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## **Strategic Agility in International Business**

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### **Introduction**

For many years, there has been talk about the need for companies to cope with the rapid rate and increasing complexity of environmental, social, political and economic changes (Fernhaber & Zhou, 2020). What sets the present time apart is that such changes are likely to be of an unprecedented scale and scope, and where past recipes for coping may be no longer tenable. Hence, this makes strategic agility of great importance (e.g. Ahammad, Basu, Munjal, Clegg, & Bazel-Shoham, 2021; Boojihawon, Richeri, Liu, & Chicksand, 2021; Montiel, Cuervo-Cazurra, Park, Antolín-López, & Husted, 2021). Strategically agile firms develop new ways for managing business transformation and renewal, developing learning and knowledge transfer skills, founded on an adaptive corporate culture. While the literature on strategic agility has been growing rapidly in recent years, research on strategic agility in the dynamic context of emerging and transitional markets is rather more limited. Although there is an emerging body of conceptual and applied research, it is based on the experience of a limited range of countries, and there remain many opportunities for further theoretical development (see, for example, Shams, Vrontis, Belyaeva, Ferraris, & Czinkota, 2021; Sampath, Bhattacharyya, & Krishnamoorthy, 2021; Adomako et al., 2022). Yet, it can be argued that strategic agility is of even greater importance in emerging and transitional markets than in developed markets, given the more fluid

nature of institutional supports, and the lesser systemic resources for dealing with grand challenges.

In other words, if institutions are less predictable and less effective, it can be argued that firm specific advantages such as agility matter more; particularly if the firm engages in international collaborative partnerships as well as mergers and acquisitions (Brueller, Carmeli, & Drori, 2014; Junni, Sarala, Tarba, & Weber, 2015b).

Strategic agility has emerged as a vibrant research stream and the concept has also received attention in the practitioner community (Doz & Kosonen, 2008a; Doz & Kosonen, 2008b; Weber & Tarba, 2014; Ferraris, Degbey, Singh, Bresciani, Castellano, Fiano, & Couturier, 2022). Strategic agility, in general, relates to the firm's ability to constantly adapt to changing and uncertain environments (Goldman, Nagel, & Preiss, 2006). More specifically, Doz and his colleagues suggested that strategic agility consists of three meta-capabilities, namely strategic sensitivity, resource fluidity, and leadership unity (Doz & Kosonen, 2008a; Doz & Kosonen, 2008b). Strategic agility requires inventing new business models and new categories of products and services, rather than rearranging old products and categories (Wilson & Doz, 2011). Hence, strategically agile companies focus on the new ways for managing business transformation and renewal, developing learning and knowledge transfer skills, an adaptive corporate culture, and other such core competencies (Doz & Kosonen, 2008a; Doz & Kosonen, 2010; Weber & Tarba, 2014).

The challenge of strategic agility lies in matching the firm's strategy with the firm's resources, such as: capital, human resources, intellectual property, advanced manufacturing and information technologies, as well as in knowledge transfer, building a post-acquisition integration capability, the relevant coordination mechanisms

between multinational headquarters and its subsidiaries, adapting CEO's leadership style to the ever-changing business environment, organizational preparedness to reverse ineffective strategic decisions, and in terms of market positioning and product or service mix (Combs, Ketchen Jr, Ireland, & Webb, 2011; Nadkarni & Herrmann, 2010; Shimizu & Hitt, 2004; Nyamrunda & Freeman, 2021).

These challenges encountered by firms in today's highly competitive global environment necessitate a deeper understanding of strategic agility, its theoretical underpinnings, potential micro-foundations, and its implications for firm performance (Weber and Tarba, 2014). In order to attain strategic agility it is important for organizations to develop the key capabilities needed to accelerate the renewal and transformation of the existing business models (Bock, Opsahl, George, & Gann, 2012). For instance, human resource management practices may be conducive to managing tensions associated with organizational change and transformation (Burgess, Strauss, Currie, and Wood, 2015; Junni, Sarala, Tarba, Liu, & Cooper, 2015a). Furthermore, leadership ability to manage strategic paradoxes may enable strategic agility (Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2014). Strategic agility in its turn can strengthen the positive effects of technological capability on explorative innovation in the firm (Zhou & Wu, 2010).

