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**Psychic Distance and Inter-organizational Relationships:
Theoretical Foundations, Methodological Approaches, and Future
Research Directions**

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Psychic Distance and Inter-organizational Relationships: Theoretical Foundations, Methodological Approaches, and Future Research Directions

Abstract

Purpose – This paper presents a comprehensive and integrated review of the literature on the role of psychic distance in shaping inter-organizational relationships, by uncovering the theoretical, methodological, and thematic foundations of this research domain.

Design/methodology/approach – Leveraging a systematic literature review in combination of text mining techniques using Leximancer, the study identified 62 relevant articles published between 1980 and 2024. The analysis revealed four key areas of focus: (1) interfirm business relationships, (2) relational governance and performance, (3) relationship quality, and (4) relationship violation.

Findings – The findings indicate that this body of research is grounded in well-established theoretical frameworks, with social exchange theory, transaction cost analysis, relational exchange theory, and the resource-based view being the most frequently employed. The literature predominantly emphasizes the role of psychic distance in the formation and maintenance of interfirm business relationships, while the other three areas remain comparatively underexplored.

Originality/value – By offering a more robust framework and a holistic understanding of psychic distance in inter-organizational relationships context, this study paves the way for further theory-driven studies, which is a theoretical contribution towards advancing this research area

Keywords; *Psychic distance; inter-organizational relationship; systematic literature review; text mining; Leximancer.*

Introduction

Psychic Distance (PD) is a pivotal concept in the literature on inter-organizational relationships, playing a critical role in shaping both the research

priorities and theoretical advancements within the field (Magnusson & Boyle, 2009). PD is often considered a central construct that influences the direction of scholarly inquiry in this area, although its potentialities remain somewhat contested among some scholars (Katsikeas, Skarmeas, & Bello, 2009). PD is commonly defined as the perceived differences between the operating environments of exchange partners (Katsikeas et al., 2009). The fundamental assumption underlying PD in inter-organizational relationship research is that these perceived differences “prevent or disturb the flows of information between the firm and the market” (Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975, p. 308). Such disruptions hinder effective relationship management by complicating communication between partners, thereby posing significant challenges for firms in planning and executing appropriate international marketing strategies (Bello, Chelariu, & Zhang, 2003).

Broadly, consensus among some scholars remains that PD complicates the evaluation and monitoring of trade partners, often fostering suspicion and increasing the perceptual differences between parties (Homburg, Krohmer, Cannon, & Kiedaisch, 2002). This can lead to misunderstandings, disagreements, and tensions that ultimately jeopardize the overall effectiveness and efficiency of inter-organizational relationships (Anderson & Gatignon, 1986; Li & Ng, 2002a). Since the early 1980s, researchers have examined the impact of PD from various perspectives, yet the findings have been inconsistent. For instance, some studies have challenged the presumed negative effects of PD on relationalism (Bello, Chelariu, & Zhang, 2003) and trust (Leonidou, Barnes, & Talias, 2006). Despite significant progress, the comprehensive impact of PD on inter-organizational relationships remains underexplored, as much of the research has focused on its antecedents and consequences rather than its broader implications (Durand, Turkina, & Robson, 2016). This is further complicated by the fragmented and discursive nature of PD research (Katsikeas, Skarmeas, & Bello, 2009). Durand, Turkina, and Robson (2016) argue that current research, while informative, has limited utility in advancing the field, as many studies revisit similar issues without generating new insights. This deficiency has left PD research in an emergent stage (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018), highlighting the need for a more focused research agenda to advance both the theoretical and practical dimensions of PD in inter-organizational contexts.

This research presents a systematic and comprehensive review of the existing research on PD in inter-organizational relationships from 1980 to 2024. While previous reviews have aimed to assess and consolidate knowledge on PD in cross-border relationships, they have primarily focused on contexts such as mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, and strategic alliances. However, there has been a notable lack of attention given to reviewing the body of knowledge on PD within inter-organizational relationships. To address this gap, the present study employs both a systematic literature review and text-mining techniques using Leximancer, an unstructured ontological discovery tool (Randhawa et al., 2016). The study aims to answer three key research questions:

1. What are the theoretical foundations, key concepts, and methodologies that have shaped research on PD in inter-organizational relationships from 1980 to 2024?
2. What research gaps exist in the study of PD in inter-organizational relationships, and how can future research address these gaps?
3. What are the underlying reasons for the mixed empirical findings in PD research, and what controversial issues require further investigation?

By adopting this comprehensive approach, the study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the scholarly developments and challenges in the field, while offering recommendations for future research directions.

In so doing, the study makes several significant contributions to the literature on PD in inter-organizational relationships context. First, it elucidates the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual underpinnings of PD, which is a critical issue in cross-border channel relationships (Leonidou & Katsikeas, 2010; Aykol, Palihawadana, & Leonidou, 2013). The review offers a consolidated, structured, and synthesized account of PD research, serving as a valuable resource for scholars interested in further investigating this phenomenon and advancing the field. Moreover, it provides a foundational knowledge base for early-career researchers seeking to explore PD in inter-organizational relationship exchanges, thereby facilitating the development of future research that can contribute to the ongoing advancement of the field.

