

# The knowledge-based view in international business: A systematic review of the literature and future research directions

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## ABSTRACT

The knowledge-based view (KBV) has been particularly influential for developing and shaping the international business (IB) field. IB scholars have used the KBV to explain a wide range of IB phenomena. However, to date, there has been no systematic review of the literature on the KBV in IB. This study aims to fill this gap. To this purpose, we identified and analyzed 124 articles published at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field in 40 academic journals from 1999 to 2021. Drawing on our findings, we reveal the current state of the KBV in IB and identify the knowledge types and processes required for firms to navigate the global environment, as portrayed by the studies included in our review. We then highlight promising future research directions to advance the KBV and the IB field.

## 1. Introduction

The knowledge-based view (KBV) has been particularly influential for driving and shaping research in international business (IB). Ever since the KBV emerged in the early 1990s, IB scholars have been at the forefront of the KBV literature (Birkinshaw, Bresman, & Nobel, 2010; Foss & Pedersen, 2004, 2019; Grant & Phene, 2022). Over the past three decades, knowledge-based theoretical underpinnings<sup>1</sup> have helped to illuminate key concepts for the IB literature, such as the mere existence of the multinational corporation (MNC) (Kogut & Zander, 1993), international acquisitions (Bresman, Birkinshaw, & Nobel, 1999; Zander & Zander, 2010), international joint ventures (IJVs) (Dutta & Beamish, 2013; Fang & Zou, 2010), and international subsidiaries (Ahrens, Oehmichem, & Wolff, 2018; Kawai & Chung, 2019). Although no unanimous consensus exists regarding its main tenets, the KBV was chosen as a theoretical foundation to explain IB phenomena since the advantages of MNCs over domestic firms are based on their “superior potential for assessing, integrating, and deploying knowledge” (Grant & Phene, 2022, p. 4). Such potential is crucial for successfully conducting business internationally.

Nonetheless, the KBV literature in the international context is highly fragmented (Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Grant & Phene, 2022; Phookan & Sharma, 2021), and despite its importance, to date, no systematic literature review has been conducted on the KBV in the IB field. Thus,

gaps in understanding remain. For example, we are yet to elucidate the following essential questions: How is knowledge conceptualized in studies which employ the KBV in the IB field? What is the locus of knowledge creation in KBV studies in an international context? What are the units of analysis investigated by these studies? And what knowledge configurations allow firms to successfully operate internationally? In this sense, scholars have called for the creation of a comprehensive framework showing the knowledge types and processes required by firms to navigate in the international arena (Grant & Phene, 2022).

This study aims to fill these gaps by providing a systematic review of the literature situated at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field. The fundamental research questions we address are: (1) What is the state-of-the-art of the KBV in the IB field?; (2) How has the KBV been employed to explain IB phenomena?; and (3) Where do we go from here? Building on our systematic review of KBV studies conducted in IB, in response to Grant and Phene's (2022) call, we develop a framework that shows the state-of-the-art of the KBV in IB including the knowledge types and knowledge processes required for operating internationally as revealed by the studies reviewed. Our analysis relies on 124 articles applying the KBV to study IB phenomena that were published between 1999 and 2021 in 40 journals devoted to the IB and management/marketing fields. Our study differs from previous conceptual studies and systematic literature reviews conducted on knowledge-related concepts. These studies include: Foss and Pedersen (2019) who focus on a

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<sup>1</sup> Terms, such as ‘knowledge-based theory’, ‘knowledge-based perspective’, or ‘knowledge-based approach’ are frequently used instead of the KBV.

microfoundations approach to knowledge sharing in MNCs; Zhao, Liu, Andersson, and Shenkar (2022) who provide a systematic literature review on the knowledge management of emerging economy MNCs; and Grant and Phene (2022) who develop a conceptual rather than a systematic literature review study, based on selected papers from the MNC literature, for exploring the role of the KBV in global strategy. Conversely, by undertaking a systematic review of the literature, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the KBV in the IB field and its role in developing the IB literature. Moreover, it considers not only MNC-centric studies but also other contexts, such as new ventures, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and returnee entrepreneurs. Based on our review, we highlight promising opportunities to advance the KBV and the IB field and propose relevant managerial and policy implications.

This study makes three contributions. First, we contribute to the KBV and the IB field by unveiling the state-of-the-art of KBV studies in an international setting. We synthesize the characteristics of the KBV in the IB literature in terms of journal publication, time frame, theoretical underpinnings used jointly with the KBV, context, level(s)/unit(s) of analysis, methods used, and content of the study. Thus, we reveal a comprehensive, up-to-date overview of the literature at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field. Second, we provide a critical assessment of the existing research, and we generate a framework that shows the most important knowledge types and processes necessary for firms to navigate the global environment. Third, we outline promising future research directions that seek to advance the KBV as well as the IB research.

This article proceeds with a discussion of the origin and evolution of the KBV. Next, we outline the search criteria used to identify the articles included in our review and we present the method used to conduct the analysis. The following section presents and critically discusses our findings. We then provide promising future research directions to support the development of the KBV and the IB field. After that, we outline implications for management and policy and present some limitations of this review.

## 2. Theoretical underpinnings

Knowledge has been at the forefront of IB research since its inception. The very existence of the MNC was attributed to the fact that within-firm knowledge is a public good with low transmission costs; therefore, “the exploitation of proprietary knowledge is logically an international operation” (Buckley & Casson, 1976, p. 35). In alignment with this, Kogut and Zander (1993, p. 626) argued that “the decision to transfer technology within the firm or in the market can be explained by the attributes of knowledge that constitute the ownership advantage of the firm”.

Seminal work in management by Winter (1987) and Kogut and Zander (1992) discussed the importance of tacit knowledge for competitive advantage, triggering the development of the KBV, which over the next three decades became one of the key theoretical approaches adopted by IB researchers. The KBV emerged as several research streams converged regarding their interest in and emphasis on the role of knowledge. Such streams include the resource/capability-based approach (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990), organizational learning (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988), and epistemology (Polanyi, 1962, 1966). The KBV proliferated in the three decades that followed, with a broad range of studies conducted in most management-related fields. Such proliferation brought about a high degree of fragmentation of the knowledge-based literature (Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Grant & Phene, 2022). We provide details in what follows.