The literature on strategic agility is extremely wide-ranging, and encompasses all the functional areas of management. In this conceptual paper that introduces this special issue, we focus on two crucial functional areas. The first is HRM. Firstly, in a rapidly changing and increasingly unpredictable world, what firms do with their internal resources and capabilities, and how they enhance them, is of strategic importance (for a recent review, see Ezerdi et al., 2022). If most firms can do little on their own to mitigate global grand challenges, they may be better able to cope with them if through

developing the skills, human capital and combined cognitive capabilities of their workforce. The second area is marketing. In a fast-changing world, the old methods of analyzing markets and designing marketing plans have become less effective (Whalen & Holloway, 2012a) and even the largest global firms suffer from relatively high rates of new product failures (Castellion & Markham, 2013), while the marketing function is sometimes rather obscured through more predatory mechanisms of value extraction through liquidating accumulated assets and through financial engineering (Lazonick & Shin, 2019). Exogenous shocks have challenged far flung value chains, and raised doubts about the sustainability of some major consumer industries (Kano & Hoon Oh, 2020). This may force firms to rapidly reappraise what they sell, to who and how they sell it, and mechanisms for drawing in new customers and retaining existing ones. In turn, this forces firms to be more entrepreneurial – and agile – in their marketing strategy (Vaillant & Lufuente, 2018).

Finally, the nature and extent of agility is bound up with local, national, and regional context; these all afford organizations opportunities and capabilities, and restrain and mould strategic choices. Hence, a key concern in taking the literature on strategic agility forward in the context of international business is taking fuller and more nuanced account of contextual effects on the ability to modify and remodify what the organization does.

### **International Strategy and Agility**

Multinational enterprises are not exempt from the requirement for entrepreneurial capabilities to compete successfully on the global landscape (Teece, 2014; Shams et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2019). Strategic agility may facilitate multinational companies

to capture opportunities across emerging and established markets in today's increasingly connected global world (Fourné, Jansen, & Mom, 2014), characterized by increased VUCA forces (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). In addition, firms need to possess the resources and capabilities to interact with multiple non-market actors to gain competitive advantages (Mellahi, Frynas, Siegel, & Sun, 2016). Furthermore, novel forms of government involvement provide both opportunities and challenges for firms. This would include the rise of Sovereign Wealth Funds, increased state support and bailouts for firms, quantitative easing, and the engendering of an ecosystem of firms occupying oligopolistic or monopolistic market positions fulfilling outsourced or privatized state and infrastructural functions, all examples of what has been referred to as the "new statism" (Wood & Wright, 2015).

Strategic agility may have important bearing to enable multinational enterprises to cope with afore-mentioned cases of complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Indeed, multinational enterprises may be in a better position to take advantage of environmental shocks and fluctuations specific to their host countries, as they can adjust and relocate activities and/or transfer resources among subsidiaries (Christofi et al., 2021), as long as the costs of global coordination of the firm's operations do not diminish the benefits of agility (Tong & Reuer, 2007).

There has been growing interest in strategic agility in international strategy. Space precludes a full review of this undeniably diverse literature. However, key issues include the how this might be enabled by internal organizational vis-a-vis contextual dynamics and the role of the managerial team in bringing this about (Ahammad et al., 2021). Other work highlights the relatively eclectic and at times superficial theorization of this phenomena, and the potential for drawing on insights from other fields (Christofi

et al., 2021). Gomes et al. (2020) argue that much of the literature is events driven, highlighting how firms respond to a particular challenge. Meanwhile, Shams et al. (2021) note that central to developing the dynamic capabilities necessary for agility is the effective stakeholder relations. It has further been argued that agility mediates the relative capacity of an organization to make effective usage of knowledge resources across national boundaries (Cheng et al., 2020). A common strand in this literature is the need to effectively cope with changes in markets within and between contexts, and the usage of internal capabilities, most notably human resources, in rising to the challenges driven by systemic changes.