Second, this study examines the progression of research on Psychic Distance (PD) in inter-organizational relationships, offering valuable insights and

identifying emerging trends for scholars in this field. It highlights the most commonly employed theoretical paradigms in PD research, providing a clearer understanding of the conceptual frameworks guiding scholarly inquiry. Additionally, the study explores changes in research methodologies, including study design, scope, sampling techniques, data collection methods, and data analysis, pinpointing areas where methodological enhancements are needed. By integrating and synthesizing diverse topics within the PD research stream, the study demonstrates how knowledge in this area has evolved and expanded over time. This comprehensive analysis is intended to refine the focus, scope, and quality of future research, ultimately contributing to the advancement of the field.

Third, the study critically assesses the current state of PD research, identifying its strengths and suggesting avenues for further theoretical, methodological, and empirical improvement. Through the use of content analysis via Leximancer, the study offers a richer and more holistic understanding of the foundational knowledge base and key concepts that define PD in inter-organizational relationship research.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: the research methodology, followed by the presentation of findings of the analysis. Subsequently, the relevant insights derived from the results were presented – likewise the highlights of research gaps, limitation of study, outlines of the directions for future research in this area, and conclusion of the study.

Methodology

Sample Selection

To conduct a comprehensive review of the literature on PD in inter-organizational relationships, we first performed an extensive search of online databases and article reference lists to identify all relevant publications on this topic from 1980 to 2024. We selected 1980 as the starting point for our review because this marks the year when the IMP group-initiated work on the interaction approach, publishing their seminal paper on PD in inter-organizational relationships (Ford, 1980). This is consistent with Laufs and Schwens's (2014) view on the importance of employing a fixed time frame for literature searches, to

facilitates the identification of a substantial body of relevant studies that have contributed in the development of knowledge in the field.

For this review, we utilized Google Scholar, ProQuest, Scopus, and ScienceDirect, which are considered four key databases well-suited for identifying pertinent articles published within the domains of international marketing and business, where studies of interest are most commonly found (Laufs & Schwens, 2014). We employed specific keywords in our search strategy, including "Distance," "Psychic Distance," "Psychological Distance," and "Inter-organizational Relationship" (see Appendix 2 for detailed keyword strings). Our search criteria focused on journal articles in which these terms appeared in the title, abstract, or keywords, ensuring that only studies published in peer-reviewed journals were considered, which is consistent with the methodologies used in previous reviews of inter-organizational relationships (e.g., Leonidou et al., 2014; Aykol & Leonidou, 2018; Laufs & Schwens, 2014).

Following the recommendations of Leonidou et al. (2014) and Laufs and Schwens (2014), we also included an article that was not retrieved through our initial database search (Heroux and Hammoutene, 2012). This article was identified from the reference lists of previously identified articles due to its relevance to our research. Our initial search strings across the four databases yielded 2,062 articles, including duplicates. We conducted a duplication check using Mendeley, a bibliographic and citation management software, which resulted in the removal of 1,811 duplicate articles, leaving a total of 251 articles. These articles were then further screened for inclusion in the systematic literature review based on the following three criteria:

1. The article must focus exclusively on the effects of PD in the relationship between exporters and importers, rather than on other aspects of cross-border business relationships such as mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, or strategic alliances. This criterion led to the exclusion of 163 articles, resulting in 88 remaining articles.
2. The article must be an original published journal research article, rather than a special issue editorial, erratum, book review, or conference paper. This criterion led to the exclusion of 24 articles, leaving 64 articles remaining.

3. The article must be an empirical or conceptual paper, including qualitative, quantitative, and commentary papers. This criterion led to the exclusion of 2 articles, resulting in a final sample of 62 articles.

These 62 articles constitute the total sample for this study (see Appendix 1 for a full list of articles).

Systematic Literature Review and Text Mining

To analyse the structure and theoretical foundations of PD in inter-organizational relationships, we first conducted a systematic literature review, which entails a method for identifying, evaluating, and interpreting all available research relevant to a specific research question, topic area, or phenomenon of interest (Kitchenham, 2014). The articles that form the basis of the systematic review are referred to as primary studies, while the systematic review itself is considered a secondary study (Budgen & Brereton, 2016). As such, a systematic literature review synthesizes the theoretical foundations of a given topic, identifies gaps in the literature to suggest areas where further investigation is needed, helps position new research within the existing body of knowledge, and examines the extent to which a given hypothesis is supported or contradicted by the available empirical evidence (Budgen & Brereton, 2016).

Furthermore, we emphasised two key characteristics of a systematic literature review, which are particularly relevant to this study. First, we ensured the review was robust, comprehensive, and exhaustive, and consistent with the approaches taken by Leonidou et al. (2014) and Aykol and Leonidou (2018). The objective of such review dynamic is to provide a complete and thorough summary of the current literature relevant to the research area (Kitchenham, 2014). Second, our systematic review was performed in a rigorous, replicable, and transparent manner, aiming to minimize bias. This approach allows for an analysis of PD in inter-organizational relationships that ensures transparent and comprehensive reporting of the research area.

