data was provided annually by the Japanese publisher Toyo Keizai from 1970 and is assembled by general managers of over 15,000 foreign Japanese subsidiaries every year being asked to assess whether their subsidiary made a loss, break-even, or a gain on a three-point scale (Beamish et al., 1997). This type of survey method, hereinafter labeled the 'TK method', has subsequently been employed by researchers in four studies of other populations of foreign subsidiaries, e.g., in Taiwan (Lo & Lin, 2015).

#### 4.1.3. Dimension of measurement

Our results show that a high proportion of SP research employs a unidimensional definition of SP. This is in contrast to earlier studies of MNC (or organizational) performance that found multiple dimensions outweighed uni-dimensional measurement and concluded it is most appropriate to assess performance by multiple dimensions (e.g., Combs et al., 2005; Richard et al., 2009). However, our findings show that unidimensional measurements were more frequent than multiple dimensions (see Table 2 below). Authors of highly-cited studies supported their uni-dimensional measurement selection by ascribing it to the subject under study (e.g., Gaur et al., 2007) or that a uni-dimensional measure is commonly used to describe performance within a specific industry, e.g., the banking industry (Miller & Eden, 2006). Several studies stated that their reason for selecting a single measure was purely methodological, e.g., "in keeping with prior variance decomposition research" (Ma et al., 2013, p. 76).

Some authors agitated for the need for "a composite measure of subsidiary performance" (e.g., Monteiro et al., 2008, p. 96) in order "to avoid the problems associated with depending on narrowly defined criteria, such as profitability" (Nguyen & Rugman, 2015, p. 477). For instance, a study of knowledge transfer within MNCs used managerial evaluations of three different items (sales growth, market share, and ROA) to measure SP (Li & Lee, 2015). Another study (Simonin & Özsomer, 2009) about knowledge processes was content with using only two measurement items (market share and sales growth). Yet, considerations made (justification) when measuring SP multi-dimensionally in contrast to uni-dimensionally were often neglected as only the measurement items themselves, e.g., "firm reputation, profitability, and product or service distribution" (Brouthers et al., 2008, p. 198), or "market share, sales growth and return on investment" (Venaik et al., 2005, p. 662) were explicitly stated.

#### 4.1.4. Uni-dimensional measures

Table 3 shows that the most common uni-dimensional measurement item overall was 'Survival', whereas the most common financial item was ROA. Several studies using 'Survival' as SP referred to the same highly cited study, e.g., "In keeping with previous studies that used the same dataset, we consider a subsidiary terminated when its records no longer appear in the dataset (e.g., Delios and Beamish, 2001)" (Getachew & Beamish, 2017, p. 67). Three home countries dominated the MNCs studied in this group, as 26 of 38 studies were based on samples of subsidiaries of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean MNCs (e.g., Dai Table 3

Uni-dimensional measures	Cluster			Total
	1	2	3	
EBITDA margin	0	0	1	1
Labor productivity	5	0	2	7
Market share	0	1	0	1
Performance rate	1	0	0	1
Profit	1	0	0	1
Profit increase	0	0	0	0
Return on Assets (ROA)	4	11	13	28
Return on Equity (ROE)	0	0	3	3
Return on Investment (ROI)	2	0	0	2
Return on Sales (ROS)	3	2	3	8
Sales per sq. meter	1	0	0	1
Sales revenue	1	1	2	4
Survival	2	26	10	38
Toyo Keizai	5	5	1	11
Total	25	46	35	106

et al., 2013; Gaur & Lu, 2007). Further, in the sample, 43 studies used typical financial returns ratios as SP measurement, with the two most frequently used ratios being ROA and ROS, accounting for 28 and eight entries, respectively. Three studies measured SP by ROE and two by ROI.

Several studies justified the use of a single financial item to measure the SP construct: "We use return on assets (ROA), the most common measure of profitability, as our measure of financial performance" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 323) and "The use of the objective financial measurement of the performance is widespread (...) ROA (return on assets), (...) is an appropriate indicator for management effectiveness about performance" (Lo, 2016, p. 1714). Rarely used single financial SP measures included 'Performance', such as, for example, "Performance was assessed by asking respondents how the subsidiary rates in relationship to its local competitors" (Lovett et al., 2009, p. 487) or 'Sales revenue', as "we utilize the sales revenue to indicate foreign affiliate performance" (Chung & Dahms, 2018, p. 306). Lastly, taking industry standards into account and arguing against ROA, one study in the sample measured SP by 'sales per square meter' arguing: "measuring sales performance, as opposed to ROI or ROA, has repeatedly been promoted as a more reliable way of comparing performance across different national markets" (Tran et al., 2010, pp. 500-501).

