

How to Use Multiple Case Studies in International Business Research: Methodological Aspects

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This paper intends to illustrate how to undertake multiple case studies in international business research using the example of the author's current case study research which focuses on the internationalisation and foreign market selection processes. In particular, the paper discusses methodological aspects of case study research and qualitative data collection and analysis. By doing so, this paper has made significant methodological and theoretical contributions to the literature on qualitative and case study research in IB.

Field of Research: Management and Marketing Research

1. Introduction and Conceptual Background

It has been argued that the type of research methodology influences directly and significantly the quality, validity and generalisability of business research in general and international business research (IBR) in particular ((McGrath & Brinberg, 1983). Further, the innovation and creativity in research design and methodologies have contributed considerably to the development of the field of international business (IB) (Kogut, 2001). Notwithstanding, many experienced international business scholars argue that most empirical research in international business relies on questionnaire survey and/or secondary data which involve vital problems as regards to the profundity and richness of understanding the strategy subjects in IB. Accordingly, they have called for rich analytical qualitative case studies to gain comprehensive understanding of many complicated, cross-cultural and strategy-related phenomena in IB which cannot be attained via the dominating quantitative research methods (e.g. Boddewyn & Iyer 1999; Craig & Douglas 2001). A recent claim made by (Ghauri & Firth 2009) asserts that it is extremely useful and highly recommended to use the case study research method in investigating many vital topics in international business research, such as foreign market entry processes (as the case of the author's current research example), international business negotiations, international joint ventures, and headquarter subsidiary relationships. Moreover, a leading journal in international business (Journal of International Business Studies) has recently called for methodological papers a propos how to undertake case study research in IB as an attempt to bring qualitative methods back into the mainstream of international business research.

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Additionally, it has been found that the literature on research methodologies in IB has mainly focused on the subject of generalisability of the findings of cross-cultural research and ignored the issue of qualitative and case study research design and processes (Yang, Wang & Su 2006). Observably, many IB scholars have a great deal of awareness and knowledge of the value of and importance of qualitative and case study research methods in international business. Nevertheless, very little IB qualitative and case study research was witnessed in international business journals. As a result, this paper intends to fill this evident gap in IB literature by illustrating how to successfully undertake multiple case studies in international business research using the example of the author's current case study research which focuses on the internationalisation and foreign market selection processes. In particular, the paper discusses methodological aspects of case study research design and qualitative data collection and analysis. At first, the paper justifies the choice of qualitative and case study method. The second main part of the paper details the case study design, case selection and the number of cases. The third main section explains the data collection and analysis methods and techniques. The fourth section discusses quality issues related to the case study research design. Finally, the conclusion is provided at the end of the paper.

2. Justification for Qualitative Research Methodology

The research problem 'how do' and the main question 'what are' are descriptive rather than prescriptive, which require a theory-building approach (inductive) rather than a theory testing one (deductive) (Perry 1998). Accordingly, the interpretive paradigm (inductive) is more suited than the positivist paradigm (deductive) because the research is concerned with picturing the actual world of investigated phenomena rather than providing statistical details about the cause-effect relationships between variables within the examined phenomena. Furthermore, the internationalisation and foreign market selection process is an extremely multifaceted process (Atthirawong & MacCarthy 2002; Carla 1994). Consequently, the author's research was designed to gain a rich and comprehensive picture concerning critical success factors and phases involved in the multifarious decision processes undertaken by Arabian firms in selecting the foreign country for their international operations. Therefore, the best way to recognise and uncover the extremely complex components of this process is getting inside the minds of the organisations' decision-makers and understanding the process from their viewpoints (Hassard 1993) and experiences (Smith & Heshusius 1986).

In the current research, the qualitative method is the most useful way of gaining access to top executives and their mindsets because it offers intensity and richness in the collected data that could avoid and overcome the common barriers of validity and reliability in a social and organisational study.