It is important to note that the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to determine whether each potential primary study should be included in the review are inherently subjective and determined by the authors. Furthermore, the analysis process, which involves specifying the information to be extracted from each study, is also subjective. To mitigate these limitations and to provide a detailed analysis of the concepts underlying the selected publications, the textual

content of the focal articles was analysed using unstructured ontological discovery methods (Biesenthal & Wilden, 2014).

Text mining is an advanced method of unstructured ontological discovery that provides comprehensive conceptual insights by shifting the focus of analysis from the researcher's citations to the actual words used in the literature. This approach facilitates a systematic, unbiased, and content-driven review of the literature (Biesenthal & Wilden, 2014). In this study, we employed Leximancer 4.1, a textual data mining software that is particularly effective for conducting text narrative inquiries in a given research area (Sowa, 2012; Stubbs, 1996). The underlying premise of Leximancer is that texts are coded based on the context in which they appear, and co-occurring texts reflect categories, or concepts, with specific meanings. Leximancer extends beyond basic coding to generating an expanded list of related terms that signify a concept from the text data (Liesch et al., 2011). According to Campbell et al. (2011, p. 67), "machine-based concept identification has been found to exhibit close agreement with expert judgment." Leximancer is considered particularly suitable for sophisticated exploratory research due to its high reliability and reproducibility in extracting concepts and clustering themes, without the expectation biases that can arise in manually coded text analysis or expert-driven systematic reviews (Randhawa et al., 2016, p. 754).

Leximancer uses algorithms to identify the most frequently used concepts within a body of text and, more importantly, the correlations between these concepts (Randhawa et al., 2016). This method systematically uncovers key concepts related to PD in inter-organizational relationships by analyzing the connections between a minimal set of seed words (thematic analysis) and how these words co-occur within their contexts (semantic analysis) (Randhawa et al., 2016). This process enables the investigation of concepts (common text elements) and themes (alignments of uncovered concepts) (Mathies & Burford, 2011).

The outputs generated by Leximancer are referred to as "maps of meaning" (Randhawa et al., 2016, p. 175). Initially, Leximancer creates a thesaurus of words closely associated with a concept (represented by dots in Figure 1) to clarify its content. In text mining, concepts are more than simple words; they are combinations of texts that convey interconnected meanings (Campbell et al., 2011). The connections between concepts are then identified and grouped into themes (represented by circles in Figure 1). The significance of themes is indicated by both the color of the circles (darker circles signify greater significance) and their

size (the size reflects the number of concepts clustered together to form a given theme) (Randhawa et al., 2016). The distance between concepts on the "maps of meaning" indicates the strength of their semantic connection; concepts that are closely connected semantically are mapped closer together (Campbell et al., 2011; Rooney, 2005). The absence of a concept on the map suggests that the concept did not occur frequently enough within the text to be identified and associated with other concepts (Liesch et al., 2011).

In summary, the integration of these two approaches—systematic literature review and text mining via Leximancer (Randhawa et al., 2016)—offers complementary insights. The systematic literature review identifies the theoretical foundations and structure of PD in inter-organizational research, while text mining with Leximancer uncovers the key themes and concepts. The combination of these methods not only reveals knowledge gaps in the literature but also highlights areas for future research inquiry.

Study Findings

Findings of the Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review reveals that research on Psychic Distance (PD) in inter-organizational relationships has primarily been published in journals focused on International Marketing, International Business, and Management. The majority of articles appeared in *Industrial Marketing Management*, followed by the *Journal of International Marketing*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, and *International Business Review* (see Appendix 1 for a complete list of publication sources). To further investigate the intellectual foundations of PD research within inter-organizational relationships, we conducted a systematic review mapping the theoretical frameworks employed in the selected articles (see Appendix 1). The findings indicate that while a broad theoretical spectrum is used to explain the impact of PD, a significant number of articles do not explicitly adopt a theoretical framework. The most frequently utilized theories include Social Exchange Theory (18%), Transaction Cost Analysis (14%), Relational Exchange Theory (10%), and the Resource-Based View (8%). Other theories, such as Institutional Theory, Knowledge-Based View, and Network Theory, have been applied to a lesser extent in the literature. Additionally, the review identifies four methodological characteristics: research design, scope of research, sample and data collection

methods, and data analysis techniques. In the following sections, we briefly discuss each of these theoretical streams.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory, which focuses on the exchange of resources between two socially interacting parties (Emerson, 1976), emphasizes the role of reciprocity in determining risks and benefits (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In the context of PD in inter-organizational relationships, Social Exchange Theory has been used as a conceptual foundation for hypotheses exploring behaviors such as communication effectiveness and trust. For instance, Barnes, Leonidou, Siu, and Leonidou (2015) applied the theory to examine how one behavior (e.g., communication effectiveness) is reciprocated by another (e.g., trust). Some researchers have also anchored their studies in more specific frameworks derived from Social Exchange Theory, such as psychological contract breach (e.g., Leonidou et al., 2017).