#### 4.1.5. Combinations of measures

The two most frequent multi-dimensional SP measurement combinations were perceptually defined in the Operational Domain (27 articles) and Quasi-perceptually defined in the Financial Domain (36 articles). The first combination typically included: 'Firm reputation', 'Product or service distribution', 'Customer satisfaction', 'Employee retention', or 'Access to market'. Examples of articles using the perceptually defined measurements in the Operational Domain include (e.g., Brouthers et al., 2008; Dikova, 2009; Fey et al., 2009). The articles employing quasi-perceptual and multi-dimensional financial measurements typically used SP measurements constructed by three or four items, including such labels as 'Sales Revenue', 'Cash Flow', 'Financial Results', 'Net Profit', and 'Profit'. Several highly cited studies in the sample (e.g., Ambos & Birkinshaw, 2010; Monteiro et al., 2008; Venaik et al., 2005) employed such combinations.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.2. Thematic relationships and measures of subsidiary performance

The bibliographic coupling method described in section 3 yielded three clusters of articles with thematically related subjects under study. The three clusters contain 82, 61, and 50 articles respectively, as shown

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The dataset containing the labels of the reviewed articles and corresponding coding and data from Web of Science and VOSviewer is available on request.

Cluster 1 (knowledge, transfer, organizational)	Cluster 2 (experience, entry, learning)	Cluster 3 (institutional, emerging, relationship)
(Gong, 2003)	(Delios & Beamish, 2001)	(Makino et al., 2004)
(Monteiro et al., 2008)	(Luo & Peng, 1999)	(Gaur et al., 2007)
(Luo <i>,</i> 2003)	(Barkema & Vermeulen, 1997)	(Chan et al., 2010)
(Chang et al., 2012)	(Li, 1995)	(Chan et al., 2008)
(Andersson et al., 2001)	(Gaur & Lu, 2007)	(Brouthers et al., 2008)

Fig. 4. Highly cited studies in the three clusters.



Fig. 5. Mapping of Thematic Clusters.

in Table 2. Each cluster was thematically labeled as Cluster 1: Knowledge, Transfer, Organizational; Cluster 2: Experience, Entry, Learning; and Cluster 3: Institutional, Emerging, Relationship. To provide a further indication of the cluster themes, Fig. 4 provides a table of the five most highly cited articles in each cluster.

#### 4.2.1. Cluster 1: Knowledge, transfer, organizational

One of the central themes in Cluster 1 is the dissemination of knowledge within large MNC subsidiary networks, and several articles in the sample studied the role of knowledge transfer from MNCs' headquarters to their subsidiaries and the association with SP. For instance, a study using two perceptive measures ("the firms overall performance last year was greater than expected" and "the firm outperformed its major competitors in the last year") found a positive direct relationship between technology transfer with headquarters and SP (Cui et al., 2006, p. 106). A later study established a similar positive relationship between knowledge transfers from MNCs to subsidiaries and SP (Chang et al., 2012). This study employed multiple financial SP measures as it used both ROI and ROE as dependent variables in the model (obtaining similar results). A third article in Cluster 1 found an inverted U-shaped relationship between intra-MNC advantage transfer and SP by using ROA as the dependent variable (Lo, 2016). A related and important theme in Cluster 1 is the issue of intra-MNC knowledge transfers through expatriates, and Wang et al. (2009) established a positive association by asking 242 subsidiary executives about "the extent to which the respondent was satisfied with the subsidiary's performance" (p. 1192). In Cluster 1, several articles study the relationship between subsidiaries' staffing strategies and SP. For instance, Colakoglu and Caligiuri (2008) established that cultural distance moderated the association between home country expatriates and SP, operationalized as an multi-dimensional, quasi-perceptual aggregated measure within the Financial Domain (sales volume, profitability, and market share compared to industry norms). The direct relationship between expatriate staffing and SP was examined by Hyun et al. (2015), and using 'labor productivity' as the SP measure it established a significant and positive relation between the ratio of expatriates and SP. A subsequent study about the SP effect of replacing expatriates with host country nationals used an industry-adjusted ROS averaged over three years as SP measurement and found a positive impact of replacing expatriates with host country nationals in longer-established subsidiaries (Bebenroth & Froese, 2020).