Moreover, it is more relevant when the research objective is to explore deeply the processes and mechanisms of international business (Yeung 1995), as was the goal of the authors' research. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to understand the personal experiences of humans more deeply and clearly than does the positivist approach (Gummesson 2003; Patton 1987; Spencer. et al. 2003). Its use fitted with the relatively small number of cases examined and was recommended when information obtained from each subject was expected to differ in complex ways and each interview was a story in its own right (Ticehurst & Veal 2000).

3. Justification for Case Study Strategy

A case study in management education is defined as a “description of management situation” (Bonoma 1985, p.203); whereas, as a research approach or method it is described as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context not clearly evident” (Yin 2003, p.13). Other methodologists described the case study as a research methodology which relies extensively on interviews (Perry 1998). Case study may be *exploratory*, *descriptive* or *explanatory* (Yin 1981; 2003), *particularistic*, *descriptive* or heuristic (Merriam 1988) and snapshot, longitudinal, pre-post, patchwork or comparative (Jensen & Rodgers 2001). Accordingly, the category of the selected case studies for the current research is *exploratory* according to Yin's typology (Yin 1981; 2003) as the research adopted the inductive approach in an attempt to add and develop new aspects of the existing theory in the area of internationalisation and foreign market entry. The research's case studies are *heuristic* (Merriam 1988) because they maximise experiences and the knowledge of senior managers in organisations in relation to the internationalisation decision-making, and comparative (Jensen & Rodgers 2001) seeing that they were selected purposively from different industries and sizes to integrate the findings by carrying out cross-case analysis and assessment.

In general, the case study strategy was adopted in the present investigation for the several reasons. Mainly, case study approach is the most appropriate method when the research problem addresses the question of 'how do' rather than 'how should' and, therefore, the inductive (theory-building) approach is required to solve that research problem (Perry 1998). In other words, the case study approach aims to explain inductively the real context of the phenomena being examined (descriptive) rather than developing normative models based on a theory testing approach which describes how the phenomena should exist (prescriptive). Furthermore, according to Yin (2003, p.2) “the case study strategy allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events - such as individuals life cycles, organizational and managerial processes,...”. The aim of the author's

research was to explore the problem of '*how do Arabian firms successfully internationalise their business activities and select their foreign markets*'. As a result, the author attempted to resolve the established research problem through obtaining real and in-depth information from decision-makers of the selected organisations to gain a rich understanding of how internationalisation decisions are made in reality. Hence, testing predetermined propositions or hypotheses as in the case of a deductive approach was not the subject of his research. Moreover, the case study method is a solid ground for the theory building approach which is very suitable for new areas of research wherein little is known (Eisenhardt 1989) or for refining the existing theory and proposing new directions for further research (Stake 1994). Finally, it is extremely useful and highly recommended to use the case study research strategy in investigating many vital issues in international business research, such as foreign market entry processes (Ghauri & Firth 2009).

4. Case Study Research Design

As indicated by Yin (1994; 2003) the case study design represents the research plan that guides the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. Four types of case study designs were proposed by Yin (2003): (a) single case (holistic), (b) single case (embedded), (c) multiple case (holistic) and (d) multiple case (embedded). Initially, the single case design implies the deployment of one case study and it is holistic when it involves simply one unit of analysis or the case itself ;whereas, it is embedded if it integrates more complex subunits of analysis (Yin 2003). In contrast, multiple case design refers to conducting several case studies or experiments (Villard 2003; Yin 2003) and, it can be holistic if it entails several holistic cases in which each holistic case consists of only one unit of analysis. However, the embedded multiple case design contains a number of embedded cases wherein each embedded case includes multiple units of analysis (Yin 2003). The multiple case study design was the most appropriate design for the current research because it was not aiming to test theory or to understand a unique and typical phenomenon as in the single case design. However, a strategic decision process takes a long time (Mintzberg, Raisinghani & Theoret 1976) therefore, due to time and other research resource constraints, it is hard to rely on one single firm case and observe the internationalisation and foreign market selection process from beginning to completion.