Internationalization is a key international business concern where strategic agility plays an important role. This is especially salient for collaborative entry modes, such as mergers and acquisitions (e.g. Junni et al., 2015b; Madhok & Keyhani, 2012), which are important entry modes for firms to and from emerging and transitional markets. For instance, human resource flexibility facilitates the sociocultural integration and knowledge transfer in international mergers and acquisitions by bridging national cultural difference (Sarala, Junni, Cooper, & Tarba, 2016), while learning flexibility facilitates the discovery of opportunities in acquisitions as well as knowledge assimilation from acquisitions (Madhok & Keyhani, 2012). Moreover, different types of mergers and acquisitions can facilitate strategic agility (Brueller, Carmeli, & Drori, 2014; Junni et al., 2015b).

Other important themes of international strategy and agility include home- and host-country institutions, MNE subsidiaries, global IT infrastructures and supply chain / distribution channels in global value chains, just to mention a few (for reviews, see Christofi et al., 2021; Shams et al., 2021). In the next two sections, we discuss two key

themes and crucial functional areas: strategic agility and international marketing, and HRM aspects of strategic agility.

### **Strategic agility and international marketing**

Strategic agility has had an increasing impact on the international marketing field, ranging from its core conceptualization and assumption to the recent trends and dynamics observed in international marketing practices (Vaillant & Lufuente, 2018). Based on literature review, four salient dimensions will be discussed in this section to illustrate the important role of and interaction between strategic agility and international marketing, namely (1) strategic aspect and performance, (2) emerging market perspective, (3) international marketing agility, and (4) crisis and marketing agility.

Strategic agility has been intertwined with marketing theories and practices from the strategic perspective, either explicitly or implicitly (Johnston, 2009). A recent paper provides an updated overview outlining the concept and antecedents of marketing agility with a promising research agenda (Kalaiganam, Tuli, Kushwaha, Lee, & Gal, 2021). Marketing agility may be defined as the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market (Kalaiganam et al., 2021: 35). In essence, international marketing agility is the manifestation of agility in the context of international marketing. The concept of marketing agility relates to multiple levels of analysis, including organizational, team, marketing leadership, and employee levels. Furthermore, firms may face challenges in implementing marketing agility, such as ensuring brand consistency, scaling agility across the marketing ecosystem, managing data privacy concerns, pursuing marketing agility as a fad, and hiring marketing leaders. Notably, marketing agility needs cautious planning and execution, because it may not fit all firms or all marketing activities. It is



important to notice that several adjacent subfields in marketing also refer to the notion of strategic agility. For instance, service marketing agility emphasizes the service marketing domain and articulates the extent to which this particular context of service marketing may influence the manifestation of strategic agility (Tabataba'i-Nasab & Mohammadian Yazd, 2019). In a similar vein to the original conceptualization of strategic agility, performance implication is regarded as an important metric to determine the effectiveness of strategic agility in the marketing domain. For example, there is a nuanced and complex relationship between marketing agility and financial performance under different levels of market turbulence (Zhou, Mavondo, & Saunders, 2019). Furthermore, the strategic marketing multicultural model can impact the variation of agile innovation in family businesses (Thrassou, Vrontis, & Bresciani, 2018).

What has been seen as the distinctive features of emerging market and transitional economies may significantly shape the manifestation of strategic agility and international marketing. Notably, the less comprehensive institutional environment and limitations in regulatory frameworks has been seen as a major divide between emerging and mature markets (Liu & Meyer, 2020), albeit that rapid progress in some of the former, and existential crises in a few notable instances in the latter, may make such easy distinctions less tenable in the future. When emerging market firms venture into advanced economies (Liu & Vrontis, 2017), marketing agility can play an important role in comprehending the international business environment rapidly and taking appropriate marketing action swiftly (Khan, 2020). The different trajectories and pathways necessitate an open mind, fresh perspectives and perhaps even greater improvisation in securing marketing agility amongst emerging market firms (Hughes & Chandy, 2021). For example, digital products and services, there is a need for rapid

iteration between making sense of markets and executing marketing decisions to adapt to changing market assessments, which is the essence of marketing agility. Furthermore, marketing agility in emerging markets requests the strategic vision and foresight beyond rapid interaction due to the rapidly changing needs and demands of customers. Many emerging markets are in the process of building framework conditions and institutional transformation presenting the unique opportunity for firms to act as ‘rule makers’ instead of ‘rule-takers’ (Xing, Liu, & Cooper, 2018). For instance, brand management in Chinese overseas acquisitions requires a multi-level and dynamic perspective to (re)deploy brand as a strategic asset – rather than a liability - in globalization endeavours (Liu, Öberg, Tarba, & Xing, 2018). Similarly, developing and deploying marketing agility in the context of emerging and transitional economic contexts demands not only the standardization-adaptation balance, but also creativity and innovation to realign strategic motives and operational imperatives (Boojihawon et al., 2021; Osei, Amankwah-Amoah, Khan, Omar & Gutu, 2019).

