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Recommendations for Using the Case Study Method in International Business Research

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Abstract

The case study method has not been as frequently used in international business (IB) research as quantitative methods. Moreover, it has been sometimes misused and quite often criticized. Still, it can be very useful for understanding such complex phenomena as the internationalization process or the management of multinational enterprises. Based on case study methodology literature and the author's personal experience from conducting case studies and reviewing case study articles, this paper proposes some ways for overcoming some of the critiques of the case study method and increasing its contribution to IB research.

Keywords

Case Studies, International Business, and Qualitative Research

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Recommendations for Using the Case Study Method in International Business Research

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The case study method has not been as frequently used in international business (IB) research as quantitative methods. Moreover, it has been sometimes misused and quite often criticized. Still, it can be very useful for understanding such complex phenomena as the internationalization process or the management of multinational enterprises. Based on case study methodology literature and the author's personal experience from conducting case studies and reviewing case study articles, this paper proposes some ways for overcoming some of the critiques of the case study method and increasing its contribution to IB research. Key Words: Case Studies, International Business, and Qualitative Research

Introduction

The case study method has been used in several areas of international business (IB) research. For instance, the "Uppsala model" which is well-known to those researching internationalization is based on four Swedish cases introduced by Jan Johanson and Finn Wiedersheim-Paul in 1975. (The Uppsala model states that in the initiation of international activities, firms lack market knowledge and thus begin their foreign market entry from comparatively similar and well-known countries and prefer exporting as it is easier than establishing sales or manufacturing subsidiaries abroad.) Despite the success of this multi-case study, several scholars have affirmed that quantitative methods are more often used in many business and management disciplines, even if case studies and other qualitative methods are sometimes more justified (for an overview, see Cassell, Symon, Buehring, & Johnson, 2006; Ellram, 1996; Macpherson, Brooker, & Ainsworth, 2000; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004; Woodside & Wilson, 2003). Consequently, the case study methodology still needs more systematic attention.

This paper aims to investigate the usefulness and limitations of case studies as a research methodology in IB and propose several ways for using the method more effectively. It starts from an overview of the literature on the strengths of single and multiple case studies. Then, the critique associated with this method is discussed. Moreover, the strengths and weaknesses of surveys are also briefly introduced, as this method is very often used in IB literature as an alternative or (sometimes) a complement to case studies. Finally, several opportunities for increasing the contribution of case studies are brought out.

This study mainly focuses on IB and case study research literature, but some ideas from management, logistics, and marketing are also included. I selected the IB area because this was the focus of my dissertation (Vissak, 2003) and most of my published articles have been written in this field. I have had experience both from conducting case studies (my Ph.D. dissertation was based on seven cases and I have also used this method in a large share of my articles) and surveys (my MA dissertation and some of my articles were based on econometric models constructed from survey data). I have reviewed a large number of journal articles and conference

papers (using both quantitative and qualitative methods) and also have been a discussant at several doctoral tutorials. In this article, I share my experience as an author, a reviewer, and a discussant.

The Strengths of Case Studies

Case study research is a very useful method as it allows expanding and generalizing theories by combining the existing theoretical knowledge with new empirical insights (Yin, 1994). This is especially important in studying topics that have not attracted much previous research attention. The application of this method can be useful for transcending the local boundaries of the investigated cases, capturing new layers of reality, and developing new, testable and empirically valid theoretical and practical insights (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Ghauri, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Stuart, McCutcheon, Handfield, McLachlin, & Samson, 2002; Tsoukas, 1989; Voss, Tsikriktsis, & Frohlich, 2002). Case studies are especially helpful for discovery, description, mapping and relationship building, but they may also be used for theory testing, refutation, refining (Gummesson, 2005; Hillebrand, Kok, & Biemans, 2001; Johnston, Leach, & Liu, 1999; Tsoukas; Voss et al.; Woodside & Wilson, 2003; Yin), illustration (Otley & Berry, 1998; Siggelkow, 2007), classification, hypothesis development (Bensabat, Goldstein, & Mead, 1987; Tellis, 1997b), prediction (Woodside & Wilson) and identification of further research needs (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Siggelkow, 2007; Simon, Sohal, & Brown, 1996).

Case studies do not necessarily have to rely on previous literature or prior empirical evidence. Thus, case study research can be used for theory-building even if little is known about the phenomenon. Moreover, this method is appropriate if (Eisenhardt, 1989):

- (1) current perspectives seem inadequate (for example, not much is known about why and how companies re-internationalize, re-enter some foreign markets where they had ended activities earlier);
- (2) if they conflict with each other (for instance, it is not still completely clear if in current multinational networks, foreign subsidiaries are reaching more important roles and a higher decision-making freedom than ever before or if there is a tendency toward increased control);
- (3) if they contradict with current research (for example, although it is evident that the internationalization process of most firms is not linear – companies' involvement in certain markets may grow and decline considerably instead of growing in an even pace – many studies still ignore this).