#### 4.2.2. Cluster 2: Experience, entry, learning

In Cluster 2, several articles studied a common theme of experience's association with SP. The seminal study by Luo and Peng (1999) used a quasi-perceptive, financial, and multidimensional measure of SP as managers of foreign MNCs' subsidiaries in China were asked to assess their subsidiary's ROS, ROE, ratio of total sales/total assets, and the competitive position on a "five-point Likert scale in comparison with the particular sub-unit's major competitors in the local industry" (Luo & Peng, 1999, p. 279). The study found a positive relationship between experience and SP, particularly in complex and hostile environments. Another highly cited study in the same area by Delios and Beamish (2001) found that two different measures of SP had different antecedents, as "when a firm makes a wholly owned entry, host country experience influences subsidiary survival but does not have an independent relationship with profitability" (Delios & Beamish, 2001, p. 1035). The study used two uni-dimensional measures, one operationally and overall effectiveness, i.e., survival, and one quasi-perceptive, i.e., a financial measure based on the TK method. Based on their findings, the authors stressed that researchers "could achieve a better and more complete

understanding of the outcomes of a multinational firm's strategic decisions" by deploying several SP measures (Delios & Beamish, 2001, p. 1035). Later, another study of experience's effect on SP (Gao et al., 2008) confirmed a positive association between host market experience and SP by using ROS, a financial, operationally-defined, and unidimensional measure of SP, albeit the authors noted that ROS "may be subjected to the practice of internal transfer pricing" (p. 757). A related study in Cluster 2 established a U-shaped relationship between host country experience and the likelihood of a subsidiary achieving profitability (Wu & Lin, 2010). The study measured SP by the TK method on a sample of over 1500 Taiwanese MNCs.

#### 4.2.3. Cluster 3: Institutional, emerging, relationship

The articles in cluster 3 are generally newer, as research on emerging economies informed by an institutional perspective has increased considerably since the seminal article by Peng et al. (2009). A recent study on the relationship between emerging market MNCs' home country market share and SP by Lee et al. (2022) utilized one unidimensional measure (survival) to establish such a relationship, in particular for subsidiaries located in less-developed countries. Lee et al. (2022) based their study on a sample of Korean MNCs, and several other studies in this cluster have used data from other large Asian emerging home countries (e.g., China). Two articles in cluster 3 study the relationship between risk and SP based on samples of Chinese MNCs (Han, 2021; Liu et al., 2016). Both studies utilize multi-dimensional SP measures, and Liu et al. (2016) measure SP by three seven-point Likert-scale items, i.e., "managers' satisfaction in terms of the growth rate of sales, growth rate of market share, and growth rate of profit in their overseas subsidiaries" (p. 361). In the same way, Han (2021) also used three survey questions, yet predominantly related to quasi-perceptual financial items about sales growth, sales margin growth, and local market share growth. The themes of institutions and emerging economies are also examined in two slightly older and strongly bibliographically coupled studies of subnational effects on SP, and Ma et al. (2013) dealt with several alleged limitations of an earlier study by Chan et al. (2010) when stating that "we seek to address these limitations theoretically and empirically in this paper" (Ma et al., 2013, p. 69). Both articles establish that SP varies across subnational regions. However, the two studies used different SP measures, i.e., ROS because "sales can better reflect performance in a dynamic business climate" (Chan et al., 2010, p. 1232), and ROA "in keeping with prior variance decomposition research" (Ma et al., 2013, p. 76). The latter article performs an additional analysis using 'sales per employee' as DV whilst stating that "it is possible that accounting measures might not truly reflect subsidiary performance" (Ma et al., 2013, p. 81).