The important role played by international marketing agility can influence the international strategy of both international entrepreneurial ventures and multinational enterprises. For instance, marketing through customer and partner interaction plays an important role in achieving strategic agility in entrepreneurial internationalization, because customer- and market-centric thinking needs to be built in a key set of business processes and capabilities to cope with time, relationship and functional dependencies (Hagen, Zucchella, & Ghauri, 2019). As a nascent and emerging concept that combines international marketing and strategic agility, international marketing agility is multifaceted in nature. A range of factors drive the development and dynamics of international marketing agility, while international marketing agility in return can affect a variety of performance outcomes for the international business organizations involved

(Asseraf, Lages, & Shoham, 2019). For instance, the international propensity of serial entrepreneurs who demonstrate ambidextrous strategic agility is revealed as a precursor to international marketing agility (Vaillant & Lafuente, 2019). Furthermore, international marketing agility can influence the export quality of Chinese enterprises (Li, Liu, & Bustinza, 2019). Notably, one important organizational form in international marketing is collaborative partnership (Liu, Sarala, Xing, & Cooper, 2017) that emphasizes the interactions among multiple stakeholders, including distributors, customers and suppliers (Liu, 2017, 2020b) from the international marketplace. Thus, international collaborative partnerships may present both opportunities and challenges for planning and implementing international marketing agility. Therefore, to further advance our understanding of international marketing agility, it is important to uphold the concept clarity while considering the contextual factors seriously, namely when, why, where, how, and under what conditions strategic agility and international marketing may co-evolve and mutually benefit each other.

The crucial role of strategic agility in conjunction with international marketing can foster resilience for international business operation in extreme conditions and crisis situations. In fighting against the global health crisis posed by COVID-19 – and likely future pandemics - strategic agility is essential for organizations to mobilize resources and develop appropriate capabilities in a timely manner. For instance, the observations from Asian business and management practices suggest the important role of strategic agility in the early prevention and control of COVID-19 pandemic helped to ensure business continuity against the disruption of global supply chain (Liu, Lee, & Lee, 2020). In the area of fast fashion brands in the light of COVID-19 pandemic, both marketing agility and E-Commerce agility can facilitate business organizations to amend marketing practices rapidly and resiliently (Kannappan, 2020), even although

other concerns have been raised about the sustainability of the fast fashion industry on practical and ethical grounds (Miotto & Youn, 2020). In the field of public management, Singapore's whole-of-government approach in handling the COVID-19 crisis largely relied on strategic agility in both scale and speed via collaborative partnerships between public and private sectors (Lee, Lee, & Liu, 2021).

Furthermore, the notion of resilience is closely connected to agility in the context of crisis and extreme situations (Liu, Cooper, & Tarba, 2019). In dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity, entrepreneurs and their teams need both agility and resilience to navigate through setbacks and failures (Xing, Liu, Boojihawon, & Tarba, 2020), especially in the international business environment. Entrepreneurship is arguably the essential engine for post COVID-19 economic recovery after the unprecedented global health crisis and associated societal challenges in emerging economies and beyond (Meyer, Prashantham, & Xu, 2021). Therefore, we argue strategic agility and international marketing can play an important role for international business organizations to fight against crises or extreme conditions while building resilience in both new entrepreneurial ventures (Liu, 2020a) and incumbent and rising multinational enterprises in both emerging and advanced economies across individual-, organizational-, and society-levels.