Transaction Cost Analysis

Transaction Cost Analysis emphasizes the efficiency implications of firm relationships (Williamson, 1975, 1979). Within the context of PD in inter-organizational relationships, these efficiencies are influenced by how cross-border partners manage transaction-specific investments, external environmental uncertainty, and internal performance ambiguity (Leonidou et al., 2014). According to this theory, firms can reduce the costs associated with opportunistic behavior, environmental changes, and performance deviations by developing appropriate governance mechanisms, such as formalized contracts, to manage market transactions (Heide, 1994). This theory has been widely applied to understand the negative effects of opportunism on relationship exchanges in the presence of PD (Bianchi & Saleh, 2010; Katsikeas, Skarmeas, & Bello, 2009).

Relational Exchange Theory

Relational Exchange Theory posits that relationships between buyers and sellers evolve through a series of discrete transactions and relational exchanges, ultimately leading to long-term relationships characterized by trust, commitment, and cooperation (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). In the context of PD in inter-organizational relationships, this theory has been used to explore various aspects

of relational exchange, including the factors contributing to its development (e.g., Bello et al., 2003; Lee & Jang, 1998), the determinants of relational governance (e.g., environmental, structural, behavioural factors) (e.g., Abdi & Aulakh, 2012; Li & Ng, 2002a), the characterization of long-term versus short-term relationships (Haugland, 1999), and the performance implications of relational exchanges (e.g., Skarmeas & Katsikeas, 2001).

Resource-Based View

The Resource-Based View (RBV) conceptualizes organizations as bundles of resources and posits that these resources and capabilities are the basis for achieving competitive advantage (Grant, 1991). According to Barney (1991), an organization must possess valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources to sustain a competitive advantage. In the context of PD in inter-organizational relationships, RBV has been used to examine how relational resources and capabilities, such as relationship learning and complementary capabilities, impact relationship outcomes and business performance. Scholars have also investigated the behavioral drivers of these resources and capabilities (e.g., Griffith & Dimitrova, 2014; Skarmeas, Zeriti, & Baltas, 2016). Additionally, some researchers have considered favorable behavioral dimensions (e.g., trust, commitment, information sharing) as valuable resources in their own right and explored their interactions with environmental and relational factors (e.g., Griffith, Myers, & Harvey, 2006; Matanda, Ndubisi, & Jie, 2016).

Research Design

The majority of the articles reviewed in this study (83%) employed a formalized research design, characterized by the development and testing of hypotheses to establish the study rationale (see Table 2). This trend is likely due to the theoretical underpinnings of PD research in inter-organizational relationships, which often necessitate a structured, formalized approach. In contrast, exploratory studies accounted for only 10% of the total papers examined, with most of these studies conducted during the early stages of PD research when the field was still in its developmental phase. This finding can be attributed to the limited knowledge available at that time, as this research stream has experienced gradual development (see Figure 1). Exploratory studies in this period primarily focused on the impact of PD on the performance implications of relational governance strategies (e.g., Griffith & Myers, 2007) and on changes in relationship

characteristics across different stages of exchange relationships (e.g., Heroux & Hammoutene, 2012).

More than half of the studies reviewed (51%) employed a cross-sectional research design, with a relatively small number of studies, particularly those utilizing survey methods, adopting longitudinal designs. The limited use of longitudinal designs can be attributed to the associated costs and time requirements. However, given that PD is a dynamic phenomenon that evolves over time, cross-sectional studies capture only a snapshot of the relationship exchange, potentially overlooking the possibility of changes in the causal sequence between variables over time.

A significant majority (86%) of the studies on PD in inter-organizational relationships adopted a statistical approach, typically applied in large-sample studies that facilitate statistical analysis and data collection through specific research instruments. Despite the value of case studies for gaining in-depth insights into PD-related phenomena, they were rarely utilized, appearing in only 3% of the articles. Almost all (86%) of the reviewed studies reported a focus on causal relationships, emphasizing the investigation of cause-and-effect dynamics within PD research. In contrast, descriptive studies, which aim to confirm the frequency of variable occurrences or the extent to which two variables covary, represented only a small fraction (7%) of the research. The prevalence of causality-focused research reflects a growing trend toward constructing and testing theoretically driven conceptual models, even if this trend is not statistically dominant.

Scope of Research

The majority of the studies (55%) concentrated on a single country, gathering data either from exporters or importers to examine the effects of PD on inter-organizational relationships. An additional 20% of the studies involved two countries, while multi-country studies were infrequent, with only one study employing a three-country research design (Cannon et al., 2010). In multi-country research, data collection often spanned both domestic and foreign contexts (e.g., Skarmeas, Saridakis, & Leonidou, 2017; Racela et al., 2007) or included data from both exporters and importers (e.g., Durand, Turkina, & Robson, 2016; Skarmeas & Robson, 2008). Some studies used multi-country designs to compare domestic versus foreign buyer-seller relationships (e.g., Leonidou, Barnes, & Talias, 2006).