#### 5. Conclusion and guidance for future research

This article has presented a systematic review of the literature on SP performance measurement via a bibliometric analysis of 193 articles published in 33 top-tier management journals from 1982 to 2022. The science mapping produced three thematic clusters and revealed a generally low degree of congruence in SP measurement. A total of 79 different items were used to measure SP (see Appendix B), and these were deployed seemingly randomly within thematic clusters in eight different combinations of mode, domain, and dimension. Hence, a key takeaway from this review is the need for better justification – both theoretically and empirically – for the selection of SP measurement items. Given the plurality in SP, determining the most suitable measurement of SP performance given the particular subject under study is pivotal. Our systematic mapping of existing SP measures in the literature

provides a much-needed state-of-the-art overview that may serve as directions for future research regarding *"How to select and justify thematically congruent measurements of SP in IB research"*. Thus, we close this review by proposing a decision model for how scholars may select and justify appropriate measures of SP performance.

#### 5.1. Towards a decision model for selecting SP measures

As is often stated (but too often not heeded), a good research design is based on a clearly defined research topic and question(s). Selecting (and collecting data on) the appropriate measures of SP should be driven by the research topic and question(s) (subject under study) and not the other way around (Nielsen et al., 2020; Schwab, 2005). Hence, the starting point for selecting SP measures is to set the contextual boundaries of the subject under study by defining the focus and scope of the research. Given the complexity of most IB phenomena (Eden & Nielsen, 2020), clarifying the research scope may help bring the focus of the study into view and thus provide guidance and justification for subsequent choices related to SP measurement. As revealed in our review, SP measurements vary to a great extent within thematic clusters, and this incongruence may be reduced by defining the boundaries of the study at the outset.

The research focus and scope lead to careful considerations about measurement domain and modality, choices which will ultimately influence whether uni- or multi-dimensionality is appropriate for measuring SP. Researchers will need to determine the scope of the study, such as whether it is about specific types and tasks of expatriates, such as expatriate top managers replacement (Bebenroth & Froese, 2020), or more broadly about the effects of expatriate staffing on SP performance, e.g., in culturally distant areas (Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2008). By making such choices early in the research design process, scholars will be able to actively manage the inherent complexity of IB phenomena and determine what types of measures best capture the SP effects in a particular context (Eden & Nielsen, 2020). However, while specifying the focus and scope of a study is necessary and may help narrow down the SP measurement choices, it is not sufficient for justifying the ultimate selection. Whether narrow or broad in scope, several additional questions regarding domain and modality must be asked that will help provide a systematic and justifiable selection of SP measurement.

In the following sections, we will use the example of expatriate research as an illustration of how to apply our decision model in research practice. Research has found varying results of the relationship between expatriate staffing and SP (see, e.g., Hyun et al., 2015). Some research found a positive association between expatriate staffing and SP (e.g., Gong, 2003; Petrou, 2015), while others reported a negative relationship (e.g., Gaur et al., 2007), and yet others reported no significant relationship (e.g., Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2008; Sekiguchi et al., 2011) or mixed results (e.g., Hyun et al., 2015). The varying results may be due to the specific theories behind the tested hypotheses, the chosen dataset, the statistical methods applied, or the research design in general (see Nielsen et al., 2017). However, more pertinent to this study, the inconsistent results may also be rooted in the choices of SP measurements. The above examples used the following SP measurements: labor productivity (Gaur et al., 2007; Gong, 2003; Hyun et al., 2015; Sekiguchi et al., 2011), ROA (Petrou, 2015), and a quasi-perceptive financial measurement, i.e., sales volume, profitability, and market share (Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2008). Equivalent SP measurement may not have yielded different results, but it would have provided an opportunity to compare and infer common knowledge across the expatriate studies directly.

The SP measurement guidance questions are developed by building on the three performance aspects presented in section 2: domain, mode, and dimensionality, and the results of the assessment of the SP review. Fig. 6 below shows the various steps in the decision model.



Fig. 6. Decision-Making Framework for Selection and Justification of SP Measurement.