To conclude this section, we identify several promising research directions on agility from the marketing science perspective. Given the nature of emerging markets is fast-changing with high degree of dynamism, four dimensions identified from our review will become even more salient. As for the macro-level context, institutional environment and institutional transformation can play an important role affecting agility. In particular, the emerging market perspective will not only affect the emerging market multinationals, but also the incumbents from advanced economies. Global

competition and competitiveness in what have been termed the slow globalization period (Gorynia, 2020) demands agility in reacting quickly to the changing market environment. As for the organizational-level, firm performances need to take an inclusive approach, including both financial performance and other performance indications, such as social and environmental performance. Consumers may be attracted to buying products and/or services of socially responsible firms. Thus, marketing expertise in non-financial areas may significantly advance agility research.

On the individual level, the behavioural micro-foundations of international marketing agility can present promising research opportunities that connect to international marketing performance for entrepreneurial ventures as well as multinationals' FDI activities. Furthermore, some salient concepts hold particular importance for advancing agility and marketing research, such as resilience, collaborative partnerships, and entrepreneurship, especially when the world is recovering from the unprecedented global health crisis COVID-19 globally.

### **Strategic agility and HRM**

Strategic agility may be founded on being sensitive to what might necessitate a change in strategy, clarity in leadership and sufficiently flexible resources (Doz & Kosonen, 2010; Ahammad, Glaister & Gomes, 2020). The existing literature suggests that strategic agility in HRM thus depends on managerial capabilities and skills and organizational design (Doz, 2020). Supplementing the HR literature on organizational capabilities and design (e.g. Jamrog et al., 2006; McCann, 2004; Pina e Cunha et al., 2020) and, more recently, the micro-level of analysis, looking *inter alia* at the person-environment fit, agile leadership and entrepreneurial teams (e.g. Parker et al., 2015; Xing et al., 2020; Salmen & Festing, 2021) is a very large body of literature on

international HRM, that points to the challenges and opportunities of managing people across national boundaries, the effects of country of origin and domicile institutions on HR practice, the usage of different categories of expatriates, and, indeed, the type of HR practices associated with – and at some times pioneered by – emerging market MNEs (Gorynia, 2020). Four salient aspects will be discussed in this section to illustrate how one may develop an international and comparative perspective to strategic agility in HRM, namely (1) a cross-national perspective, (2) the prevalence of institutional discontinuities, (3) HR practices in multinational enterprises, and (4) the role of improvisation and intra-organizational tensions.

From a cross-national perspective, it is worth considering events that require firms to develop capabilities related to strategic agility. There is little doubt that large and potentially system-challenging events are taking place with increasing regularity at a global level (e.g. Phan & Wood, 2020). However, we must remember that system-challenging events – such as macro- economic instability and growth – have uneven effects on spatial and temporal lines (Jessop, 2021; Wood & Schnyder, 2021; Boyer & Gaudelierre, 2021). It has traditionally been held that emerging economies have historically experienced more system-challenging events than developed economies (e.g. Cespedes, 2013; Kandil, 2018) and hence firms in those countries were particularly forced to develop more innovative HR practices (e.g. Som, 2012; Takeuchi et al., 2009), although it could be argued that recent political events within the US and the UK challenge such easy assumptions.

When system-challenging events occur, HR is quite central. For example, in times of economic turbulence, HR managers have to square the circle between encouraging commitment and the development of organization-specific human capital, and having to make painful decisions around hiring and firing (Erederi et al., 2020). As another

example, climate change poses new challenges for the viability of industries, nations and regions, with HR managers having to contend with problems of industrial growth and decline (c.f. Fiedler et al., 2021). In some contexts, it may be challenging or difficult to maintain existing production paradigms, and the climate necessitated moving of the more geographically vulnerable mega cities remains on the cards (Phan & Wood, 2020). Such challenges have manifested themselves around the world, but have been more or less pronounced in different national settings. Indeed, from a cross-national perspective, it may be the case that some national systems are more capable of generating the basis of broad social consensus and delivering on the social contract – and are hence in a better position to address certain global societal challenges (Schmid & Kwon, 2020). For example, the coordinated markets of Western Europe and Scandinavia have made much more progress to renewable energy than the Anglo Saxon liberal market economies; this has implications for the relative competitive of different firms and industries between the one group of countries and the other (Wood et al., 2020). Accordingly, whilst the seeming increase in the number and intensity of system-challenging events may make the case for greater strategic agility in HRM, what is needed is likely to vary greatly from national context to national context.