In short, the multiple case design was preferred over the single case design because it provided robust and rigorous grounds for good quality research derived from the triangulation of evidence compared with single case design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Parkhe 1993; Yin 2003). Further, the evidence abstracted from multiple case research is considered more powerful and more compelling (Herriott & Firestone 1983) and the approach is a very useful tool to gain insight

into all aspects of how an organisation addresses complex strategic decision-making (Ulaga & Sharma 2001).

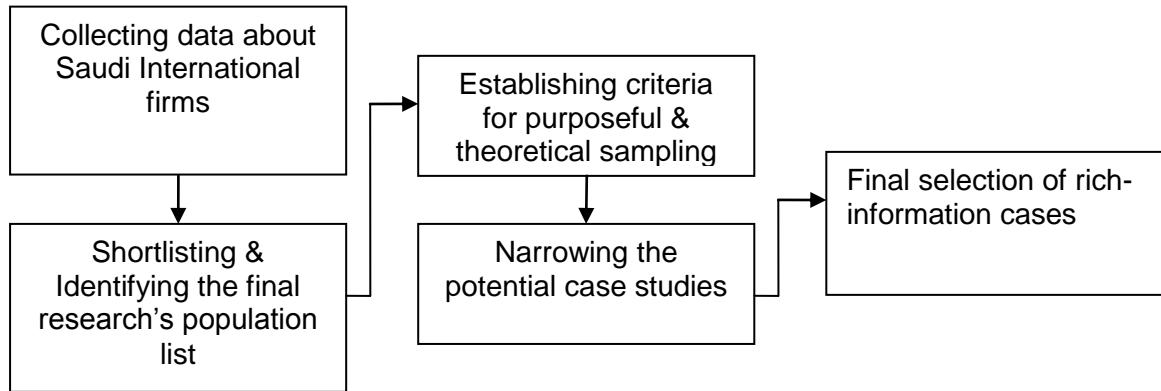
4a. Cases Selection

Experienced researchers have established common agreement which suggest strongly that the selection of case studies should be made based on 'theoretical sampling' and not based on 'random sampling' as is the case with survey research (Eisenhardt 1989; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Patton 1990; Perry 1998; Yin 2003). According to Glaser & Strauss (1967 p.45) theoretical sampling is "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges". Yin (2003, p.47) argued strongly that multiple cases should be considered as multiple experiments and not multiple respondents in a survey and cases must be selected based on replication logic and not based on sampling logic. As a result, each case either predicts similar results (literal replication) or predicts opposite results for predicable reasons (theoretical replication). Patton (2003) introduced the concept of 'purposeful sampling' suggesting that case studies should be selected from among potential cases which are information-rich and provide the researcher with deep knowledge and understanding about the research issue. Therefore, he identified sixteen different strategies of purposeful sampling for case selection of which four strategies were utilised in the current research.

The procedures of case selection began in January 2009 and it involved gathering data about the top leading Arabian and Saudi companies from the department of commerce and trade in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, we could not find a precise list which includes the Saudi international firms. Therefore, initially, we looked at the websites of the top listed companies to determine whether they have international operations or not. We found that extremely small number of the Arabian and Saudi firms has international operations.

The proposed multiple case design was selected based on Patton's combination or mixed purposeful sampling strategy (Patton 2002) through applying several sampling strategies (criterion, convenience, and intensity sampling strategy). As a result, two companies were purposively selected and they were information-rich, accessible, proximal, large, leading and well-established Saudi manufacturing and professional service firm which established various offshore operations. The process concerning the theoretical selection of case studies is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The selection process of case studies