#### 5.2. Measurement domain

The first aspect of performance measurement is Domain, which considers which classification of items is best suited to measure SP. The three classifications are Financial, Operational, and Overall effectiveness. As shown earlier, more than half of the studies in our review utilized financial measures to capture SP, and of these, the majority used uni-dimensional measurements such as ROA. By contrast, in the studies that captured SP as operational measures, the majority operationalized these as multi-dimensional measurements. This is hardly surprising because operational SP is typically capturing various intermediary processes that may eventually influence financial performance. Overall effectiveness is the broadest (and all-encompassing) operationalization of SP, often captured simply by exit or survival. As discussed above, the domain of SP measurement must be warranted by the research question(s) under study, and careful attention thus paid to the focus and scope.

The following questions are important for decisions regarding the different domains:

- 1. Is the subject under study so broad and all-encompassing (both internally and externally focused) that subsidiaries' survival from one year to the next is an appropriate measure of SP?
- 2. If not, do financial or operational measures best capture SP?
- 3. If a financial measure is selected, what part of the subsidiary financials is affected by the subject under study? If the study focus is narrow, does, e.g., ROS accurately measure SP? If the focus is broader, does selecting, e.g., ROA, accurately capture SP?
- 4. If an operational measure is selected, does it adequately measure the aspects of subsidiary activities under study? Is it too narrow (e.g., labor productivity), or is it too broad (e.g., firm reputation)?

As an example, Chung et al. (2008) studied foreign investment mode changes during times of crisis and analyzed expatriate staffing effects on subsidiary survival. Given the broad and all-encompassing implications of changes in investment strategy for the subsidiary, such measurement may be warranted. However, in less severe cases (i.e., where survival is not at stake), the choice may be between capturing the effects of expatriate staffing (or capabilities) either via financial or operational measures. For instance, Gaur et al. (2019) used survival to gauge the effects of expatriate staffing on SP but also robustness checked for ROA. In contrast, Bebenroth and Froese (2020) selected ROS (lagged three years pre- and post-succession) to capture the effects of expatriate top manager replacement on SP as a reflection of (managerial) efficiency. Others (e.g., Ando, 2014) used the quasi perceptive financial measurement based on the TK method (i.e., the subsidiary was profitable; operated at breakeven; incurred a financial loss) to capture the effects of expatriate staffing, whereas examples of operational measurement include Tao et al. (2018), who utilized perceptual measures of growth rate of sales; growth rate of market share; and growth rate of profit in the overseas subsidiary to gauge operational effects of expatriates on SP.

#### 5.3. Measurement modality

The next aspect to consider is the modality with which the data is to be collected, and it includes three modes: operationally defined, quasiperceptive, and perceptive. The three modes inform different levels of abstraction ranging from precisely defined performance measures obtained from secondary financial data (e.g., ROA, ROS) to informants' perception of the subsidiary's performance in similarly defined terms (e. g., asking about perceived ROA, ROS). The distinction between

operationally defined and quasi-perceptual is solely the data type (i.e., primary vs. secondary data). Our review showed that slightly above half the studies utilize operationally defined modes to capture primarily financial domains of SP, typically via secondary data and spread over all three thematic clusters, but least in cluster 1. The use of perceptive and quasi-perceptive modes of measurement is about evenly split (i.e., about 25% of the studies each), but here we observe a much stronger use within cluster 1 than for the operational mode. As mentioned in our analyses, there is a general lack of adequate justification for the selection of SP measures, and it is often argued that data availability and prior research serve as a guide. However, researchers' considerations about the mode should be driven by the research question and not data availability, convenience, or even prior studies. Lack of adequate data access (which is often an issue regarding SP) does not free authors from the responsibility of collecting pertinent and reliable information to capture the appropriate aspects of SP. The guiding points should be whether particular modes of measures are most appropriate, given the research objectives, question(s), and design. Specifically, modularity of measurement is predicated on a better understanding of the focus, scope, and domain of subsidiary activities and performance. Pertinent questions in relation to mode are:

- 1. Given the domain of measurement, is the most appropriate measure (s) of SP defined operationally, quasi-perceptually, or perceptually?
- 2. If operationally defined, can appropriate measures (e.g., financial accounts or market shares) be collected directly from reliable secondary sources (e.g., archival databases)?
- 3. If quasi-perceptually defined, can appropriate measures (e.g., self-reported ROA) be collected from reliable primary sources (e.g., survey data)?
- 4. If perceptually defined, can appropriate measures (e.g., self-reported performance or reputation) be collected from reliable primary sources (e.g., survey data)?