Contrary to those research methods that aim at statistical correlations and focus less on their underlying explanations, case research can help to (a) discover causal relationships (Hillebrand, Kok, & Biemans, 2001; Jensen & Rodgers, 2001), (b) understand how and why everything has happened in a certain way (Yin, 1994), and (c) create thick, interesting, and easily readable descriptions and rich understandings (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gummesson, 2006; Otley & Berry, 1998; Patton & Applebaum, 2003) of phenomena in their

natural settings (Bensabat et al., 1987; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Ghauri, 2004; Johnston et al., 1999; Lindgreen, 2001; Perren & Ram, 2004; Yin). For example, to understand how being foreign-owned speeds up a firm's internationalization, it is not enough to construct an econometric model with two variables—the share of foreign capital in the foreign-owned firm's total share capital and the share of exports in its total turnover the year after. By finding a positive relationship, we cannot be sure what caused what (i.e., maybe the company started exporting more because it became foreign-owned or maybe the investment came to the firm because it was already successful abroad). Such a model also would not guarantee that foreign ownership was beneficial for increasing exports—maybe the firm's export share would have increased even more without the change in ownership (in some cases, foreign owners even hinder or constrain their subsidiaries' export activities). Moreover, such a model will not explain why the relationship was positive: whether the subsidiary gained access to modern technologies and became able to develop internationally competitive products itself, whether it began reselling its owner's products in neighboring countries, or started marketing its products through the owner's network without making any changes in its production practices. We also will not know how important the foreign owner's role was and how much the company's internationalization was impacted by other factors and actors (e.g., changes in the economic or political environment, the bankruptcy of some competitors or the growth of main foreign customers. Conducting a case study may be more helpful for answering these questions than an econometric model.

Case studies can be also used for deeply investigating dynamic, experiential and complex processes and areas – like, for example, accelerated exporting, business networks, business-to business marketing or headquarters-subsidiary relationships – taking place in a fast-changing and fluid environment (Arenius, 2002; Ghauri, 2004; Gilmore & Carson, 1996; Gummesson, 2003; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Palakshappa & Gordon, 2006; Zalan & Lewis, 2004). Moreover, case examples can help to bridge the gap between academia and industry (Simon et al., 1996). For instance, some years ago a businessman contacted me after my case-study presentation about positive and negative impacts of foreign owners on their foreign subsidiaries at a conference about transition countries and told me that in that session, my presentation was the only one he understood as the methodologies of quantitative papers and the terms used for presenting them were not familiar to him. Moreover, research-oriented cases can be also used for illustrating presentations at practitioner-oriented events and teaching students with a little or no scientific background (in addition to using teaching cases).

One of the other strengths of case studies is that the necessary data can be collected over a long time period. Consequently, the researcher can go much further than a cross-sectional snapshot of a process (Ghauri, 2004; Johnston et al., 1999; Leonard-Barton, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stuart et al., 2002; Tellis, 1997b; Yin, 1994). This is especially important in investigating such subjects as a certain company's complicated internationalization process (a firm may enter some countries in a specific year, pull back from there some months later, enter some of them again a couple of years after that, open production subsidiaries in some countries after exporting there for some years, but end all activities in some others) or the impact of takeovers of or by foreign companies (in this field, a "success story" may turn out to be a story of a failure some months later and sometimes a "success story" again some years after that: for example, in one case, a small company was taken over by a larger foreign firm and this enabled it to find new international customers; after the owner's

bankruptcy and a period of serious financial difficulties, the firm's former owners managed to buy it out for less than they had sold it and the firm's growth continued). Moreover, it is possible to step backward and forward (for example, refining the research question(s) and collecting additional evidence after the initial cross-case comparison; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989; Gummesson, 2005; Shah & Corley, 2006). If a phenomenon is complex and/or the situation is changing very fast, such flexibility is very important.

Case study data can be collected from multiple levels, perspectives (Gummesson, 2006; Leonard-Barton, 1990) and sources (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Ghauri, 2004; Johnston et al., 1999; Nieto & Pérez, 2000; Simon et al., 1996; Tellis, 1997a; Yin, 1994; e.g., business papers, journals, annual reports, archival records, and the case companies' homepages). This might be very helpful if, for instance, the interviewee does not remember when exactly a certain foreign subsidiary was founded or a marketing campaign launched (this is quite natural if the event took place years ago) or how much the company's turnover or net profits increased in a certain year. Moreover, the interviewer's ability to collect data from such sources before the interview also saves the interviewee's time as the latter does not have to give very general information about the company. A caution is that the authors should not try to write the case story before making the interview, which might lead to only noticing or supporting the information already collected, even if it is not completely correct.

The case study method also enables research to be conducted in countries with sample bases too small for using statistical generalization (Chetty, 1996; Daniels & Cannice, 2004). For example, in Estonia, the population is 1.34 million and in several sectors and segments (e.g., banking, air and railway transport, ice-cream production) there are only a few firms. It would be hard to construct an econometric model on the development of their international or other activities. Researchers active in larger countries may face a similar problem with these or some other sectors. Theoretical generalization can also be made based on case studies. If it is possible to make logical conclusions supporting certain causal relationships, it may be proposed that they also hold for some structurally similar cases (Hillebrand et al., 2001).