Unanimous agreement does not exist as far as knowledge *definition/conceptualization* are concerned (Grant & Phene, 2022). In particular, two main conceptualizations (or variants) of knowledge have emerged: an *objective conceptualization* of knowledge (e.g., Grant, 1996a) and a

*subjective, socially constructed conceptualization* (Spender, 1996; Tsoukas, 1996). Relatedly, research that follows the resource-based view (RBV) assumptions and/or adopts an objective conceptualization generally frames knowledge as a *resource (or capability)* of the firm that is essential for achieving competitive advantage (DeCarolis & Deeds, 1999; Wang, Choi, Wan, & Dong, 2016). Other researchers, usually from cognitive psychology and sociology backgrounds, have conceived knowledge as a *process* (Gourlay & Nurse, 2005; Hildreth & Kimble, 2002; Kogut & Zander, 1996; Spender, 1996). For example, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p. 58) defined knowledge as “a dynamic human process of justifying personal belief toward the ‘truth’”. In line with Eisenhardt and Santos (2001, p. 159), such authors have often regarded the conceptualization of knowledge as a resource as being rather “mechanical and reductionist”. Instead, they have construed knowledge as an ongoing process of constructing reality (Spender, 1996; von Krogh, Roos, & Slocum, 1994). Various knowledge-related processes have been studied, such as knowledge creation (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009; Regnér & Zander, 2014), knowledge sharing (Fey & Furu, 2008; Pierce, 2012), knowledge integration (Boh et al., 2007; Grant, 1996b), and knowledge management (Bogner & Bansal, 2007; Hedlund, 1994).

To make the picture even more complex, a certain level of confusion exists regarding terminology, since overlaps and multiple substitute terms prevail. For example, Foss and Pedersen (2019) remarked in their review that no less than six different terms have been used in the literature as substitutes for knowledge sharing: transfer, acquisition, flow, sourcing, adoption, and seeking.

Knowledge has also been frequently approached from the perspective of its *tacit* and *explicit* nature. In this respect, influential work by Nonaka (1994), Nonaka, Toyama, and Konno (2000), and Nonaka and Toyama (2005) on knowledge creation and conversion has played a significant role. Scholars commonly agree on the importance of tacit knowledge for organizational outcomes (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Spender, 1996; Winter, 1987). However, Grant and Phene (2022) have questioned the future relevance of tacit knowledge in the advent of new technology and especially of machine knowledge and learning.

Scholars have also developed other knowledge classifications, such as *external* and *internal* knowledge (Foss, Lyngsie, & Zahra, 2013; Grigoriou & Rothaermel, 2017; Menon & Pfeffer, 2003). Moreover, scholars have devoted attention to *common* knowledge, which is understood as including not only linguistic considerations but also similar cognitive systems, behaviors, and skills that are necessary to ensure smooth communication in the MNC context (Carlile, 2004; Joshi & Lahiri, 2015; Lam, 1996). Yet, the literature is much more fragmented regarding their impact on knowledge creation and competitive advantage.

In terms of *theoretical assumptions*, scholars who understand the KBV as an extension of the RBV consider (tacit) knowledge as the most important resource (and sometimes capability) of the firm for achieving competitive advantage (DeCarolis & Deeds, 1999; Kaplan, Schenkel, von Krogh, & Weber, 2001; Wang et al., 2016). Other KBV scholars, whose main representative is Robert Grant, recognize the importance of tacit knowledge for attaining competitive advantage but highlight that the KBV goes beyond concerns related to strategic choices and competitive advantage, which are traditionally emphasized by the strategic management literature, and extends to other key concerns of the theory of the firm. These, following Grant (1996a), include the nature of coordination within the firm, the determinants of firm boundaries, the role of management and the importance of decision-making rights, organizational structure, and the theory of innovation. In alignment with Grant and Baden-Fuller (2004), the main assumptions regarding knowledge and its role in production are as follows: knowledge represents an important productive resource, tacit and explicit knowledge vary in transferability, knowledge is subject to economies of scale and scope, knowledge is created by individuals, and different types of knowledge are generally required to produce a good or service. Moreover, other scholars have sought to explain the very existence of the multinational

firm based on knowledge. Without explicitly referring to the KBV, **Kogut and Zander (1993)** challenged prior conceptualizations of the multinational firm, which rely on transaction cost economics, and justified the existence of the MNC based on knowledge transfer and recombination. They argued that the MNC exists because intrafirm, rather than interfirm, knowledge transfer and recombination are more efficient. Other researchers have adhered to and built on **Kogut and Zander's (1993)** approach (e.g., **Bresman et al., 1999; Fransson, Håkanson, & Liesch, 2011; Tallman, 2003**).

Furthermore, knowledge-based theories have persistently studied and often debated issues related to knowledge *loci*. As put forward by **Felin and Hesterly (2007)**, determining the locus of knowledge creation is vital for answering fundamental questions such as: Are new value and innovation created as a collective process, or do they stem from the attributes and abilities of individuals? Is knowledge transfer rather about the structural and organizational knowledge process, or does it mainly rely on the ability of individuals to absorb knowledge? Such debates mainly highlight, but are not limited to, two levels: a *collectivist approach*, which is generally represented by the firm (**Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Kogut & Zander, 1992; 1995**) and an *individualist approach* (**Felin & Hesterly, 2007; Grant, 1996a; Nag & Gioia, 2012; Simon, 1991; Spender & Grant, 1996**). Yet, some scholars (**Foss & Jensen, 2019; von Krogh, 2009**) have noted that accepting organizational knowledge as a construct does not mean ignoring the role of individuals in creating, sharing, and using knowledge.