For instance, in a study of the SP effects of expatriates' transfer of managerial knowledge from parent firms to foreign subsidiaries, Berry (2015) focused on broader issues of performance within the financial domain, captured operationally by ROA obtained from secondary data. A different study of expatriate R&D staff and technology transfer capabilities may measure SP domain operationally but still use operational mode measures such as the number of patents granted in the host countries. Operational modes of measurement are also appropriate for studies within the overall effectiveness domain as researchers seek to capture survival or exit in objective terms.

Other studies on expatriates' role as learning conduits seek to capture financial domains quasi-perceptually via self-reported assessment of financial performance (e.g., Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2008; Kawai & Chung, 2019). However, if the study resides within the operational domain, for example, studies of the effect of HRM practices, perceptual modes of measurement are typically more appropriate to capture more nuanced dimensions of SP (e.g., Fey & Björkman, 2001; Park et al., 2003; Simonin & Özsomer, 2009).

#### 5.4. Measurement dimensionality

The third decision-making aspect of SP measurement has to do with the dimensionality of measurement. To determine whether uni- or multi-dimensional measurement is appropriate in a given study, researchers must (re)examine the context (focus and scope) as well as the domain and mode of the study. Measurement dimensionality is, in many ways, the (logical) outcome of the previous decisions made regarding

these aspects of SP measurement. However, as indicated in Figs. 1 and 5, there is still a choice between uni- and multi-dimensionality to be made and justified. For instance, if a study is deliberately broad in scope and seeks to capture SP within the financial domain with operationally defined modes of measures, it may seem appropriate to utilize a broader uni-dimensional measure such as ROA to capture SP. In contrast, a narrowly scoped study may warrant a narrow uni-dimensional financial SP measure such as sales revenue. Indeed, our review showed that almost all (except for 4) studies within the financial domain that used the operational mode to measure SP utilized uni-dimensional measurement. By contrast, more than two-thirds of the studies within the financial domain using a quasi-perceptive mode applied multidimensional SP measurement. Yet, ratios (e.g., ROA, ROS, ROI) or other uni-dimensional financial performance measures, such as sales revenue or EBITDA, capture markedly different aspects of SP. Hence, the utilization of multi-dimensional measurement of financial archival performance data may yield important insights into which specific activities drive particular types of output. For instance, Chang et al. (2012) used ROI and ROE in a study about expatriate knowledge transfer, Li et al. (2013) measured SP as ROA, ROI, and ROS in research on embeddedness, while Luo (1997) utilized ROI and ROA to measure performance implications of international strategy.

Similarly, if the objective is to capture the effects of operational domains of performance, operational modes are more likely to lead to uni-dimensional measurement, whereas perceptive measurement is typically multi-dimensional. Not surprisingly, the majority of studies that gauged SP via overall effectiveness relied primarily on uni-dimensional, operational modes of measurement. Measurement dimensionality, then, relies on the match between study objectives, context, domain, and mode.

- 1. Given the objective, context, domain, and mode of the study, is unior multi-dimensional measurement of SP most appropriate? Ensure adequate match between theory, data, and measurement.
- 2. If uni-dimensional measurement is appropriate, which measure best captures the direct performance effects (DV) of the particular activities (IVs) you study?
- 3. If multi-dimensional measurement is appropriate, which measures best capture the indirect performance effects (DVs) of the particular activities (IVs) you study?

The choice between uni- and multi-dimensional measurement of SP must be justified theoretically. For instance, if a study is pre-occupied with expatriates' ability to transfer and utilize knowledge from the parent firm, selecting a uni-dimensional measure of SP seems inappropriate because utilization of knowledge may lead to many different outcomes, including innovative capacity that may result in new product development, new process development, or even patents, and eventually (potentially) result in increased ROS or ROA. But tracing such effects is difficult, and most of the measures proposed here would be influenced by a host of other factors and activities that would need to be controlled for (Nielsen & Raswant, 2018). In other instances, the theorizing may be more direct, i.e., more expatriates lead to more sales, in which case subsidiary ROS may be an appropriate measure. In general, the more indirect and complex the theorized effect of the IV(s) on the DV(s), the more difficult it may be to justify a uni-dimensional measurement of SP, particularly in the form of proxies. Several studies in our review used several uni-dimensional measures as robustness checks, substituting survival with ROA or substituting ROA with ROE (e.g., Castaldi et al., 2019; Gaur et al., 2019), but triangulation of data and measurement may lead to new theoretical insights as measures are systematically selected for their multi-dimensional qualities (Nielsen et al., 2020).