In case study research, it is also possible to generalize from only one case (Gummesson, 2003; Stuart et al., 2002; Tellis, 1997b) if it is useful for theory-building (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991) and testing (Bensabat et al., 1987). Moreover, in some situations (and very small countries or industry segments), there is only one – unique, extreme, or critical – case to study or it is the only one accessible to scientific investigation (Ellram, 1996; Ghauri, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007; Tellis, 1997a; Yin, 1994). Multiple cases, in turn, can both augment external validity and help to guard against observer bias (Leonard-Barton, 1990; Voss et al., 2002). They may be also used for advancing theory generation (Bensabat et al.; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Johnston et al., 1999), providing replication, confirming, refining or refuting the findings of the first case, investigating whether they could be expanded to (somewhat) different situations (and companies that are, for instance, slightly smaller, older, have a different foreign owner but the same foreign ownership share or operate in another, but a culturally similar country), perceiving patterns more easily, generating hypotheses, emphasizing the phenomenon's complementary aspects, eliminating chance associations (Eisenhardt, 1991; Ghauri; Halinen & Törnroos; Hillebrand et al., 2001; Johnston et al.; Nieto & Pérez, 2000) and raising important issues and questions (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). Still, a particular case is mainly examined to understand this one case, not others (Stake, 1995).

Compared to (mail) surveys, case studies have some additional advantages. The application of this method helps to overcome the problem of firms being over-researched and developing resistance (Chetty, 1996) – if the case is based only on secondary data and/or on interview materials collected in previous years by other researchers who recorded the interviews and/or made field notes, the company does not have to be contacted at all; moreover, some managers agree to an interview as they see it as a way for marketing their firm (some even give annual reports and other additional materials to interviewers without asking), wish to remain in contact with the academia, or hope to get some useful feedback about their firm or themselves (Österåker, 2008). From the publication of survey results, they do not always receive useful suggestions for their company. On the other hand, the same managers may refuse to fill a survey as they receive several of them every week or feel that surveys do not allow them to express their thoughts as freely as interviews. Thus, surveys may have a low response rate (for some academic journals, even 5-10 percent seems to be quite acceptable) and, because of that, do not represent reality as strongly as intended (there is a risk that successful companies are more active in answering survey questions than less successful ones).

Surveys may also lack open-ended questions (like how and why or why not), thus not penetrating complex issues, distorting reality slightly or even completely (Forza, 2002; Gummesson, 2003; Stuart et al., 2002; Wilson, 1999). Moreover, sometimes a respondent may not understand a survey question correctly. Once an Estonian manager claimed that her company had not received any inward foreign direct investments, as it fully belonged to a Swedish enterprise (while this actually was a clear indication of having them). During interviews, such issues can be clarified and, if necessary (and possible), additional questions can be asked. For instance, a CEO answered “no” to all questions regarding the positive impacts of foreign ownership for his company (he claimed that this enterprise had not received any useful technology, know-how, foreign market contacts or anything else listed in the questions), but after asking if such ownership had had any effect at all, told that he put a Swedish – their owners’ – flag on the table when he took over a Lithuanian firm and without this flag, this takeover would have failed as Estonia’s reputation was not very high at that time. Consequently, case studies should provide more sufficient and correct information for understanding complex aspects in the field of international business. Moreover, making interviews may highly increase the possibility of getting the answers from the “right” respondent. Even if a survey is addressed to a CEO, he/she might let his/her office assistants or other staff members fill it out. In addition, it increases the chance of getting a larger share of questions answered. It is easy for a survey respondent to skip some questions – sometimes those questions the researcher is interested in the most, but during interviews, the interviewer can ask the interviewee to answer them.

The Critique of Case Studies

Despite their usefulness, case studies have been often criticized. They are usually more time-consuming and labor-intensive than survey methods (Daniels & Cannice, 2004; Leonard-Barton, 1990; Nieto & Pérez, 2000; Simon et al., 1996; Stuart et al., 2002; Voss et al., 2002). It may take a whole day or even more to reach the interviewee’s company, make an hour-long interview and get back home. Such a trip may have to be repeated soon after to make a second interview even if another case company is located on the same street in the same town or if the author wishes to

interview somebody else from the first case firm (that interviewee may not have time for the interview the same day). Moreover, transcribing a 60-minutes interview may sometimes take ten hours or even more, especially if the recording is of poor quality and if it contains many names that need to be checked while (e-) mailing a survey and even convincing a potential respondent to answer may take 10-15 minutes in total and buying a database containing all the data necessary for conducting a model (for example, the export data of hundreds of firms) takes even less time. The time and financial constraints limit the number of selected cases and interviewees from each case firm; moreover, they may force authors to conduct their research in only one country although for international business research, it would be sometimes very important to talk to both sides – for instance, the exporter and the importer, the head office of a multinational corporation and its subsidiary in another country. In addition, individual cases, by their nature, are often difficult to generalize (Jensen & Rodgers, 2001; Patton & Applebaum, 2003; Simon et al.) and they cannot be controlled statistically because they usually result in more variables than data points (Lee, 1989; Nieto & Pérez; Yin, 1994). Some critics even state that as each case study is equal to one research observation, hundreds of case studies are required to produce any (statistically) meaningful results. Otherwise, they could be only used for explanatory purposes, not scientific justification (for an overview of such arguments and their critique, see Ellram, 1996; Johnston et al., 1999; Siggelkow, 2007; Tellis, 1997a). Of course, it is possible to concentrate only on a couple of variables – for example, the shares of some markets in the selected firms' total turnover or the number of their foreign subsidiaries and thus increase the number of cases considerably. But then it can be questioned why the case study method was selected at all if it ignores the potential richness of the results (and that is one of the case study method's main strengths). It is not practical to make a large number of interviews for asking something that could be found out from a couple of survey questions or from an annual report (unless the authors plan to use the rest of the collected data elsewhere).