The literature on Varieties of Capitalism, and comparative institutionalism more generally, has enjoyed growing influence in International Business (Jackson & Deeg, 2019), as well as international and comparative HRM (Goergen et al., 2012; Mayrhofer et al., 2019). However, a limitation of this literature has been a tendency to treat the firm as a black box or transmission belt, mediating the relationship formal institutional features and socio-economic outcomes (Alchian & Woodward, 1988; Wood et al., 2014). In response, HR scholars have sought to understand the intervening role of the

firm via surveys (Mayrhofer et al., 2019; Goergen et al., 2012) or case studies (Thompson, 2011).

The most recent comparative institutional literature has highlighted the prevalence of discontinuities, rather than seeing matters in a strictly path dependent manner (Jackson & Deeg, 2019). Rather, actors choose to conform to practices to solve coordination problems (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Jackson & Deeg, 2019). Institutional changes may be driven actors taking a long view or acting opportunistically (Dore, 2001). Activities by norm entrepreneurs may snowball, leading to a broad drive for systemic change (Dore, 2001). Organizations and managers that are strategically agile may be particularly well equipped to act as norm entrepreneurs (Teece et al., 2016). In other words, the literature on strategic agility may help us understand norm entrepreneurship better, and vice versa. A caveat is in order here; not all norm entrepreneurship ends well.

National context may also help mould the type of strategic agility that emerges: as a coping strategy; as outright opportunism that may impose costs on wider society, the economy and polity; or something that can contribute to renewing national institutional orders, benefitting the economy at large. In some contexts, individuals may be more far sighted or, indeed, altruistic, whilst in others, there may be a recklessness in driving change in the interests of short-term personal wealth accumulation. Changes may lead to renewed stability and growth or a sustained period of open-ended crisis. There is also a body of work that explores how MNEs may serve to evangelise their country of origin model – for good or ill – other settings (Gooderham, 2006). Nonetheless, there is much debate around the scale and scope of such changes (ibid.; Brewster et al., 2008). Much of the debate remains around stylized ideal types and hypothetical tendencies (Teece et al., 2016); however, it is clear that changes in firm practices in response to institutional



transformation home or abroad are often most visible in terms of HRM (Doellgast et al., 2020). Understanding strategic agility is central to such processes, but at same time, this would challenge views that strategic agility is necessarily benign or an universal panacea.

So far, we have made the case for taking account of strategic agility in comparing HR practice between settings. However, a further dimension is strategic agility within organizations that cross national boundaries. As Morgan and Kristensen (2006) alert us, MNEs are only partially embedded in any national context, and hence are freer from the institutional constraints imposed on single country firms. It may well be in their interests to seek to fit in with their single country peers within a national context, in order to benefit from the institutional complementarities encountered there. This would include adopting the specific HR practices proven to be effective within a national or regional specific production regime (Morgan & Kristensen, 2006). Hence, MNEs may, in some instances, be more cautious, and, indeed, less agile, than their single country peers, who may take systemic benefits for granted, and be ever conscious of systemic shortfalls (Brookes et al., 2017). Indeed, based on transnational survey evidence, Brookes et al. (2017) conclude that MNEs are less likely to depart from nationally dominant HR practices than their single country peers; in short, rather than undermining existing prevailing HR paradigms, they may reinforce them.

Alternatively, HR practices in multinational enterprises may be more footless, and seek to shed the constraints of the home country when operating in contexts with fluid or weaker institutions. It is often held that, in entering emerging markets, MNEs face greater challenges in navigating institutional voids and so forth (Doh et al., 2017). Alternatively, more agile MNEs may find chances for greater opportunism, or even predatory practices, as numerous labour scandals involving Western MNEs will

evidence (Stringer et al., 2018); unethical behaviour is not something imposed by context, but also involves real choices by managers. Firms may seek to place HR controversies – and poor labour standards – at arms length through outsourcing, whilst reaping the benefits of low wage costs (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). As global value chains come under increasing scrutiny, the abrogation of social responsibility around the HR practices by sub-contractors has increasingly become difficult to justify and sustain, but this has yet to deter many larger players (ibid.). Again, whilst strategic agility may be associated with flexibility, resilience or innovation, agility is not always a benign phenomenon.