Geographically, Europe (predominantly the United Kingdom) was the focus of 35% of the articles, followed by North America (primarily the United States) with 23%. Other regions, including Oceania, Latin America, and Africa, were significantly under-researched, likely due to their less prominent roles in global trade. Our synthesis revealed a growing research interest in PD within Asia, Europe, and the USA, while research efforts in other regions appear to be driven more by the personal interests of a few researchers. Expanding research across these under-studied regions could provide valuable insights into the global applicability of PD concepts.

Regarding the unit of analysis, 50% of the articles focused on either the export or import venture, referring to the relationship between a specific exporter and importer. These were followed by studies that used the exporter (16%) and importer (9%) as the unit of analysis. Such research designs were more common in the early stages of PD research and were often applied in studies focusing on cross-border channel distribution selection criteria (e.g., Ghymn & Jaffe, 2004). However, only 8% of the studies examined the role of PD within the inter-organizational relationship dyad as the unit of analysis, likely due to the significant time and financial costs associated with obtaining reliable and comparable data from dyadic counterparts in different countries.

In terms of industry coverage, 67% of the studies were conducted across a mix of different industries, a choice likely driven by the pursuit of larger sample sizes. According to Aykol and Leonidou (2018), broader industry coverage increases the likelihood of obtaining a larger sample, allowing for greater variation in the factors of interest and enhancing the generalizability of the results. Single-industry analyses accounted for 17% of the articles, with the most common industries being food and beverages, electronics, machinery, and textiles.

Sampling and data collection

The majority of the articles reviewed (68.2%) employed probability sampling techniques, such as random sampling or systematic random sampling, particularly in more recent studies (e.g., Leonidou, Aykol, Fotiadis, Christodoulides, & Zeriti, 2017; Skarmeas, Zeriti, & Baltas, 2016; Sachdev & Bello, 2014). Only two articles (3.3%) utilized non-probability sampling methods, which were applied in qualitative research with small sample sizes (e.g., Vaaland, Haugland, & Purchases, 2004; Voldnes, Grønhaug, & Nilssen, 2012). Additionally, 8.3% of the

articles were purely conceptual and thus did not involve data collection. Notably, 13.3% of the articles did not clearly specify their sampling techniques.

In terms of data collection methods, the majority of studies (53.3%) employed mail questionnaires, with electronic data collection methods (e.g., online or email) being the second most popular (26.6%). The exclusive use of electronic methods in more recent studies likely reflects the increasing reliance on the internet, which offers cost and time efficiencies in distributing and collecting questionnaires. Face-to-face interviews were primarily reported in qualitative and mixed-method studies and were sometimes used in pilot studies to inform the final sampling procedure (9.6%). Other data collection methods, such as telephone and drop-off questionnaires, were rarely utilized in this area of research.

Regarding sample size, 80% of the articles reported sample sizes exceeding 99 units, with the majority (75%) falling within the range of 100 to 299 units. There has been a noticeable increase in sample sizes over time, with earlier studies (e.g., Ford, 1984; Lee, 1998) typically using smaller samples ranging from 0 to 92 units. This trend toward larger sample sizes in later studies can be attributed to several factors: (1) the widespread use of the internet, which facilitates access to a larger portion of the target population; (2) the growing reliance on structural equation modelling (SEM), which requires a minimum sample size proportional to the number of scale items to yield reliable results (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018); and (3) the availability of reliable databases (e.g., Dun & Bradstreet), which enable researchers to secure a broader participant base.

In terms of response rates, 33% of the articles reported response rates of 40% or higher. Another 20% reported response rates between 30% and 39%, while 18.3% achieved response rates ranging from 20% to 29%. These relatively high response rates are consistent with the use of mail and electronic questionnaires, which are typically associated with higher response rates. A smaller proportion of articles (10%) reported response rates below 20%. The response rate patterns observed in this review align with findings from other large-scale review studies of exporting (e.g., Leonidou & Katsikeas, 2010) and importing (e.g., Aykol et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

Concerning survey bias, 48% of the articles reported checking for non-response bias in their survey data. This high incidence of non-response bias checks is likely related to the prevalent use of mail and electronic data collection methods, which were the most commonly employed in the reviewed studies. The use of key informant bias techniques was rare, with only 5% of the articles reporting its application. Conversely, 47% of the articles addressed common method bias, primarily through the use of confirmatory factor analysis (Venkatraman & Prescott, 1990) and the variance and marker variable method (Lindell & Whitney, 2001).

Regarding construct evaluation, most articles assessed the reliability of their constructs, which is consistent with the predominantly quantitative nature of the studies and their reliance on various statistical methods. Specifically, 33% of the articles employed Cronbach's alpha tests to purify their data, while 30% used composite reliability tests. These reliability assessments are indicative of the increasing trend toward testing theoretically driven conceptual models, as they ensure the quality and reliability of the constructs (Diamantopoulos & Sigauw, 2009).

The most commonly used hypothesis testing method was SEM, reported in nearly half (47%) of the reviewed studies. The focus on testing theoretically grounded conceptual models in causal relationship research likely explains the widespread adoption of SEM. Additionally, only 5% of the articles reported the use of confirmatory factor analysis, and 12% employed multivariate statistical methods, primarily hierarchical regression. The use of descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency percentages) and univariate/bivariate statistics (e.g., ANOVA tests) was less frequent in the reviewed literature.