Survey methods, in turn, are supposed to be more cost-effective and quicker (although it is sometimes also very time-consuming to convince a large number of respondents to answer and then to insert all their answers to a computer for analyzing them), allow statistical generalizations (if the sample represents the population well and if the number of respondents is large enough) and have no "interviewer's effects" (Chauvel & Despres, 2002; Forza, 2002; Gummesson, 2006). Some interviewees may give a wrong answer (1) because they did not correctly understand the question (for example, the term "foreign direct investment" may not be familiar to all business people); (2) by mistake (for example, telling their turnover in a wrong currency or in thousands instead of millions); or (3) on purpose (for instance, because they want to be seen in a better light), but this may also happen during surveys. Moreover, if the survey is anonymous, sometimes some respondents give random answers in order to get it over with. On the other hand, the anonymity may motivate the respondents to answer honestly, while during interviews, they may wish to leave a better impression and thus not to reveal all the facts. So, it is not certain which of them distort the reality less: case studies or surveys.

Moreover, in studying complex processes (for instance, a dissolution of an international partnership), researchers are unlikely to observe the same set of events – the same configuration of people, groups, social relationships, technologies, and so on – unfolding exactly in the same way. In addition, different interviewees may describe these events dissimilarly and even the same interviewee may not give the same information to all interviewers or even to the same interviewer in different years. A

year later, the same event may be seen in a different light (for instance, finding a new foreign partner may seem beneficial at first, but later, the firm may have to face some problems). Moreover, the result of an interview may vary depending on the interviewee's and the interviewer's moods, their working atmosphere – for example, the noise and the number of interruptions – and on several other factors. The non-replicability of the same observation hinders any later attempts to verify the findings of a particular case study (if a partnership between firms has dissolved, a company has gone bankrupt or its management has changed, it is sometimes even very hard to find the same respondents; moreover, sometimes the interviewees wish to remain anonymous together with their companies and then, the reviewers and other readers cannot check even their public data as they do not know their real identities). This also makes the case results vulnerable for the accusations that they cannot be extended to different settings (Gummesson, 2005; Lee, 1989) or beyond the specific phenomenon, and that the resulting theory is too narrow (Eisenhardt, 1989; Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006). A problem may also arise if case studies are used for hypothesis-testing, as the authors may deliberately overlook the context and ignore their rich qualitative insights (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). (This may also be a problem with models; it is acceptable if authors leave out the data of some firms because they have some exceptional characteristics, but it is not acceptable if they leave out some data just because doing so will lead to the desired results). Moreover, it is not easy to get hypothesis-testing case studies published, as several reviewers, editors and conference organizers think that it is impossible to “test,” “prove,” or “reject” anything at all based on a small number of cases. They recommend using milder terms like “there was some support for this proposition.” Quantitative methods are considered to be more suitable for correlational type of hypotheses (for example, for proposing that if the share of foreign ownership increases, exports will also increase) and some reviewers only tolerate cases if they accompany the use of such methods as illustrations to certain conclusions or if they are used for developing hypotheses that are later tested with other methods.

On the other hand, some case descriptions may be abundant and too long as it is easy to become overwhelmed by the volume of collected data (in addition to making and transcribing the interviews, the authors often also read annual reports, newspaper articles and check many other sources) and to lose sight of the most important dimensions, issues (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Stuart et al., 2002), relationships and aspects. Thus, the intensive use of empirical evidence can lead to overly complex, wide (Eisenhardt, 1989) and descriptive theory or a text without any clear focus or theory at all (such papers and case stories may be very interesting to read, but it is hard to get them published if they lack sufficient interpretations of the results, clear connections with the literature review, and strong conclusions). Moreover, the authors may be tempted to ignore negative issues (Simon et al., 1996) and leave out anything contradicting their developed propositions or theory.

Another problem of case studies is that during interviews, the respondents may present their past decisions and actions in a very favorable light (but this cannot be always avoided in using other methods either). Moreover, the interviews may be affected by time constraints, interruptions, the presence of third parties monitoring the discussion, sudden crises facing the company which distract the interviewee, and several other factors (Welch, 2000) and events such as illnesses and other personal problems or, in some cases, even joys (once an interviewee had just become a father while the other interviewee was rushing to his birthday party... it was, of course, quite hard for them to concentrate on the interview). As a result, the interviews may

become stressful for both the interviewers and the interviewees (Forza, 2002). The latter would rather like to end the interview as soon as possible if they cannot postpone or cancel it. Moreover, they may not concentrate fully on the questions as their thoughts are elsewhere and this may result in a large number of short “yes”, “no,” and “I have no idea” type of answers that could have been collected by a survey; moreover, the respondents could have filled the survey at a more convenient time for them.

The authors of longitudinal case studies face some other serious risks: the firm’s ownership may change and/or the top managers or other important respondents may leave the organization (or the foreign owners may force them to resign; in such cases, it might take several months before a new CEO is appointed instead of a temporary one sent from the head office and it is very hard to convince potential respondents to agree to the interview) or feel threatened by the initial findings; the company may also face severe financial or other difficulties so that the outsiders may be no longer welcome (Leonard-Barton, 1990). Most managers like to talk about success, not failure, especially if the latter did not lead to huge success later (even in that case, they may rather blame the outside environment than their own miscalculations, but survey results may not be more objective, either, in this respect). Moreover, the observed phenomena may change during the course of the study (Otley & Berry, 1998; Simon et al., 1996) and the respondents may interpret events, or justify their decisions with arguments or knowledge that became available later (Voss et al., 2002). For instance, they may say they foresaw their foreign partner’s economic difficulties and terminated their partnership because of that, while actually the partner may have had to face these difficulties because of the termination of this contract. Moreover, the authors may become advocates instead of observers (Voss et al.) and lose their own objectivity if they get deeply involved with the case company (Leonard-Barton; Perren & Ram, 2004) or the respondents. This problem may deepen considerably if the researcher also becomes a shareholder, a permanent employee, or a temporary consultant of the studied firm as it could cause a serious conflict of interest. It would be very tempting to show the company in a better light rather than disclose all or some of its problems and past mistakes. Surveys cannot be criticized as much in this respect. Even if the researchers are involved in a couple of selected companies, their answers represent only a small share of the total amount of collected evidence and they are not brought out separately so there is less temptation to “play” with the results.