Finally, and supplementing contextual drivers of agility, the latter may be driven by organization specific culture, resources, ambidexterity and knowledge (Christofi et al., 2021). Rather than institutional approaches which see HR as an outcome of the agility afforded by contextual circumstances, such work sees HR as an input factor, even if in turn, resultant agilities may result in HR itself being redefined. In other words, rather than maximising opportunities afforded by rules or a (lack of) constraints in countries of domicile, MNEs may build on present intra organizational agilities that may encompass HR related factors such as teamworking, talent management, empowerment, codetermination, and individual and organizational learning (Salmen & Festing, 2021). Such factors encompass both individual agilities, and collective and organizational ones.

It has further been argued that HR practices may promote greater flexibility, accordingly enhancing such agilities, through investment in training, and effective performance management (Christofi et al., 2021; Salmen & Festing, 2021). Some studies have addressed individual-level and team-level agility and flexibility in multinational enterprises, suggesting that agility equips expatriates and other

employees with the ability to adapt, operate and respond effectively in diverse cross-cultural settings (Ang et al., 2007; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Shin et al., 2007; France et al., 2019). A recent review article has suggested that a very promising direction for future research may be a ‘fine-grained investigation of potential psychological micro-foundations of incumbent executives and employees that enable achieving strategic agility’ (Christofi et al., 2021). In turn, individual-level capabilities may enhance organizational capabilities of multinational enterprises to rapidly adjust to changes in existing contextual circumstances, and/or when entering new international settings (Salmen & Festing, 2021; Zhang et al., 2019).

To conclude this section, we identify several additional promising research directions on agility from the HRM perspective. Firstly, viable new HR practices may emerge through improvisation, serendipity, or simply through exhausting all known alternatives (e.g. Pina e Cunha et al., 2020). In other words, what might seem in retrospect to be shining examples of strategic agility may be the product of the kind of tinkering that comes from desperation, ad hoc adjustments, or simply bungling. The best laid plans for attaining and practicing strategic agility may become derailed through the course of events, and blowback or unexpected consequences from earlier, seemingly successful, interventions (cf. Teece et al., 2016; Phan & Wood, 2020). HRM immediately affects a core stakeholder, a firm’s people, and hence serendipity and failure affect the internal life of the organization and its future prospects. Future research could usefully explore in more depth the role of serendipity and failure in developing new HR practices. Secondly, the development of capabilities related to strategic agility may result in intra-organizational tensions within multinational enterprises, as it gives rise to greater differences between the headquarter and subsidiaries in terms of mindsets, routines, strategic logics, goals and organizational

sub-systems (Fourné et al., 2014). HR practices can help address these tensions, but this remains an under-researched area. Future research could usefully unpack the appropriateness of different HR practices for addressing such tensions.

### **New Directions for Strategic Agility in IB**

Based on the discussion above, Table 1 presents some of the crucial areas for future research on agility.

The articles in this Special Issue focus on the strategies and operations of firms operating in transitional and emerging economies, which requires the firms to address various aspects of strategic agility.

Since such a complex, widespread and growing phenomenon as strategic agility may require the incorporation of multidisciplinary, multi-level and cross-cultural models and analyses, our special issue solicited papers that offer novel insights in terms of the performance implications of strategic agility, the relative importance of strategic agility antecedents and their interaction effects, and the influence of different contexts (intra-firm, inter-firm, network) and different levels of analysis (firm level, business-unit level, top management team, individual), in terms of promoting theoretical synthesis, and suggest new venues for future research. Although each article provides genuinely novel insights, we can observe some common themes. These revolve around the impact of human capabilities within and between firms and agility, and relations between firms and their customers, and sustainable governance of global value chains, which connects to the themes alluded to earlier in this overview. The first two articles focus on strategic agility from the perspective of emerging market firms. The latter two articles show how

developed economy firms can benefit from strategic agility when entering and operating in emerging markets.