While the KBV may not have attained a theory of the firm status (**Grant & Phene, 2022**), it has been particularly influential for developing and shaping the IB field. Specifically, the KBV, which has previously been recognized as one of the most frequently employed theoretical perspectives in international strategic management (**White et al., 2016**), has helped explain core IB phenomena, such as international alliances/IJVs (**Dutta & Beamish, 2013; Pollite, Miller, & Yaprak, 2015; Wen & Chuang, 2010**) and MNC subsidiaries (**Gnyawali, Singal, & Mu, 2009; Hsu, Iriyama, & Prescott, 2016**) as well as corresponding

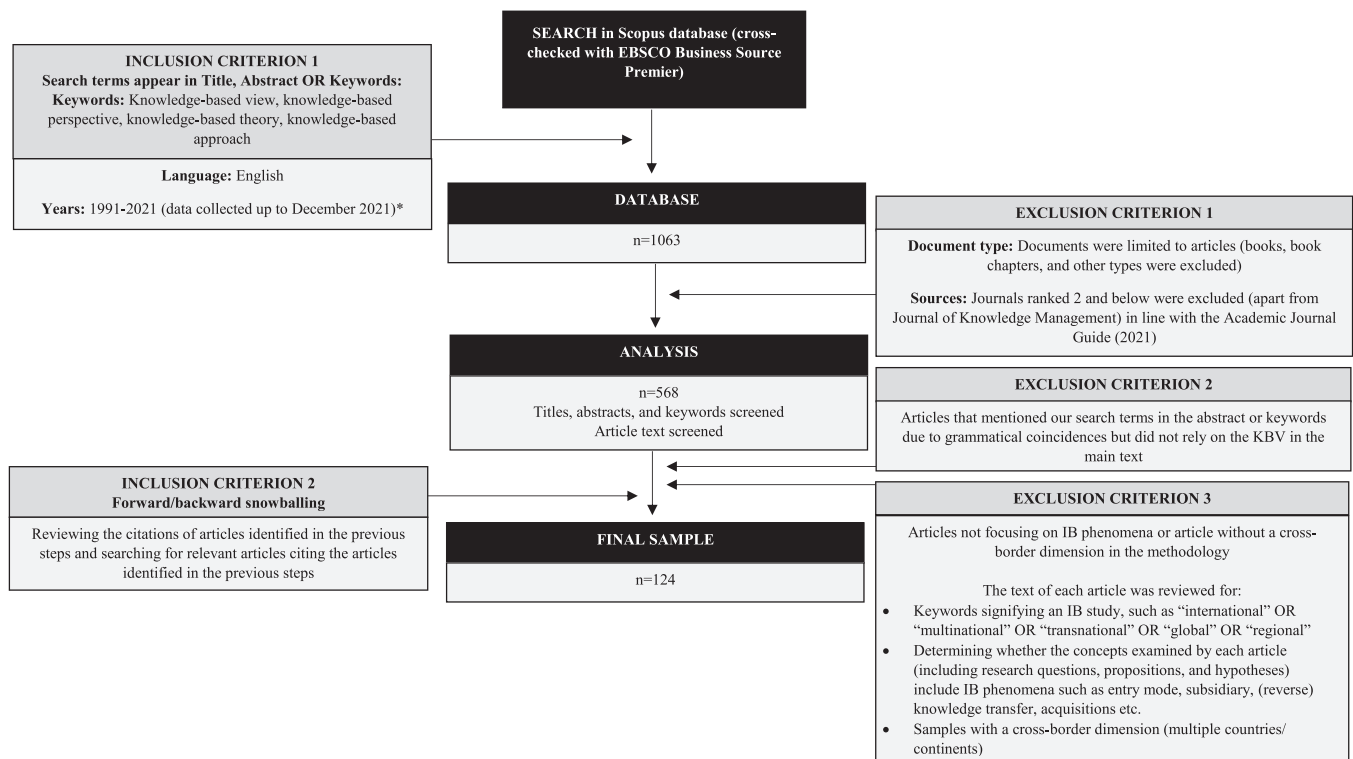
internationalization outcomes, for instance, international growth (**Assadina, Boso, Hultman, & Robson, 2019; Yli-Renko, Autio, & Tontti, 2002**) and export/international performance (**Denicolai, Zucchella, & Strange, 2014; Filatotchev, Liu, Buck, & Wright, 2009**), among others. However, despite its importance, we have only limited understanding of the current state of the KBV in IB and its contribution to enriching and shaping this field. Furthermore, in alignment with **Grant and Phene (2022, p. 5)**, we argue that “there is a vital need for the creation of a comprehensive framework of knowledge types and knowledge processes” required by firms to navigate the global environment. Conducting a systematic literature review of research that uses the KBV in an international context enables us to reveal the current state-of-the-art of the KBV in IB, generate a framework that synthesizes the knowledge types and processes that firms use in their international activities, and provide promising future research directions for the development of the KBV and the IB field.

### 3. Methodology

As our aim was to analyze existing conceptual and empirical contributions to the study of the KBV in the IB field and identify future research avenues, we applied the systematic review methodology (**Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Denyer & Tranfield, 2008; Webster & Watson, 2002**). We followed the well-established guidelines outlined by **Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003)** for planning and conducting the review and reporting the findings.

#### 3.1. Data collection

We collected our data in line with the guidelines put forward by **Short (2009), Tranfield et al. (2003), and Webster and Watson (2002)**, as well as practical applications of the methodology in the IB field (e.g., **Kano, Tsang, & Yeung, 2020; Papanastassiou, Pearce, & Zanfei, 2020; Zhao et al., 2022**). **Fig. 1** presents the different steps we applied when



**Fig. 1.** Planning and conducting the systematic literature review.

\*Note: Articles were collected online up to December 2021. These included articles that were made available by journals online but published subsequently with a later date

planning and conducting the review.

First, we conducted a scoping study of articles ( $n = 35$ ) using the KBV published in three leading journals in the field (*Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of World Business*, and *International Business Review*). We found that authors used different terms when referring to the theory (view, perspective, theory, and approach). These different terms formed our search keywords (inclusion criterion 1, Fig. 1). We conducted a multidisciplinary search using the Scopus database (e.g., Saebi, Foss, & Linder, 2019) by applying the broad, concept-centric approach (Webster & Watson, 2002), and focusing on all management fields (cross-checked with the EBSCO Business Source Premier database). This resulted in 1063 documents.

Similar to other systematic reviews in the IB field (e.g., Srivastava, Singh, & Dhir, 2020; Zhao et al., 2022) we then used the Academic Journal Guide (AJG) (2021) published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools CABS (2021), UK to narrow our search to top academic journals rated 3 or above. An exception was made for *Journal of Knowledge Management* (ABS 2; Impact Factor = 8.689) given its relevance for the KBV (exclusion criterion 1, Fig. 1). This resulted in 568 articles.