4b. Data Collection Methods and Techniques

Case study research can include both qualitative and quantitative data and recent methodologists have identified several techniques of data collection of case study based-research but it is not necessary to utilise all of these methods (Bogdan & Biklen 1982; Patton 1990; Yin 2003). These techniques encompass (1) interviews, (2) questionnaire, (3) archival records, (4) direct observation, (5) participant observation, (6) documentation and (7) physical artifacts. As pointed out by Bogdan & Biklen (1982) interviews can be used either as a major method for data collection in qualitative research or in combination with other sources of data such as document analysis, observation or other techniques. Therefore, the current researcher relied on in-depth interviews as a primary data source and method because most of the investigated four internationalisation decisions, within the selected two Saudi international firms, were made some time ago thus it was difficult to find documents or archival records related to these decisions in most of the undertaken cases studies, a situation recognised by Mintzberg, Raisinghani & Theoret (1976). In addition, direct observation, participant observation and the interrelated physical artifacts were unfeasible, inaccessible and impossible to be employed in the current research. As a result, these decision processes were only able to be explored after completion and the researcher, therefore, had to be dependent on supplementary data sources in conjunction with face-to-face, in-depth interviews in the current research to incorporate the case study database for each single case and mainly triangulate the interview data. Other sources besides document review were: (1) a questionnaire which was designed following the interview sessions, (2) field notes which were taken during the visits to the selected five case firms and during the interview course, (3) internet sources available at the firm's website which contained information about the firm's background and international operations (4)

follow-up telephone and electronic mail contacts made subsequent to the interviews to clarify interviews related data and obtain additional information about the research issues. In effect, the in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide because the area of internationalisation and foreign market entry decisions is a relatively new area of research and the researcher has good interview skills to manage the interview process effectively (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran 2000). Furthermore, one of the influential strengths and advantages of the semi-structured interview technique for the current research was exploring the research issues thoroughly as it provided opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss the topics in more detail, allowing the interviewees to freely and fully express their views, beliefs and thoughts (Lofland & Lofland 1995; Mathers, Fox & Hunn 1998;). Moreover, since multiple case studies were conducted and each case study considered as a single experiment (Yin 2003), the flexibility and elasticity which distinguish semi-structured interviews allowed changing and modifying of interview questions when required to gain rich, reliable, valid and accurate data through directing the interview process and asking the same question in different ways to explain the same issue (Mathers, Fox & Hunn 1998). In conclusion, based on the former debate, in each of the conducted two cases, in-depth interviews were conducted at various sessions with the available and most knowledgeable senior managers who participated significantly in the internationalisation and foreign market selection process.

4c. Case Study Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedures for the case study involved two main stages. The first stage began with designing and preparing the case study protocol followed by the collection of data from the field. These stages are explained in the next sub-headings.

4c.1. Case Study Protocol

Case study protocol was planned prior to the data collection process and not only included the interview instrument, but also the procedures and actions required to pursue in using the instrument. The case study protocol established the entire data collection process and it is regarded as a necessary part of the case study research. As suggested by Yin (2003, p.69), the case study protocol for the current research incorporated four main sections as follows:

- An overview of the case study research project (objectives, issues, topics being investigated).

- Field procedures (gaining access to sites, sources of information, timetable of data collecting activities).
- Case study questions (specific questions that the investigator must keep in mind during data collection).
- A guide for case study report (outline, format for the narrative).

4c.2. Process of Collecting the Field Data

The data collection process began in late June, 2009 and it followed the guidelines suggested by Dick (1999):

1. Contact the respondents.
2. Explain the purpose of the research project to respondents.
3. Establish good unbiased relationship with the respondents.
4. Determine a date, time and venue for the interview course.

At the outset, telephone contact was made with the identified major and most knowledgeable senior managers involved in the internationalisation decision. The telephone conversations lasted 5-10 minutes and aimed to explain the research purpose and interview questions to participants and determine a date, time and venue for the interview sessions. Given that all participants were heads of firms and were very busy, the requested interview time was long (two and a half hours to three hours), there was a deliberate attempt not to put any pressure on them concerning the interview arrangements; hence, the interviews were conducted at a date, time and venue convenient and suitable for them. The participants were contacted by telephone and an agreed date, time and the venue was set for the interview sessions. Arranged dates and times were confirmed with the participants' personal secretaries by telephone a couple days prior to the interview dates. The telephone contacts with the senior managers created a friendly atmosphere between the researcher and the participants and contributed significantly to the success of the interview sessions and the case study field procedures. All in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of three months.