Text Mining

Figure 1 presents the conceptual map generated from the analysis of the focal articles, revealing four predominant research areas within the literature on Psychic Distance (PD) in inter-organizational relationships: (1) interfirm business relationships, (2) relational governance and performance, (3) relationship quality, and (4) relationship violation. These themes and associated concepts underscore the diverse perspectives and complex nature of PD in inter-organizational contexts.

According to the conceptual map, research on PD within the theme of interfirm business relationships has garnered the most attention, as indicated by the prominence of this area (highlighted in red, light blue, green, and purple). Studies in this domain explore the impact of PD on the establishment and maintenance of cross-border business relationships (e.g., Obadia, 2013; Solberg, 2008; Nes, Solberg, & Silkoset, 2007; Lee & Jang, 1996; Lee, 1998), the role of PD in relationship learning and value creation in business transactions (e.g., Skarmeas et al., 2017a; Skarmeas et al., 2017b; Skarmeas et al., 2016), and the factors influencing relationship learning in cross-border inter-organizational relationships (e.g., Liu, 2012; Cheng et al., 2010). Within this theme, the concepts of "distance" and "relationship" are closely linked to terms such as "information," "firms," "partner," "transaction," "business," and "cross-border." These connections align with the conceptualization of PD as an impediment to the flow of information between partners in cross-border business relationships (Sachdev & Bello, 2014). Research in this area frequently draws on cognitive categorization theory (e.g., Obadia, 2013), social exchange theory, and relational exchange theory (e.g., Lee & Jang, 1996; Lee, 1998) to examine how PD complicates cross-border business partnerships.

In the realm of relational governance and performance, studies focus on the impact of institutional distance—a dimension of PD—on governance arrangements in international market channels (e.g., Abdi & Aulakh, 2012), as well as how governance strategies, such as formal or informal contracts and relational governance, contribute to firm legitimacy and performance (e.g., Yang, Su, & Fam, 2012; Dou, Li, Zhou, & Su, 2010). The concept of "performance" is closely connected to "relationship" and "export" within the relationship and international themes, indicating that performance outcomes, whether relational or export-related, are key variables investigated in this area (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018; Leonidou et al., 2014). Specifically, research in this stream examines the effect of PD on business relationship performance.

[Insert figure 1 here]

Most studies within this research area focus on the role of Psychic Distance (PD) in influencing export performance (e.g., Lee, 1996a; Lee, 1996b; Lee & Jang, 1998; Racela et al., 2007). Other research has investigated the impact of PD on relationship performance (e.g., Leonidou et al., 2017a; Leonidou et al., 2017b; Leonidou et al., 2011) and economic performance (Obadia, 2013). However,

aspects of performance such as financial performance have not been addressed by any studies included in this review. Additionally, a subset of studies explores the effect of PD on market performance (Jean et al., 2015) and long-term orientation (Cannon et al., 2010).

In terms of relationship quality, this theme has received relatively limited attention (noted by the blue and green areas in the conceptual map). The core concepts within the relationship quality theme include “quality,” “trust,” and “commitment.” Studies in this area primarily examine the impact of PD on the overall quality of inter-organizational relationships. Relationship quality, defined as the overall strength of a relationship (Leonidou et al., 2014), encompasses five distinct but related dimensions: trust, commitment, communication, cooperation, satisfaction, and conflict. Among these, trust and commitment are the most frequently examined dimensions (e.g., Johnston et al., 2012; Skarmeas et al., 2008; Skarmeas & Robson, 2008; Leonidou et al., 2006). Other dimensions, such as communication, cooperation, satisfaction, adaptation, and conflict, are less frequently studied (e.g., Voldnes et al., 2012; Karande, Ha, & Singhapakdi, 2008; Racela et al., 2007; Westjohn & Magnusson, 2017). The close connection between the concepts of “trust” and “commitment” suggests that trust fosters a positive environment in channel relationships, encouraging relational partners to commit and cooperate to achieve shared goals (Skarmeas et al., 2008).

Finally, Liesch et al. (2011) emphasize that the absence of certain concepts in the analysis indicates that “important concepts fail to occur sufficiently frequently within the text to be identified and associated with other concepts” (p. 25). In our analysis using Leximancer, we identified two constructs—“betrayal” and “infidelity”—that did not appear in the conceptual map. This result aligns with Liesch et al.’s (2011) findings and may be attributed to the relatively recent introduction of these concepts into the inter-organizational relationship literature (Leonidou et al., 2017a; Leonidou et al., 2017b). Research in this emerging area focuses on the antecedents (e.g., opportunism, inter-partner incompatibility, relational distance, and relational uncertainty) and outcomes of negative aspects of inter-organizational relationships, including betrayal and infidelity (Leonidou et al., 2017a; Leonidou et al., 2017b).