The first paper in the special issue by Ahammad, Basu, Munjal, Clegg, and Bazel-Shoham (2021) contributes by elucidating how emerging market firms pursue the exploitation and exploration processes in order to attain strategic agility, and how strategic agility in its turn influences the international performance of emerging market firms. This study adds to our understanding on the strategic aspect and performance dimension of marketing conversation.

In the second study, Nyamrunda and Freeman (2021) explain how relational dimensions (i.e. communication, social bonds, and knowledge), impacted by meta-capabilities (strategic sensitivity, resource fluidity and leadership unity) embedded in micro-foundational activities facilitate trust building in the context of small business cross-border buyer-seller in transitional economies. The novelty to the literature is illustrating the complex influence mechanisms around strategic agility in the underexplored context of African transitional economies. This study also implies the potential contribution to the marketing conversation regarding international marketing agility.

The third paper by Soundararajan, Sahasranamam, Khan, and Jain (2021) contributes by showing how advanced economy multinational enterprises (AMNEs) cope with idiosyncratic challenges associated with management of their emerging market supply chains. The article underscores the role of agile sustainability governance mechanisms while facing COVID-19 and other disruptions. This study contributes to the marketing conversation by highlighting the role of agility in dealing with crisis.

Finally, the findings of the fourth concluding study by Ferraris, Degbey, Singh, Bresciani, Castellano, Fiano, and Couturier (2022) show that subsidiary CEO tenure in emerging markets and CEOs' cognitive characteristics (individual-level micro-foundations) increases strategic agility of developed economy MNEs in their emerging market operations. The afore-mentioned relationship is moderated by subsidiary embeddedness. This study adds to the marketing conversation regarding both emerging markets and international dimensions.

## **Conclusion**

Strategic agility represents an important way firms can cope with an uncertain and changing world. At the same time, there is much opportunity in developing this concept to understanding its relative compatibility theories that seek to understand by both structure and change within organizations and the wider socio-economy. A second element is the need for a better understanding not only of when and where strategic agility may work, but what might still go wrong for organizations that have genuinely attained strategic agility in deploying the same. We hope that, taken together, the papers in this special issue will provide valuable insights on the existing body of research in the strategic agility domain and will stimulate future studies of this important phenomenon.

**Table 1 - Selected directions for future research on agility**

<i>Levels of analysis</i>	Marketing	HRM	International Strategy
Macro-level context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional environment and institutional transformation</li> <li>• Emerging market perspective</li> <li>• Global competition and competitiveness in the slow globalization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional effects on agility and HRM in different national contexts</li> <li>• Impact of countervailing owner power and managerial choices on functional flexibility</li> <li>• National training and education systems, skills, and strategic agility by managers and workers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differences in agile strategies across different geographic markets and regions</li> <li>• Firm’s agile strategic responses to regional and global external “shocks”</li> <li>• Cultural contingency and challenges of agile strategies</li> <li>• Agility in state-owned firms</li> <li>• Overcoming liability of foreignness through agility</li> </ul>
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An inclusive approach on performance, including both financial and other performance indications (e.g., social, and environmental performance)</li> <li>• Consumers may be driven to buy product and/or services due to firms’ social responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of serendipity and failure in developing new HR practices</li> <li>• Appropriateness of HR practices for addressing internal tensions in MNEs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic agility of emerging market MNEs, springboard MNEs, vs. mature MNEs</li> <li>• Agile practices of “born globals”</li> <li>• “Dark” side of agility: unsustainable and unethical practices as sources of agility in global value chains</li> <li>• Agile firm internationalization processes: the role of entry modes and different combinations of entry modes in creating and sustaining agility in the internationalization process</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of experience and learning processes in agile strategizing</li> <li>• New kinds of agile organizational structures and systems for the global firm</li> <li>• Building agility across the entire value chain through e.g., agile sourcing, distribution, networks, and ecosystems</li> <li>• Agility as a structural and relational capability of the MNE</li> </ul>
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavioural micro-foundations of international marketing agility</li> <li>• Salient concepts hold particular importance for advancing agility and marketing research (e.g., resilience, collaborative partnerships, entrepreneurship)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological micro-foundations of executives and employees that enable agility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee and managerial agility as a foundation for agile strategizing</li> </ul>



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