Depending on the number of cases, researchers face different problems. Single case studies limit the ability to generalize from the conclusions, models or theory developed from the selected case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Voss et al., 2002); we cannot be sure that this is the typical case (for example, a typical firm that has started exporting to a specific country or a typical company that was taken over by a large foreign buyer). If it is not, our theory may hold only for this case and maybe also for a couple of others, but not for most of other firms. Moreover, some reviewers criticize such studies as they believe that one case (even if it based on several interviews and a large number of additional materials) is not enough for an empirical (competitive) paper (in their opinion, additional cases from the same or other countries or industries should be added and compared with each other to strengthen the authors’ arguments) and such studies could be only accepted to conferences as works in progress or posters. In addition, there is a larger risk of misjudging the single event and exaggerating easily available data (Leonard-Barton, 1990). Thus, the resulting theory may be distorted and inaccurate (Eisenhardt, 1991). Multiple cases, in

turn, may reduce the depth of the study, especially when the authors' resources are constrained (Voss et al.) as collecting and analyzing case-study evidence is both time- and labor-consuming. Thus, the descriptions may come out rather "thin," focusing on surface data and neglecting the less obvious aspects of the setting under investigation. Consequently, they may also distort reality (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This may be sometimes also caused by the volume constraints for journal and conference papers and book chapters as it is very hard to accommodate a literature review, a methodology section, several case stories with tables and figures, a discussion and a list of references on 20-30 double-spaced pages with wide margins. A part of the collected material has to be left out and thus the authors have to ignore some important evidence not so closely connected to their main theme. If they wish to present such data, they have to write a book.

Due to the above-mentioned weaknesses (and prejudices), qualitative methods, including case studies, have sometimes been characterized as soft, descriptive, "feminine," "microscopic," less concrete/precise/objective/rigorous, unsystematic, "second best" (used only if the researcher is not familiar with quantitative methods or has not been able to conduct a survey), less interesting (once a session chair told me that for him, papers with models are more interesting as he is more interested in general trends than in specific situations), even mystical or unscientific, and therefore, they are regarded less highly than quantitative projects and published less often in top journals (for an overview of such arguments and their critique, see Cassell et al., 2006; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Ghauri, 2004; Macpherson et al., 2000; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Roberts, 2002; Shah & Corley, 2006; Simon et al., 1996; Tellis, 1997b). Some (international) business journals still do not publish case study papers at all. Sometimes it is also hard to get them accepted as competitive papers for conferences as reviewers expect the authors to add models and/or survey material. Moreover, the critics of this method state that while the case descriptions may be quite interesting, the results and conclusions of such papers are often unconvincing (Otley & Berry, 1998). Without proper research design, execution, and data analysis, case studies may produce poor results. This, in turn, continues to support the critique and misapplication of the method (Ellram, 1996) and leaves some critics of the opinion that case-based research is just a collection of "anecdotes and war stories" (Stuart et al., 2002, p. 429). Thus, in the next section, some suggestions for increasing the usefulness of case studies are presented.

Some Opportunities for Increasing the Usefulness of Case Studies

From the two previous sections it can be concluded that although case studies can be very useful, they are also often criticized and rejected by reviewers, conference organizers, and editors. On the other hand, the (mail) survey method that has been very frequently used in IB research also has its strengths and weaknesses. Both are shown in Table 1 (it was constructed based on the literature and the author's experience from case study and survey research).

Table 1

The case study and the mail survey method: a comparison

Case studies	
<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Critique</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commonly used in many scientific disciplines. • A higher response rate than in surveys. • Useful for generating new theory or specifying (and, if necessary, criticizing) already researched topics. • Can explain new, complex and/or dynamic issues. • Suitable for asking “how” and “why” (not) questions about a set of events and studying a firm from multiple perspectives. • Provide a holistic perspective on real-life events and the processes leading to certain results. • Theoretical reading and empirical research can be done at the same time. The data can be collected from a large number of different qualitative and quantitative sources. • Flexible in sequencing, reformulating and adding questions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unappreciated and underutilized as a methodology. Sometimes considered to be soft, weak, “feminine,” and unscientific. • Harder to publish in certain journals. • Hard to conduct and interpret the results. • Time- and labor-consuming. • Cannot handle large data sets. Hard to make statistical generalizations. • Difficult to access confidential data. The interviewee may not be totally honest. • A potential researcher bias, a bias from the use of key informants and selecting certain firms. • A threat to end up with a weak theory or partial support of particular theories or frameworks. • Hard to find a balance between depth and breadth: a single case increases the former but decreases the latter while a multiple case study increases the latter but decreases the former.
(Mail) surveys	
<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Critique</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have been very popular in many scientific disciplines. • Easier to publish in some top journals and to get accepted to conferences. • Cost-effective and quicker than the case study approach. • Relatively easy to conduct. • Can be completed at the respondent’s convenience. • No “interviewer’s effects”. • Can ensure the respondents’ anonymity. • Allow making statistical generalizations and empirically verifying theoretical relationships in larger samples from actual businesses. • Suitable for correlational hypotheses (for example, proposing that as variable X increases, variable Y will also increase). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A low response rate. This limits the generalization of the findings. • More possibility for misunderstandings and unanswered questions. • Less suitable for asking “how” and “why (not)” questions. • If researched processes and events are complex, the acquired information may be insufficient for understanding them. • Inflexible in sequencing the questions. Not possible to ask additional questions at once. • Self-selection bias: the (early) responders may be more interested, involved, and/or experienced than non-responders. • Some other person may fill the survey instead of the desired respondent. • Do not bring additional bonuses like annual reports or brochures to the researcher.