Discussion and Recommendations

Our review of the literature on Psychic Distance (PD) in inter-organizational relationships reveals that this field, situated within international marketing and international business research, has evolved into a mature body of scholarly knowledge, offering substantial theoretical and methodological insights. Theoretically, this research stream has introduced new concepts, ideas, and frameworks that have enhanced the conceptualization of PD's impact on interactions between exchange partners in international business settings. It has proposed new constructs and operationalizations to more accurately measure various facets of foreign partnerships, emphasizing the significance of context-specific factors in analyzing cross-border relationships. The comprehensive approach employed in this review has illuminated several new insights into the PD phenomenon.

First, findings from the systematic literature review demonstrate that this research area is underpinned by a robust intellectual foundation, characterized by the use of both explicit (e.g., social exchange theory, transaction cost analysis, relational exchange theory, and the resource-based view) and implicit (e.g., institutional theory, knowledge-based view, and network theory) theoretical frameworks. This theoretical diversity is likely due to the fact that many of the ideas and constructs employed in PD research have their origins in the international business context, where these theories have been extensively applied. We recommend that scholars investigating PD in inter-organizational relationships continue to anchor their research in appropriate theories with explanatory power for PD-related issues. Furthermore, there is a need for the development of new theory-informed research capable of integrating multi-level perspectives on PD, with particular attention to underutilized theories such as institutional theory, the knowledge-based view, and network theory.

Methodologically, the majority of the reviewed articles employed a quantitative, formalized approach, reflecting the extent of accumulated knowledge in this field, which enables researchers to develop and test new hypotheses. The prevalent use of statistical methods, as opposed to case studies, is consistent with this formalized approach. However, the potential of case studies to provide deeper insights into research problems should not be overlooked. The cross-sectional nature of much of the research in this field represents a significant limitation, as PD in inter-organizational relationships is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. Longitudinal studies would be more suitable for capturing the

temporal dynamics and causal relationships between the identified themes. Additionally, the strong emphasis on causal relationships indicates that research in this stream has focused on understanding PD in inter-organizational relationships through conceptual models, incorporating antecedents, mediating, intervening, and outcome variables.

In terms of research scope, the majority of the reviewed studies focused on single-country contexts, typically collecting data from either the exporter or importer. It would be valuable to expand this approach by employing multi-country data collection methods, which would enable cross-national comparisons of relationship exchanges and allow for the assessment of other dimensions of PD, such as cultural, economic, political, and institutional distance. For example, studying diverse country pairings (e.g., exporters from France assessing exchanges with importers from China or Australia) could yield valuable insights. Another significant finding is the regional focus of the studies, with most research concentrated in Europe and North America, and a gradual shift towards Asia. However, regions such as Africa, Oceania, and the Middle East remain significantly under-researched. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to conduct studies in these overlooked but important regions, such as South Africa, New Zealand, and the UAE. Given the increasing importance of service-oriented markets, there is also a need for research that sheds light on the relationship dynamics between exporters and importers in these markets.

Regarding the unit of analysis, more than half of the studies focused primarily on either exporters or importers. It would be beneficial for future research to adopt a dyadic approach, as differences between channel partners from different countries are likely. Considering the varying boundary-spanning roles and power-dependence relationships in cross-border partnerships, it would be useful to compare firms of different sizes (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018).

In terms of sampling and data collection, there has been a noticeable shift towards electronic data collection methods, facilitated by the internet, moving away from traditional personal and mail-based methods. While electronic data collection offers advantages such as broader reach, time efficiency, and cost-effectiveness, scholars should exercise caution, as the reliability of sampling frames may be questionable, and the risk of non-response bias is high. Although the informants used in these studies were generally relevant, it would be important to gather information from multiple informants within the same

organization and from both members of the exporter-importer dyad, preferably from matched pairs.

Concerning data analysis, the predominant use of statistical methods, particularly structural equation modelling (SEM), was observed in nearly half of the studies. However, non-response bias and construct evaluation were less concerning, as findings indicate that researchers in this field increasingly control for non-response bias and purify their data using Cronbach's alpha or composite reliability tests. We encourage scholars examining PD in inter-organizational relationships to explore more advanced statistical methods beyond the popular SEM and confirmatory factor analysis to enhance their data analysis.

Finally, results from the text-mining analysis clearly indicate that research on PD in inter-organizational relationships has increasingly covered a broad range of thematic areas, including interfirm business relationships, relational governance and performance, relationship quality, and relationship violation. The predominant focus has been on the interfirm aspects of PD, particularly the impact of PD on establishing and maintaining cross-border business relationships. However, the other three areas identified through text mining remain relatively underexplored. There is a noticeable lack of research on PD's influence on relational governance and performance, the interrelationship between PD and relationship quality, and the direct impact of PD on relationship violations such as betrayal and infidelity. Integrating these theoretical, methodological, and thematic insights, the remainder of this paper identifies key research gaps and offers suggestions for future inquiries.

Suggestions for Future Research

Our review of the literature on Psychic Distance (PD) in inter-organizational relationships has identified several promising areas for future research that could significantly advance our understanding of this field. First, within the domain of interfirm business relationships, an important area for further investigation is the impact of PD on relationship value creation. The perception of PD by channel partners can make the establishment and maintenance of inter-organizational relationships both costly and time-consuming. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the extent to which interacting partners engage in both transactional and relational interactions in developing relationship value. This line of inquiry has the

potential to contribute to both theoretical and practical advancements in international marketing.