The next step was screening. As recommended (Pittaway, Robertson, Munir, Denyer, & Neely, 2004), this unfolded in two phases and was performed independently by the authors. Each entry was screened at least twice and discussed by the authors at the end of the process to reduce any bias. We first screened the title, abstract, and keywords to identify and exclude articles that were included in the database due to grammatical coincidences (exclusion criterion 2, Fig. 1). The remaining articles were screened in full to narrow down this literature to articles exploring IB phenomena (exclusion criterion 3, Fig. 1). The criteria, following established approaches (Jiang, Luo, Xia, Hitt, & Shen, 2023; Kano et al., 2020; Pisani, Kourula, Kolk, & Meijer, 2017), were based on whether the articles included: (1) keywords signifying an IB study; (2) IB concepts/phenomena (in research questions, propositions, and hypotheses); or (3) a methodology that had a cross-border dimension (multiple countries/continents). Then, we applied the 'go backward' and 'go forward' snowballing search (Short, 2009; Webster & Watson, 2002) by reviewing the citations and searching for relevant articles citing the articles identified in the previous steps (inclusion criterion 2, Fig. 1). We observed, however, that the papers did not conform to our main criteria and were therefore not included. For instance, a highly cited paper was Jensen and Szulanski's (2004) study of cross-border knowledge

transfers. Even though the study focused on knowledge, it offered no explicit reference to employing the KBV to study the phenomenon. Thus, our final sample included 124 articles published in 40 different journals. Table 1 provides summative information regarding the sample.

### 3.2. Data extraction and analysis

To analyze the content of the articles included in our review, we first coded them. Our coding strategy drew, in part, on existing concepts and established coding categories. At the same time, we remained open and flexible during the coding process, allowing new concepts and categories to emerge from the data (Schreier, 2012). Specifically, we adopted the coding scheme provided by Gaur and Kumar (2018) for literature reviews with a research theme focus and a narrow scope. The authors suggested the following coding categories: research subtheme, variables, scope, context and type of study, theories employed, and key findings. Apart from the suggested categories, based on our specific data, we also noted the overall phenomena investigated by drawing on information in the title and abstract of each paper. Furthermore, we recorded the way in which the authors conceptualized knowledge (*resource, capability, asset, process, tacit/explicit, or combined approaches*). To determine this, we thoroughly analyzed the abstract, introduction, and theory section of each paper to identify the assumptions authors relied upon when defining knowledge and the theoretical underpinnings, namely, the key literature forming the assumptions. Finally, we also noted the loci of knowledge, recording the level referred to in the hypotheses or propositions (e.g., Saebi et al., 2019). We revised and refined the coding scheme several times. Next, we ensured that the coding scheme was uniformly applied to code all the articles in our review (Gaur & Kumar, 2018). To conform with the double extraction process (Denyer & Tranfield, 2008; Tranfield et al., 2003), the manual coding was performed by all authors independently. To increase validity, any discrepancies in the coding process were further discussed until agreement was reached. Table 2 provides a sample of some of the most cited papers in our database analyzed based on these categories.

## 4. Findings and discussion

Our analysis shows that research at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field has generally increased over time. This trend is consistent in both IB and non-IB journals. While only 16 articles were published

**Table 1**  
Journals and number of articles included in our sample ( $n = 124$ ).

Journal	Number of articles	Field	AJG 2021
Journal of International Business Studies	16	International Business & Area Studies	4*
International Business Review	15	International Business & Area Studies	3
Journal of World Business	12	International Business & Area Studies	4
Journal of International Management	9	International Business & Area Studies	3
International Marketing Review	8	Marketing	3
Management International Review	6	International Business & Area Studies	3
Strategic Management Journal	5	Strategy	4*
Journal of Business Research	5	General Management, Ethics, Gender & Social Responsibility	3
Journal of Knowledge Management	5	Organization Studies	2
Industrial Marketing Management	4	Marketing	3
Organization Science	3	Organization Studies	4*
British Journal of Management	3	General Management, Ethics, Gender & Social Responsibility	4
Long Range Planning	2	Strategy	3
Information and Management	2	Information Management	3
International Journal of Human Resource Management	2	Human Resource Management & Employment Studies	3
Journal of International Marketing	2	Marketing	3
R and D Management	2	Innovation	3
Other	23 (1 per journal)	Multiple	3–4*

Note: Articles from the following journals appear once in our sample: Academy of Management Journal, Asia Pacific Journal of Management, Business History, Decision Sciences, Global Strategy Journal, Human Resource Management, IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, Information Systems Research, International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research, International Journal of Operations and Production Management, International Journal of Production Economics, International Small Business Journal, Journal of Management Information Systems, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Product Innovation Management, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Management Science, MIS Quarterly, Organization Studies, Research Policy, Supply Chain Management: An International Journal, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, and Technovation.



Table 2

A sample of some of the most cited studies in our database, coded according to our criteria.

Authors	Research subtheme/ generic area	Phenomena investigated	Theory(ies) employed	Knowledge framed/ conceptualized as	Main variables (in quantitative studies)				Study type	Study scope/ context	Loci of knowledge	Level of analysis	Key findings
					Dependent	Independent	Moderators	Mediators					
Autio et al. (2000)	International new ventures/ SMEs/ entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs	International growth: the role of age at entry, knowledge intensity, and imitability	KBT	Resource	Growth in international sales	Age at international entry, knowledge intensity, imitability			Quantitative	Finnish electronics industry	Collectivist	Firm	The earlier firms expand internationally and the greater their knowledge intensity and imitability, the more rapidly they grow internationally.
Dibbern et al. (2008)	Global outsourcing	Disaggregating the extra costs in offshoring and how they relate to project performance	KBV, Transaction cost economics	Knowledge (unspecified)					Qualitative	German financial service projects offshored in India	Collectivist	Interfirm	Extra noncontractual costs (costs for the requirements specification and design, knowledge transfer, control, and coordination) arise in offshore outsourcing during transition and delivery, which may offset initial labor costs.
Yli-Renko et al. (2002)	International new ventures/ SMEs/ entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs	The role of intra- and interorganizational relationships in building the firm's distinctive knowledge base and in achieving international growth	Social capital theory, KBV	Resource	Knowledge intensity, foreign market knowledge, experiential foreign market knowledge, international sales growth	Internal social capital, external social capital, knowledge intensity, geographic diversity, entry mode experience			Quantitative	Finnish electronics industry	Collectivist	Firm	Knowledge is a key resource for international growth: positive relationship between external social capital and foreign market knowledge, positive relationships between knowledge intensity and foreign market knowledge on international growth.
Martin & Salomon (2003)	MNCs/MNC subsidiaries	Foreign entry: the impacts of knowledge transfer capacity and knowledge tacitness	KBP	Asset					Nonempirical study	Not applicable	Collectivist	Firm	The study provides a more complete picture of how knowledge shapes entry mode selection – tacitness as an obstacle to entry can be overcome by knowledge transfer capabilities.