5. Analysing Case Study Data

Overall, qualitative data analysis refers to the large volume of words obtained by interviews or observations which require describing and summarising and subsequently the researcher has to look for relationships between various themes that have been emerged throughout the analysis process so as to answer the research questions (Lacey & Luff 2001). Miles & Huberman (1984; 1994) proposed a three-phase qualitative data analysis methodology which can be applied to within and cross-case analyses of the qualitative data in

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multiple case study research. This methodology involves the following phases:

- Data reduction
- Data display
- Conclusion drawing and verification

Data reduction refers to the course of selecting, focusing, simplifying, summarising and converting the data of written field. As a major element of this phase, the data requires summarising and coding and finally categories and themes need to be created in accordance with the predetermined research questions.

Data display as a second phase entails presenting the reduced data in organised and understandable shape to allow the researcher to reach conclusions about research issues. Word or diagrammatic form such flow charts, tables and other graphics can be used to assemble and systematise the information. In addition, a matrix can be applied for analysing patterns of responses to the research question.

Conclusion drawing and verification also known as the interpretation phase and it implies giving meaning and sense to the analysed data through searching for a descriptive patterns in the data.

Two main stages of analysis are recommended for multiple case study research, that is., within-case analysis and cross case analysis (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2003). Within-case analysis entails analysing the collected qualitative and quantitative data of each case study independently after which the researcher concludes the findings about the research issues for each individual case. Yin (2003, pp.111-115) described three main analytic strategies for within-case study analysis: 1. relying on the theoretical propositions of the research; 2. defining and testing rival or contrasting explanations and 3. developing a detailed description or report for each single case study. Further, Yin (2003) identified the pattern matching technique as one of the most desirable analytic techniques to be used in within-case analysis. The technique entails comparing empirically based patterns with expected or predicted one. Accordingly, both, the case study report and pattern matching techniques were employed in the author's research.

The second suggested stage of data analysis in multiple case study research relates to cross-case analysis which implies searching for cross-case patterns. Eisenhardt (1989, pp.540-541) suggested three major cross-case analytic strategies. The first is to categorise cases based on certain dimensions and then search for similarities and differences among the group of cases. The second is to choose two cases and list the similarities and

differences between them. The final strategy is to break up the data by data source such as one researcher works on interview data, while another reviews questionnaire data. In conclusion, within-case and cross-case analyses were carried out in analysing the data of the current research. Further, the pattern or theme matching was compared with the emerged themes with patterns derived from the literature review. In cross-case analysis, categorising the case studies based on the type of industry such as manufacturing firms vs. service firms and followed by search for similarities and differences among these categories was adopted as an analytic strategy for cross-case pattern. Furthermore, the three-phase data analysis methodology (Miles & Huberman 1984; 1994) was employed in analysing the interview data of case studies.

6. The Quality of Case Study Research Design

Ascertaining rigour is an indispensable component of all research in general and of case study research in particular (Miles & Huberman 1984; 1994; Yin 2003). Therefore, the author complied with certain established criteria and performed logical assessment during the case study research design, data collection and data analysis to assure the rigour, believability and trustworthiness of the research findings. These coherent tests incorporated validity, dependability/reliability and transferability/generalisation.

6a. Validity

Validity refers to the accuracy and trustworthiness of instruments, data and findings in the research (Bernard 2000). There are three main types of validity which require to be evaluated in any research, that is, construct, internal and external validity.

6a.1. Construct Validity

Construct validity refers to establishing correct operational measures for the theoretical concepts being investigated by linking the data collection questions and measures to research questions and hypotheses (Rowley 2002; Yin 2003). Construct validity was fulfilled in the current thesis by: (1) designing case study protocol questions and asking questions during the interview sessions which effectively captured a comprehensive and rich understanding about the research main issue relevant to the internationalisation and foreign market selection process (Rowley 2002; Yin 2003), (2) maintaining the chain of evidence through ensuring the accessibility of the field guide to data collection, the case study notes and providing adequate illustration in the case report to the evidence contained in the database (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt 1988; Rowley 2004; Yin 2003), and finally (3) using multiple sources of

evidence (triangulations) such as in-depth interviews, questionnaires and documents (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt 1988; Rowley 2002; Yin 2003).