Additionally, it is common for both importing and exporting firms to maintain relationships with multiple partners within the same market space, some of whom may be direct competitors. Understanding how this dynamic affects relationship value creation and appropriation, and the role that PD plays within this competitive environment, is a critical area for future research.

Moreover, a promising but underexplored area for potential theory development involves the decomposition of relationship value into its constituent components: relationship benefits and relationship costs (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Investigating the specific drivers and deterrents of these components could provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of value creation. Furthermore, examining the influence of business and cultural aspects of PD (Evans, Mavondo, & Bridson, 2008) within this context could illuminate the effects of individual and national cultural differences on the benefit and cost dimensions of relationship value creation. This research could yield important implications for both theory and practice in international business and marketing.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Second, researchers investigating Psychic Distance (PD) in inter-organizational relationships should consider further exploring the impact of PD on the effectiveness of relational norms and governance mechanisms. Beck, Chapman, and Palmatier (2015) emphasized that the success of relationship marketing is contingent upon the cultural characteristics of the environment in which it is implemented. Similarly, Hoppner, Griffith, and White (2015) demonstrated how the effectiveness of norms of reciprocity is influenced by the cultural environment of the importer. Consequently, it would be valuable to examine how the effectiveness of relational norms is affected by the cultural characteristics of the import market. Additionally, exploring the concept of institutional distance—particularly the legal dimension—and its influence on the effectiveness of relational governance would contribute to this area of research. Future studies should also investigate the impact of PD on the governance mechanisms employed to manage export relationships, addressing questions such

as whether PD influences the selection of governance mechanisms, hinders their proper design, or affects their effectiveness.

Another significant area for future research concerns the impact of PD on partner complementary capabilities and their influence on export performance. Although substantial contributions have been made in this regard (e.g., Griffith & Dimitrova, 2014), the appropriate measures of export performance remain a subject of debate. For example, some scholars argue that export performance should encompass the multidimensional outcomes of an organization's activities in export markets, including both economic and strategic dimensions (Zou, Taylor, & Osland, 1998), while others advocate for performance metrics such as international growth (Zhou, Wu, & Barnes, 2012) or sales (Bello & Gilliland, 1997). A broader operationalization of export performance could enhance our understanding of the implications of business and cultural PD on export outcomes. Furthermore, future research should examine the performance implications of PD in inter-organizational relationships. While prior studies have confirmed that harmonious business interactions positively impact export/import performance—whether financial or market-related—there is limited knowledge regarding the mechanisms through which these relationships produce such outcomes. Identifying mediating factors, such as coordination, resource/capability complementarity, and value co-creation, could provide insights into how these interactions translate into successful business ventures.

Third, several issues related to relationship quality warrant further investigation. For instance, what is the impact of partner complementarity of resources and capabilities on dependence within inter-organizational relationships? What types of governance mechanisms are most effective at different stages of relationship quality between exporters and importers? Additionally, what is the moderating role of relationship learning in the relationship between PD and relationship quality? A relevant but often overlooked aspect of PD in inter-organizational relationships is the influence of cultural differences between interacting parties, particularly in terms of Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, long-term orientation). These dimensions may explain variations in power dynamics, relational distance, and relationship formalization.

Finally, international marketing researchers should explore under-studied but significant behavioral constructs related to PD in inter-organizational

relationships, such as relationship violation. Emerging behavioral concepts like infidelity and betrayal present new avenues for inquiry. Given that these constructs are relatively new in this domain, it would be valuable to examine the antecedents and consequences of infidelity and betrayal in inter-organizational relationships, as well as the role PD plays in these dynamics. For example, extending the study of these constructs to other country settings, such as emerging economies, and to different international relational contexts, such as strategic alliances, could provide external validity. Comparative research designs that examine low versus high-context cultures would be particularly useful for understanding how these variables interact across different cultural contexts. Additionally, exploring differences in the antecedents and consequences of infidelity and betrayal between domestic and international market settings would offer further insights.

Limitations

As with any research, this study has several limitations. While the use of a systematic research approach mitigated some of the biases commonly associated with traditional literature reviews and expert surveys, the findings are inherently shaped by the scope and nature of the research design and methods employed. First, the limitation to specific keyword strings and journals in developing the study sample may have influenced the results. To control for sampling bias, this study employed a rigorous sample selection process, utilizing multiple keyword strings and a broad range of journals and publications encompassing virtually all inter-organizational research articles. Second, the study included only empirical studies and conceptual papers, excluding ongoing and unpublished debates (e.g., working papers and conference proceedings). Lastly, as with any text mining analysis, the findings are contingent upon the algorithms used by the analytical software. Although a comprehensive narrative of the procedures is provided, the authors supplemented the objective examination of the literature with qualitative and interpretative analysis by reviewing the contextual text excerpts and abstracts of related papers. This approach was intended to guide and strengthen the interpretation of the software-generated outputs.

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