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Table 2 (continued)

Authors	Research subtheme/ generic area	Phenomena investigated	Theory(ies) employed	Knowledge framed/ conceptualized as	Main variables (in quantitative studies)				Study type	Study scope/ context	Loci of knowledge	Level of analysis	Key findings
					Dependent	Independent	Moderators	Mediators					
Saarenketo et al. (2004)	International new ventures/ SMEs/ entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs	How external resources, such as partnerships and networks, contribute to international growth in born globals	KBV	Process	Intensity of internationalization	Marketing skills, technological skills, organizational skills			Quantitative	Finnish ICT-sector	Collectivist	Firm	Some of the proposed knowledge-related determinants have significant effects on the dynamics of internationalization.
Gnizy et al. (2014)	International new ventures/ SMEs/ entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs	The role of learning in SME foreign market launch	Dynamic capabilities, RBV, KBV	Capability	Marketing program adaptation, local integration, foreign launch success	Proactive learning culture, marketing program adaptation, local integration		Marketing program adaptation, local integration	Quantitative	US SME business executives	Collectivist	Firm	Proactive learning culture is important to SMEs whose lack of market power and resources render them vulnerable in risky foreign market launch. Marketing program adaptation and local integration are mediators of the impact of proactive learning culture on foreign market launch success.
Gassmann & Keupp (2007)	International new ventures/ SMEs/ entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs	Competitive advantage of early and rapidly internationalizing SMEs	KBV	Resource & capability					Qualitative	Biotechnology SMEs from Switzerland, Germany, and Australia	Collectivist	Firm	KBV has to be complemented by social capital theory and the network perspective to explain the basis of the competitive advantage of born global firms and how this advantage is turned into realized business performance.
Nakos et al. (2019)	International new ventures/ SMEs/ entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs	Alliances as mediators in the international market orientation and SME performance relationship	KBV, RBV, Institutional theory	Resource	International performance, levels of alliances	International market orientation		International alliances	Quantitative	Privately owned SMEs based in the UAE	Collectivist	Firm	International alliances mediate the international market orientation and performance relationship – firms do not realize their full potential unless they engage in extensive use of alliances.

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Table 2 (continued)

Authors	Research subtheme/ generic area	Phenomena investigated	Theory(ies) employed	Knowledge framed/ conceptualized as	Main variables (in quantitative studies)				Study type	Study scope/ context	Loci of knowledge	Level of analysis	Key findings
					Dependent	Independent	Moderators	Mediators					
Dutta & Beamish (2013)	International alliances/IJVs	The role of expatriates as a critical resource for IJV performance	RBV, KBV	Resource	IJV performance	Expatriate deployment	Product relatedness		Quantitative	862 Japanese IJVs in the USA	Collectivist	Interfirm	Expatriate deployment has an inverted-U relationship with IJV performance, and this relationship is positively moderated by product relatedness between the parent and the IJV.
Hsu et al. (2016)	MNCs/MNC subsidiaries	The moderating role of leverage and protection mechanisms for the subsidiary technology sourcing and performance relationship	RBV, KBV	Resource	Profitability	Sourcing technology from local collaborators, sourcing technology from own R&D activity and headquarters	Ownership structure, competition in the host country, perceived levels of business and social custom challenges in the host country, operation experience in the host country		Quantitative	1971 Taiwanese MNC subsidiaries	Collectivist	Firm	Sourcing from local collaborators across organizational boundaries was most highly associated with profitability when protection mechanisms were in place, while sourcing from headquarters across geographical boundaries was most highly associated with profitability when leverage mechanisms were developed.

Note: KBT = Knowledge-based theory, KBP = Knowledge-based perspective

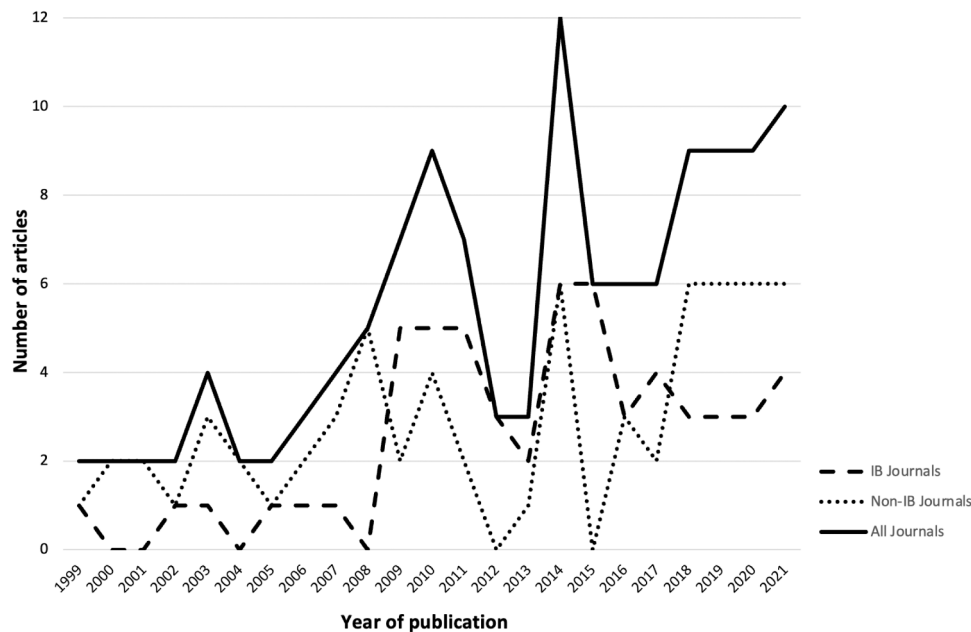


Fig. 2. Articles published by year in IB and non-IB journals.

between 1999 and 2005, more than triple that number (49 articles) were published between 2016 and 2021. Likewise, we note that only 35% of our sample (44 articles) were published from 1999 to 2010, while most articles, namely 65% (80 articles), were published from 2011 onwards. Fig. 2 presents a graph with the number of articles published in each year in IB and in non-IB journals.