6a.2. Internal Validity/Credibility

The terms credibility and internal validity were used interchangeably in the literature (Byrne 2001) and they imply that the researcher has to ascertain established relationships between dependent and independent variables (Yin 2003). In point of fact, the internal validity is required and used in explanatory or causal studies and not in the descriptive or exploratory research as was the case in the author's research (Yin 2003). However, the author satisfied this criterion by using the pattern-matching through matching and contrasting the emerged themes during the data analysis with the established themes or pattern in the exiting literature reviewed (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt 1988; Rowley 2002; Yin 2003).

6a.3. Generalisation/ External Validity/Transferability

Terms such as generalisation, generalisability, external validity (Yin 2003), transferability and applicability (Byrne 2001) were compatibly used in the literature. Overall, generalisation/external validity/transferability refers to the extent to which the research's findings can be generalised beyond the immediate case study and applied to other contexts or to other cases of the research entire population (Byrne 2001; Yin 2003). Given that "the purpose of the case study is not to represent the world, but to represent the case" (Stake 1994, p. 245) and case studies have to be selected based on 'theoretical sampling' and not on 'random sampling' as with quantitative research (Eisenhardt 1989; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Patton 1990; Perry 1998; Yin 2003), the 'analytical generalisation' is applied to case study research and not 'statistical generalisation' as in quantitative research which deals with large randomly selected sample (Yin 1994; 2003). Analytical generalisation means to what extent are the findings of the conducted case studies replicated and constant (Yin 2003). External validity or generalisation was accomplished in the current study by: (1) using replication logic in the multiple case design (Yin 2003) wherein the findings from the selected cases were replicated (Yin 1994; 2003); (2) adopting the purposeful sampling in selecting the case studies (Patton 1990), (3) writing information-rich case study description or report for the data of each case study (Byrne 2001) and finally (4) by the multiple case study design itself in which all selected cases were firms from one country (Saudi Arabia), and represented the two main industries (manufacturing and service).

6a.4. Reliability/Dependability

Reliability is also known as dependability in the literature and it illustrates to which level the instrument is stable and consistent with measuring the concept to allow repeating the same research using the same method, sample and the data collection produced so as to obtain the same results of those previous study (Sekaran 1984). Reliability was achieved in the current research by: (1) using case study protocol (Yin 2003) where all the selected case studies (participating firms) and all participants (informants) were subjected to the same sequence of entry and exit procedures and interview questions (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt 1988) and (2) intensive documentation of procedures and appropriate recording keeping (Byrne 2001; Bourgeois & Eisenhardt 1988; Yin 2003). Furthermore, collecting the data through in-depth interviews with the most knowledgeable senior managers (informants) who participated in the internationalisation decision increases significantly the reliability of the findings of the research (Huber & Power 1985; Papadakis, Lioukas & Chambers 1998).

7. Conclusion

Given that the literature on research methodologies in IB has mainly focused on quantitative research along with the subject of generalisability of the findings of cross-cultural research and ignored the issue of qualitative and case study research design, this paper aimed to fill this evident gap in IB literature by illustrating how to undertake multiple case studies in international business research using the example of the author's case study research which focused on the internationalisation and foreign market selection processes. As a result, the current paper has made a significant contribution IB literature by demonstrating how to successfully conduct a case study research in international business. It can be used as a practical methodological guide for IB researchers interested in undertaking case study research. The paper also has brought to light the advantages of the qualitative and case study research methodology. Firstly, the multiple case study approach enabled the researcher to bring together the entire vital knowledge and experiences of decision-makers involved in the internationalisation process. Secondly, the purposively and theoretical selection of the study cases from among different industries and sizes enabled the researcher to compare and contrast the findings of these different cases and develop a general model for successful foreign market selection. Finally, the purposive and in-depth interviewing of the most knowledgeable decision-makers provided credible and valuable information about the nature of the foreign market selection process.

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