Although it has been agreed that research cases should present empirical data rigorously and fairly (Yin, 1994), different authors, editors and reviewers have different visions regarding how good case study papers (including their methodology

sections and case stories) should be constructed. Still, there are several ways for overcoming at least some of the critique to case studies. A multi-method approach may be applied. For instance, qualitatively-oriented case study data used to develop survey instruments and then quantitative data obtained from larger populations and econometric models created and analyzed or the other way round. The results obtained from quantitative research could be analyzed first and then case studies conducted and other qualitative research methods used to illustrate the conclusions or to explain some unexpected findings (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006; Macpherson et al., 2000; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Roberts, 2002; Shah & Corley, 2006). This does not mean that a researcher should necessarily be very competent in all qualitative and quantitative methods: it might be useful to involve a co-author who has a different background. In international business research, having a co-author from a different country also has another bonus. It then becomes easier to add another case (or more) from that country or to interview somebody from the case firm's foreign subsidiaries or foreign owners. This may increase the value and legitimacy of the paper.

Using multiple methods of data collection can also improve the quality of the research as it allows triangulation, reduces the respondent bias, provides additional information, increases support for the researcher's conclusions, and may lead to new questions that can be answered in later research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Ghauri, 2004; Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006; Johnston et al., 1999; Tellis, 1997a). This should be especially useful if the phenomenon is complex, processual, and interactive (Gilmore & Carson, 1996). To increase the generalizability of the results, meta-analysis could be conducted (for an overview, see Jensen & Rodgers, 2001). If numerous studies have been conducted in the same research area, then some tables or figures can be also created and percentages calculated based on them. This may increase the interest of quantitative-research-oriented audience and reduce the amount of critique regarding the low generalizability of case study results. On the other hand, by using multiple methods and data sources, the authors also have to face the risk of reaching contradictory or confusing results (Ghauri) and they may be tempted to conceal the differences in order to get published. This approach may also take more time and cost more than just conducting a couple of case studies.

Some authors and reviewers also suggest increasing the number of cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) from the same or different countries or industries. Still, once a pattern emerges, each new case adds to the data at a diminishing rate (Stuart et al., 2002). Theoretical saturation is reached when incremental learning is minimal because the researchers are observing phenomena seen before (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). So, although, for instance, the first five or ten cases of quickly internationalizing firms may be very useful and interesting, the following five or ten (or any other number) may not add that much to the research results as certain aspects start repeating; moreover, the length constraints of research papers may force the authors to leave out important information from the first five or ten cases to save space for the other five or ten. As a result, increasing the number of cases may sometimes even reduce the quality of the paper instead of increasing it.

There is no agreement how many cases a researcher should select. It was stated in the section about the strengths of case studies that generalizations can be made even from only one case. According to Eisenhardt's (1989) frequently cited article, a study of four to ten cases usually works well while with fewer than four cases, theory is difficult to generate and with more than ten cases, the volume of data is difficult to cope with. Rowley (2002) suggests a number between six and ten. Miles

and Huberman (1994) claim that selecting more than 15 cases may make a study unwieldy. Gummesson (2003), on the other hand, has stated that anything from one case to several, even hundreds, can be justified depending on the research purpose and questions. Still, it can be questioned if it is reasonable to spend considerable time on making hundreds of case studies although it increases the generalizability of the results. There is no space for all the stories in a classical journal article or a book chapter, anyway, so the authors still have to (a) select a small number of typical or conflicting cases for more detailed discussion and leave most of the material they got from the other cases out, or (b) concentrate on a couple of variables (or aspects), but probably it would have been also possible to acquire such data through a mail survey or from other sources. In both of these cases, they cannot present the full richness of their results. If they want to present all the results of their work, they have to write several articles and/or books.

Another way of increasing the validity of a case study is contacting more informants/ respondents from different firms (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Palakshappa & Gordon, 2006), from the “context” – for example, consultants, government advisers and industry association people (Perry, 1998) – or from the same case organization. This is very useful if the researcher wants to ask questions for which no one person has all the required knowledge or if the events being studied may have different interpretations or viewpoints (Voss et al., 2002). This is especially the case if the researcher is studying a negative issue – for example, the negative impacts of foreign owners on their subsidiaries (like constraining their export activities to certain countries, forcing them to concentrate on producing goods with a lower value added, or hindering their activities in other ways) – as the two sides may try to distort reality to justify their own actions or viewpoints. One would be wise to consider the value of adding more respondents to monitor if contacting additional people might add bulk, but not depth, to the study (Leonard-Barton, 1990). If several interviews are made in the same firm, it is sometimes also necessary to reformulate or skip some interview questions. It is not reasonable to waste the interviewees’ time by asking some general questions that others have already answered (for instance, to which countries the company exports) or to ask something that they most probably have no direct knowledge of (for example, a new employee may not be the right respondent for the questions regarding the firm’s earlier history; sometimes, former employees may be much more useful respondents, but this also depends on their reasons for leaving the firm: if it was not voluntary, they may not be completely objective).