As Fig. 2 shows, the distribution of studies published per year between IB and non-IB journals varies. For example, more KBV-IB studies were published in IB journals compared with non-IB journals between 2009 and 2012. However, the opposite occurs in the most recent period (2018 onwards) where the KBV-IB discussion has shifted predominantly to non-IB journals. While such variance is not necessarily surprising and may be influenced to some extent by the publication of special issues on specific themes, we note that non-IB journals are increasingly interested in research at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field.

In what follows, we discuss our findings in terms of knowledge definition/conceptualization and theoretical assumptions, methodological aspects, the loci of knowledge, geographical coverage, and content. Summative information about the profile of the sampled articles is presented in Table 3.

#### 4.1. Definition/conceptualization and theoretical assumptions

While we agree with Grant and Phene (2022) that a lack of consensus over the definition of knowledge has hampered the development of the KBV as a standalone theory, our review shows that most studies published at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field did not generally provide a definition or reflect on their understanding of knowledge. However, a few studies defined instead the specific knowledge type or process being investigated, such as knowledge creation (Regnér & Zander, 2014), knowledge ties (Gnyawali et al., 2009), or tacit/explicit knowledge (Martin & Salomon, 2003; Teigland & Wasko, 2009).

Key variations exist regarding the conceptualization of knowledge (as reported in the theoretical framework). In general, authors framed knowledge as a resource (35.48%) capability (8.87%), asset (5.65%), as tacit/explicit (4.84%), or process (4.03%). Some studies either combined the approaches (12.10%), did not explicitly state the nature of the knowledge under investigation (12.90%), or embraced other approaches to knowledge (16.13%).

Table 4 presents summative information for a sample of

representative articles from each of these groups.

The majority of studies adopted a *positivist, objective conceptualization* of knowledge (framed as a resource, asset, capability, etc.) whereas the *subjective/social constructionist conceptualization* of knowledge (Spender, 1996; Tsoukas, 1996) is underrepresented. While some notions of construing knowledge from a social constructionist perspective may have been alluded to in a few studies, we identified only one study (Stoian, Dimitratos, & Plakoyiannaki, 2018) that explicitly adopted a social constructionist conceptualization of knowledge. Besides theoretical motivations, the dominance of the positivist, objective conceptualization could be explained by the data sourcing constraints (datasets accessible) along with the prevalence of the quantitative research tradition in many top journals and among many scholars. Cost and time factors can also explain this emphasis on framing knowledge as a firm resource, since adopting other conceptualizations (e.g., social constructionist; processual) would involve collecting primary data and possibly developing new analytical skills.

Over half of the articles reviewed (51.61%) *built only on the KBV* in their theoretical framework (some, in addition, invoked the basic arguments of the RBV), or they did not explicitly state the theory used (apart from the KBV) (e.g., Arte, 2017; Teigland & Wasko, 2009; Williams, 2009). The remaining studies (48.39%) used *the KBV jointly with (one or two) other theories* (such as social capital theory, dynamic capabilities perspective, RBV, resource dependency theory, transaction cost economics, institutional theory, network theory, organizational learning theory, and internationalization theories) to explain the phenomena under investigation (e.g., García-García, García-Canal, & Guillén, 2017; Nayak, 2021; Wu and Chen, 2012; Zhang, Qi, Wang, Pawar, & Zhao, 2018). In terms of the theoretical assumptions adopted in the application of the KBV, the picture is less clear. Many studies in our sample generally tended to rely, either explicitly or implicitly, on the assumptions of the RBV. Such studies consider that knowledge drives competitive advantage/performance outputs. However, in alignment with Grant (1996a) and Grant and Baden-Fuller (2004), a handful of studies focused on other concerns. For example, scholars have also investigated relationship/tie formation and dynamics (Gnyawali et al., 2009) or environmental strategy (Aguilera-Caracuel, Hurtado-Torres, & Aragón-Correa, 2012; Maksimov, Wang, & Yan, 2022). Other studies mainly drew on the assumptions proposed by Kogut and Zander (1993) or on the classification of knowledge as tacit and explicit (Nonaka, 1994;



**Table 3**  
Main characteristics of the sampled articles.

Distribution of studies per time frame							
1999-2005 12.90%		2006-2010 22.58%		2011-2015 25.00%		2016-2021 39.52%	
Knowledge framed/conceptualized as							
Resource	Capability	Asset	Tacit/ explicit	Process	Combined approach	Not explicitly stated	Other
35.48%	8.87%	5.65%	4.84%	4.03%	12.10%	12.90%	16.13%
Theoretical underpinnings							
KBV is only theory used 51.61%				Combined theoretical framework 48.39%			
Method							
Quantitative 68.55%		Qualitative 10.48%		Mixed methods 5.65%		Nonempirical/conceptual 15.32%	
Level of analysis							
Collectivist 87.10%		Individualist 3.23%		Multilevel 7.26%		Not specified 2.42%	
Context <sup>a</sup>							
Asia	Europe	North and South America		Australia and Oceania		Africa	
59.43%	47.17%	35.85%		8.51%		6.60%	
China	USA	Japan	UK	Germany	India	Other	
22.64%	21.69%	16.98%	16.98%	15.09%	12.26%	47.17%	
Main areas <sup>b</sup>							
MNCs and MNC subsidiaries	International new ventures/SMEs/ entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs	International alliances/IJVs	Global outsourcing/ suppliers/value chains	Global talent management/staffing	Other		
53.23%	17.74%	8.06%	6.45%	3.23%	11.29%		

Note:

<sup>a</sup> The percentages in the context category do not add up to 100, as particular countries and regions appear jointly in some studies.

<sup>b</sup> Although a few papers refer to more than one category (e.g., MNCs and IJVs), we assigned these to just one category by identifying the dominant theme of the article.

Nonaka et al., 2000; Polanyi, 1962, 1966). Broadly speaking, scholars, in their quest to explain knowledge-underpinned phenomena, often did not prioritize the further development of the KBV beyond the RBV assumptions and the initial assumptions which emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., Grant, 1996a; Grant and Baden-Fuller, 2004; Kogut & Zander, 1993; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka et al., 2000; Spender, 1996; Tsoukas, 1996). Instead, authors commonly found it fruitful to intersect different IB and non-IB specific theories with the KBV to promote a better understanding of whether and how knowledge matters for IB activities.

To synthesize this very fragmented literature, we checked whether relevant differences exist between the articles in each of the conceptualizations in terms of the theoretical underpinnings, methodological design, level of analysis, IB concepts investigated, and context. No relevant differences were observed in terms of the level of analysis, IB concepts investigated, and context. However, certain differences were identified to exist between articles in distinct conceptualizations related to their theoretical background and methodological choices. Table 5 presents these differences (and similarities) in a summative manner.