#### 5.5. Measurement convergence

A final reflection when selecting measure(s) of SP involves questions about convergence. The importance of transparency in the argumentation for the selection of SP measurement is pivotal for readers (including reviewers and editors) to understand and appreciate the measurement's relevance in the context of the issue under study. Such transparency involves explicit theoretical justification for the adoption and/or adaptation of existing measures as well as the development of new measures where required. This goes far beyond justifying the selection of SP measures by simply citing existing research. Authors may also want to reflect on the reasons (justifications) why newer research used the same or different measures as previous research. In this way, researchers working within the same thematic area can consider if a newer study warrants a different SP measure than previous studies. Moreover, it is also advisable to consider alternative measures either as controls or for robustness checks (or even triangulation) where possible to increase validity, reliability, and consistency in SP research. This will, over time, lead to stronger cumulative evidence and higher convergence and, thus, to reproducibility and replicability within SP research. We provide a few guiding questions in terms of measurement convergence and transparency:

- 1. What is the theoretical justification for adopting a previously used measure or set of measures of SP? And if adapted to a different context, what is the theoretical justification for such adaptation?
- 2. What is the theoretical justification for developing a new measure or a new set of measures of SP?
- 3. What is the theoretical justification for selecting particular measures as robustness checks or controls? Is triangulation appropriate?

### 6. Limitations

This review has some limitations. The reviewed articles were restricted to only considering articles published in journals ranked 3, 4, or 4\* in the Academic Journal Guide (The Association of Business Schools, 2021), and this may have excluded potentially important studies. The search terms used in Web of Science and Scopus are relevant but not exhaustive, and this may also have excluded potentially significant research. Furthermore, the authors' manual inspection of documents may have involved subjective biases leading to incorrect deselection or coding of some articles. However, given the review method and high interrater correspondence, this was considered unproblematic. Notwithstanding, our systematic analysis highlights the issues of high variability of SP measurements and lack of thematic congruency in IB research and points to the importance of consistent, coherent, and transparent decision-making regarding choice and justification of SP measures to increase reliability, validity, and ultimately replicability of future SP research.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

Henrik Gundelach: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Bo Bernhard Nielsen: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing

#### **Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A. Removed cited references

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#### Appendix B. List of SP measurement items

SP measurement items.

Access to financial resources	Operating efficiency
Access to market	OROA (Operating Return on Assets)
Capital intensity	Overall performance
Cash flow	Overall success
Cash flow from operations	Parent firm's satisfaction
Competitive position	Performance of our activities
Cost control	Performance rate
Cost efficiency	Product differentiation
Cost reduction	Product quality
Customer satisfaction	Productivity
Customer/client satisfaction and retention	Profit
Development of new products/services	Profitability
Distribution	Quality
EBITDA margin	Quality of assets
Employee productivity (sales per employee)	Quality of products/services
Employee retention	Rate of innovation
Employment relations	Relations between management and employees
Export growth rate	Reputation
Financial performance	Retention of employees
Financial results	ROA (Return on Assets)
Firm reputation	ROE (Return on Equity)
Global results	ROI (Return on Investment)
Human resources	ROS (Return on Sales)
Industry concentration	Sales
Labor productivity	Sales growth by value
Level of sales	Sales growth by volume
Management capabilities	Sales level
Management localization	Sales revenue
Market access	Sales volume
Market presence	Service
Market reputation	Service/product quality
Market share	Success of market entry
Market share growth	Survival
Marketing	Technological capabilities
Meeting the strategic objectives for our activities	The firm outperformed its major competitors in the last year
Morale of employees	The firm outperformed its major competitors in the previous year
Net profit	The firm's overall performance in the previous year was greater than expected
Net sales per square meter	The firms overall performance last year was greater than expected
New product development	Toyo Keizai (gain, break-even, or loss)
New product development capability	

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