Sometimes case study papers could also improve from developing better interviewing, analyzing, and writing skills. For example, Österåker (2008) suggests that interviewers should be able to explain the purpose of the interview, know what to look for, be interested in the topic, control the interview situation, and be open to alternative ways of thinking. The latter suggestion also applies to writing. If the results do not fit the previous theories and hypotheses, then it would be appropriate to explain the differences, not to conceal them in order to increase support to these theories or hypotheses; moreover, unexpected results may be even more valuable as some journal editors and readers are more interested in new viewpoints than the papers repeating earlier ones for the 100th time. If a phenomenon has been found to exist in 100 countries and/or regions, it is not so interesting to read that it also exists in the 101st (although it may seem safe to write about it as so many papers have already been published on this subject). It is much more interesting to read that in one region or country it does not exist; maybe it later comes out that it also does not exist

in 10 others or even that in the first 100 countries or regions, it does not exist all the time (for example, although many studies supported the Uppsala model mentioned in the Introduction of this paper, in the 1990s many others were written showing that some firms – called born globals and international new ventures – internationalized much faster although some other companies still internationalized according to the Uppsala model). In addition, according to Gummesson (2005), researchers should adopt a critical stance towards their data and sources. The cases of Enron and Arthur Andersen show that even annual reports and statements from financial analysts cannot always be trusted. Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) also suggest that the authors of case study papers carefully justify their methodology and sampling (this issue has received considerable attention in Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007), use tables, figures, appendixes and quotes from the interviews for presenting the results (for some ideas, see also Onwuegbuzie & Dickinson, 2008) and present their theoretical arguments clearly, while Siggelkow (2007) recommends paying more attention to telling a clear story supporting the main conceptual points instead of trying to give an overview of everything that seems interesting (this is quite tempting as interviews often provide very interesting or even surprising results; to present them all, it would be more practical to write several papers instead of one). Involving external reviewers may be helpful. They can check if it is clear what the authors studied, why they selected these methods, cases (if they meet the sample criteria and are useful for studying this subject) and respondents, if they clearly described the research context and discussed the contributions and limitations of the study, whether they were unbiased and objective toward rival explanations, if they clearly explained how they reached their main conclusion, if these conclusions coincide with one another and whether they made useful managerial and research suggestions. It could be also helpful to contact the key informants (interviewees). They can check if the story is accurate or if some important information is missing. The authors should also examine how the already published case studies look like in the journal they are aiming to publish their research: different journals prefer different types of case formats and the length of methodology sections also varies from a couple of sentences to several pages.

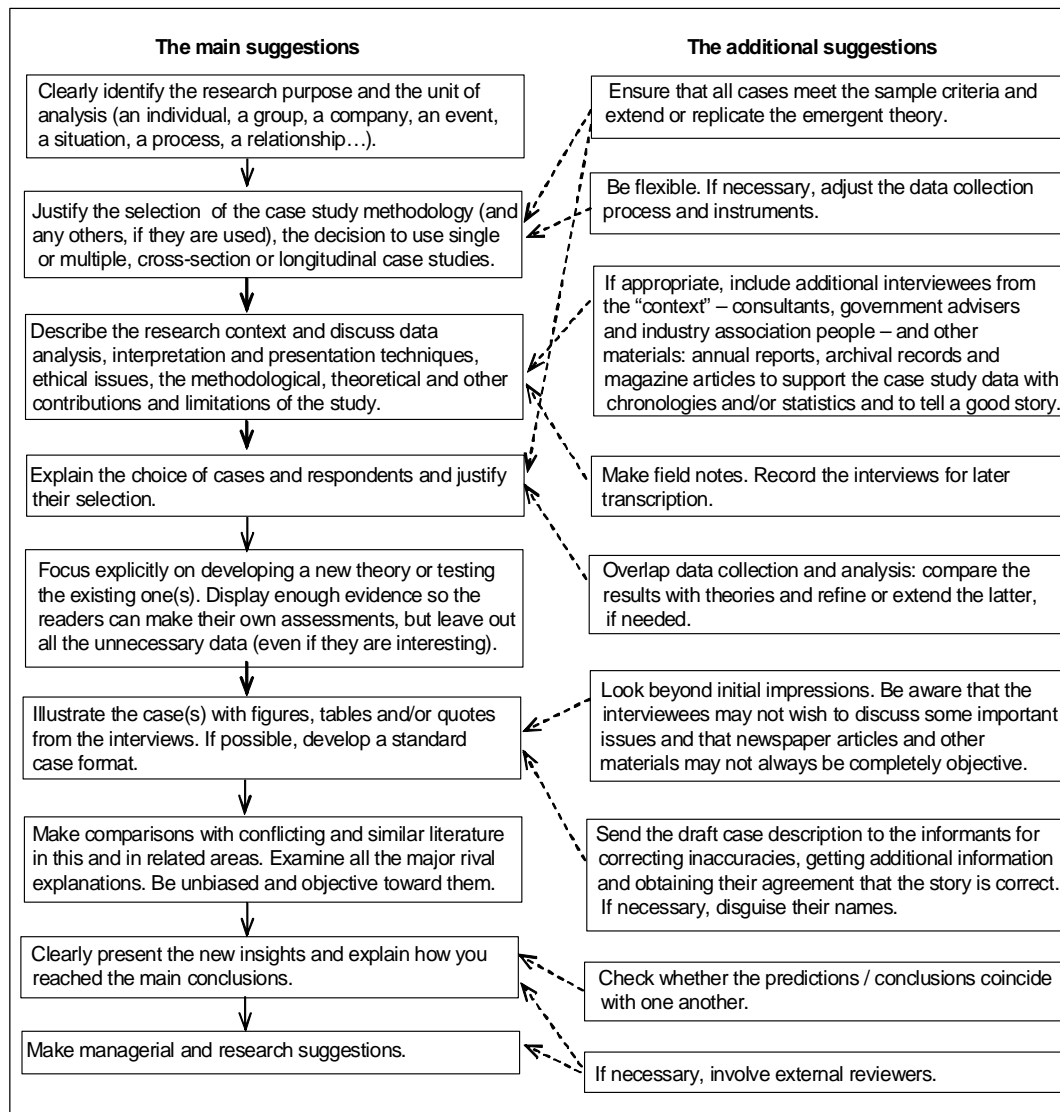
In addition, for writing the methodology and empirical parts of a case study paper, the authors should consider following the suggestions presented in Figure 1. These suggestions were based on the experience of the author and on some recommendations found in the literature and in the reviews to the author's submissions to journals and conferences.