In this section, we discuss these significant differences in terms of theoretical underpinnings, and in the next section, we underline the differences identified in the methodological choices.

Specifically, in research where knowledge is conceptualized as a *resource* and as a *capability*, most studies tended to complement the KBV with other theoretical underpinnings. When knowledge was conceptualized as a resource, the most frequently used theoretical backgrounds, besides the KBV, were the RBV or the resource dependency theory (e.g., Dutta & Beamish, 2013; Hsu et al., 2016; Nakos, Dimitratos, & Elbanna, 2019), the social capital theory (e.g., Dai & Liu, 2009; Yli-Renko et al., 2002), transaction cost economics (e.g., Liu, 2012; Wen & Chuang,

2010), and the institutional theory (e.g., Nakos et al., 2019; Swoboda, Elsner, & Olejnik, 2015). Conversely, when knowledge was conceptualized as a capability, the most frequent theoretical underpinnings, besides the KBV, were the dynamic capabilities perspective and the RBV (e.g., Gnizy, Baker, & Grinstein, 2014; Hoque, Ahammad, Tzokas, & Gabay, 2021). Such studies generally investigated the influence of different tangible and intangible resources and capabilities on performance-related outcomes, hence the combined use of theoretical backgrounds. Furthermore, many of these studies either explicitly or implicitly highlighted that the KBV is a derivative of the RBV, thus adopting the main tenets of the RBV. Conversely, studies in which knowledge was conceptualized as a *process*, *tacit/explicit*, an *asset* as well as *combined approaches* generally drew on the underpinnings of the KBV alone (e.g., Martin & Salomon, 2003; Saarenketo, Puumalainen, Kivilainen, & Kyläheiko, 2004). In broad terms, it could be argued that unlike studies that conceptualized knowledge as a resource/capability, whose authors naturally referred to the core assumptions behind the RBV or the dynamic capabilities perspective (or combined the KBV with theories that referred to complementary resources/capabilities such as the social capital theory), studies that conceptualized knowledge as an asset, process, and tacit/explicit found the KBV sufficient for theoretically anchoring their arguments.

Overall, (1) the limited effort paid to define knowledge or embrace an existing definition, (2) the imbalance between the research adopting an objective conceptualization as opposed to a social constructionist approach to knowledge, and (3) the prevalence of framing knowledge as a resource coupled with a relative overreliance, either explicitly or implicitly, on the tenets of the RBV, may have, to a certain extent, hindered the development of the KBV as a standalone, unified theory. While, without doubt, studies that embrace an RBV approach to the KBV

**Table 4**  
Summative information for representative articles according to knowledge conceptualization.

Knowledge framed/ conceptualized as	Authors and year of publication	Theories	General assumptions	Representative studies
Resource	Yli-Renko et al. (2002)	KBV, Social capital theory		Investigated the role of intra- and interorganizational relationships for creating a firm's distinctive knowledge base and for attaining international growth. According to their findings, knowledge intensity is driven by internal social capital, while foreign market knowledge is influenced by managerial contacts and customer involvement. In turn, knowledge intensity and foreign market knowledge drive international sales growth.
	Arte (2017)	KBV		Examined the importance of entrepreneurs' knowledge resources and experience for the internationalization of Indian new ventures. Entrepreneurial experience, knowledge, and educational background positively affect the internationalization of new ventures. Furthermore, this study reports that the relevance of knowledge resources depends on the nature of the business and the industry sector.
	Hsu et al. (2016)	KBV, RBV	Adopt, either explicitly or implicitly, the assumptions of the RBV to underpin the KBV or use the KBV and the RBV as complementary theoretical frames.	Investigated the relationship between MNC subsidiary technology sourcing and performance considering the moderating role of leverage and protection mechanisms. Their findings show that sourcing from local collaborators was more related to profitability when protection mechanisms were in place. Conversely, sourcing from headquarters was more related to profitability in the presence of leverage mechanisms.
	Dutta & Beamish (2013)	KBP, RBV		Studied the role of expatriates in IJVs. Their results show that expatriate deployment had an inverted-U relationship with IJV performance. Moreover, this relationship appears to be moderated by product relatedness between the parent and the IJV.
	García-García et al. (2017)	KBV Organizational learning theory		Analyzed the relationship between the speed of internationalization and long-term performance. Drawing on the KBV and organizational learning theory, this study identified an inverted U-shaped relationship between the speed of internationalization and long-term performance of Spanish listed firms. This relationship is steepened by technological knowledge and flattened by the diversity of prior international experience.
	Fang et al. (2010)	KBV		Investigated the relationship between the marketing and technological knowledge of the MNC and its foreign subsidiary performance considering the use of expatriates at different stages of a foreign subsidiary's activity. Found that the knowledge of the parent firm directly influences foreign subsidiary performance. Furthermore, this direct effect appears to be moderated by the use of expatriates.
Asset	Fey & Furu (2008)	KBV	Originates from Sveiby's (1997) seminal work, The New Organizational Wealth, which argues that value for firms primarily derives from managing intangible assets, including knowledge.	Examined whether compensation systems could help align the interests of Chief Executive Officers and subsidiary top managers, and hence, assist knowledge sharing in the MNC. Found that incentive pay based on the collective performance at the MNC level enhances knowledge sharing.
	Denicolai et al. (2014)	KBV		Studied the impact of intangible knowledge assets on international performance. Found an inverse quadratic relationship, which suggests that knowledge assets should be complemented by other assets to attain higher international performance. Externally generated knowledge may also influence international performance, but this relationship is mediated by the possession of internally generated knowledge assets.