Discussion

Like any other method, case studies also have both strengths and weaknesses. Case studies are quite often used in the area of international business, and they are appropriate for several purposes, including theory generation, testing, refutation, refining, and prediction. The case study method can be applied in small countries and new topic areas, for studying complex phenomena and incremental processes, answering “how” and “why (not)” questions. This method allows collecting additional data at any time, and using different additional sources like newspapers, annual reports, and corporate homepages. Thus, compared to some other methods – for example, surveys – case studies have several advantages. For conducting research on international business, the above-mentioned advantages are especially important—in this field, several research streams are still emerging and there is no consensus on

many important topics; the studied processes are often dynamic and the phenomena are frequently impacted by country or cultural characteristics. As all the richness of the results cannot be demonstrated and all the factors cannot be included in any model, there is still a need for single and multiple case studies, longer and shorter cases, meta-analyses and papers combining different qualitative and quantitative methods. Moreover, more attention should be paid to conducting case studies on themes conflicting with widely accepted theories. For example, showing that something is faster, more positive, or more negative than has been theorized or studying cases from under-represented sectors or regions (for example, Africa).

Figure 1. Suggestions for improving the quality of case study papers



On the other hand, this method also has some obvious weaknesses. Case research is relatively expensive (especially if an author tries to conduct it alone in several countries), it takes a lot of time and it has received considerable criticism for being unable to offer statistical generalization, developing too narrow or too wide theories (or none at all), and being hard to verify. Moreover, the interviewees may not

be totally honest, some of them may leave the firm doing the study and the authors may face the risk of losing their own objectivity or being tempted to conceal some of their results that do not agree with their propositions or main conclusions. Because of these problems, but also the lack of agreement how to evaluate the quality of case studies and the lack of trust toward this method among some reviewers and editors, it is not very easy to publish case study papers in certain top journals or get them accepted as competitive papers at conferences. Thus, there is still a need for promoting the use of this method among IB scholars and others active in social sciences; otherwise, it is seen as a “second or third best” choice instead of being the best in some cases. This does not mean that quantitative methods should be discarded – for some purposes (for example, for statistical generalization) they are more useful than case studies – but they should not be seen as the only way for doing serious science just because they have been mainly used for studying some topics before.

It can be argued that the strengths of the case study method outweigh its weaknesses. Still, this does not mean that the critique should be ignored. Although it is not possible to suggest how an ideal IB case study should look like (the number of cases, the main purpose of using them – for example, for illustration, hypothesis development or theory refining – and the maximum allowed length of articles varies considerably from publication to publication), several ways have been proposed for increasing the contribution of case study papers - more cases might be included (but this is not always helpful), additional methods used, co-authors from other countries or research streams found, people from the context interviewed, and external reviewers involved. The authors have also been advised to be flexible and objective, tell a good story, use figures and tables for illustrating their results, and establish a clear chain of evidence. In addition, they should be able to answer the questions: (1) why (this topic was selected; case research was chosen instead of something else; these particular cases and interviewees were picked), (2) how (the research was conducted, the case companies contacted, the data collected and analyzed, and the ethical issues dealt with), (3) what (was proposed and studied; the interviewees might have left unsaid; differed from and was similar to the results of previous papers; might be the limitations of the resultant theory), and (4) so what (that these conclusions were reached; were they substantially new, contradicting to the previous ones, helpful for other researchers or managers or important in any other way). These questions are often asked at conferences and seminars, by reviewers, editors and the general audience, but still, surprisingly, sufficient answers are missing in many papers (and not only in the field of IB). This, in turn, deepens the threat that case studies are not taken seriously enough.

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