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Knowledge framed/ conceptualized as	Authors and year of publication	Theories	General assumptions	Representative studies
Capability	Claver-Cortés et al. (2018)	KBV		Analyzed the relationship between the strategic knowledge management processes in subsidiaries and the performance of MNCs. The findings suggest that the adoption of strategic knowledge management by a subsidiary has a positive effect on knowledge creation by that subsidiary. The knowledge thus created positively influences knowledge transfer which increases the knowledge of the MNC. Relational context plays a mediating role.
	Colakoglu et al. (2014)	KBT		Investigated the knowledge creation capability of MNC subsidiaries considering both their knowledge stocks and knowledge inflows to the subsidiary. Reported that host country knowledge inflows to a subsidiary were found to be more effective in increasing the knowledge creation capability of MNC subsidiaries compared to global knowledge inflows from the same MNC.
	Williams (2009)	KBV	Integrate the KBV with the dynamic capabilities perspective (Teece et al., 1997). Highlight the dynamic nature of knowledge, in opposition with the conceptualization of knowledge via the RBV (as an internal and static resource).	Examined the subsidiary-level factors that drive global initiatives in MNCs. The capability to learn from internal and external sources influences global initiatives. Furthermore, global initiatives are less likely to occur if corporate and subsidiary managers lack a sense of common purpose.
	Gnizy et al. (2014)	KBA, Dynamic capabilities perspective		Studied the impact of proactive learning culture on marketing program adaptation and local integration, and finally on foreign launch success in a sample of US SMEs. Found that foreign launch success is influenced by higher and lower order capabilities. Specifically, the influence of a proactive learning culture (a higher order capability) was mediated by two lower order constructs, namely marketing program adaptation and local integration.
Tacit/explicit	Cheng et al. (2016)	KBT, Agency theory, Reactance theory		Investigated how factors that affect the relationship between IJV parents and agent, including tacit knowledge, may impact IJV instability. Found that parental opportunism and the autonomy of the IJV show a positive impact on the instability of the IJV. Moreover, the interaction between tacit knowledge and autonomy moderates the impact of parental opportunism on the instability of the IJV.
	Teigland & Wasko (2009)	KBV	Adopt the classification of knowledge into tacit and explicit at the centre of their work often drawing on seminal work by Nonaka (1994) Nonaka et al. (2000); Polanyi (1962; 1966).	Examined knowledge transfer in MNCs and performance at an individual level of analysis. Found that intrinsic motivations strongly associate with creativity and efficiency. Note that not only internal knowledge sources matter, but also external knowledge sources are important.
	Stoian et al. (2018)	KBP		Investigated the knowledge types required by micromultinational enterprises. Found that the most important knowledge types required for SMEs to be able to engage in internationalization beyond exporting involve the development of tacit knowledge such as in-depth worldwide network knowledge and hands-on foreign market knowledge. Instrumental, explicit knowledge provided by advisers, such as international setup knowledge plays a secondary role.
Process	Oxley & Wada (2009)	KBP	Usually, knowledge is understood as an ongoing process of constructing reality (Spender, 1996; von Krogh et al., 1994).	Investigated knowledge transfer in US-Japan alliances. Found that knowledge transfer is more intense, yet contained, in equity JVs as compared to licenses. Specifically, they report that in JVs, knowledge transfers related to the activity of the alliance are increased as is the speed of integration into future innovations of the Japanese firm.
	Monteiro (2015)	KBV, Attention-based view		Examined the global knowledge-sourcing process in MNCs. Found that although MNCs, in an attempt to find diverse and novel knowledge, may choose

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Knowledge framed/ conceptualized as	Authors and year of publication	Theories	General assumptions	Representative studies
				to establish foreign subsidiaries far from headquarters, interestingly, corporate managers appear to prefer opportunities that are market proven and confirm their prior knowledge. Subsidiary managers can help to alleviate this bias.
	Kotlarsky et al. (2008)	KBP		Explored how coordination mechanism contribute to knowledge processes as to attain coordination in the context of global software projects. Identified four coordination mechanisms that facilitate knowledge processes: coordination by organization design, work-based coordination, technology-based coordination, and social coordination.
Combined approaches	Assadina et al. (2019)	KBV	Generally, construe knowledge (or knowledge-related variables) as both resources and capabilities, or other combined frames.	Investigated the influence of export learning processes on export sales growth within UK and Chinese firms. They suggested embedding experiential firm resources into firm capabilities to achieve strategic success. Differences were found between the moderating effects of experiential knowledge resources and strategy adaptation on the association between the export learning process and export sales growth in the two samples.
	Li et al. (2010)	KBV, Transaction cost economics, Real options theory		Investigated the impact of market uncertainty and alliance specific uncertainty on the alliance governance mode choice considering the moderating effect of general alliance experience. They highlighted the role of specialized resources and learning capabilities for selecting alliance governance modes. Furthermore, their results underscored the moderating role shown by the general alliance experience of the partner firms.
	Williams & Lee (2011)	KBV, Social network theory		Analyzed entrepreneurship within the MNC as a result of entrepreneurial context and knowledge coordination. Drawing on the KBV as well as on social network theory, they generated a model and a set of research propositions related to entrepreneurial knowledge coordination within the MNC.
Other (e.g., the firm as a social community of knowledge)			Understand knowledge as an essential ingredient of a social community or of a network etc.	Investigated the role relational capital has in the relationship between global outsourcing, explorative innovation, and financial performance. Global outsourcing can negatively influence firm financial performance by hindering the explorative innovation capacity of the firm. The relational capital of the supplier can mitigate the negative impact of global outsourcing on firm financial performance.
	Verwaal (2017)	KBV, Relation capital		

Note: KBT = Knowledge-based theory, KBP = Knowledge-based perspective, KBA = Knowledge-based approach

are valuable and have brought numerous insights to the IB field, drawing on their reasoning, it is difficult to argue that the KBV is, in its current developmental state, independent from the RBV. In the early days, scholars (Eisenhardt & Santos, 2001; Foss, 1996) expressed concerns that the KBV could hardly be considered a standalone theory of the firm due to its precarious independence from transaction cost economics as well as its limited empirical corroboration. While over a hundred studies have been published since, the KBV finds itself once again closely entwined with another well-established management theory.

#### 4.2. Methodological design and empirical application

In terms of methodological approaches, most of the articles analyzed used *quantitative methods* (68.55%) based on surveys (e.g., Durmuşoğlu, & Barczak, 2011; Feng, Ma, Shi, & Peng, 2021; Liao & Yu, 2012; Morris, Zhong, & Makhija, 2015), existing data (e.g., Cuervo-Cazurra, Nieto, & Rodríguez, 2018; Elia, Munjal, & Scalera, 2020; Mohr & Batsakis, 2014),

or customized databases (e.g., Pla-Barber, Villar, & León-Darder, 2014; Belderbos, Grabowska, Kelchtermans, Leten, Jacob, & Riccaboni, 2021). The *qualitative studies* (10.48%) in our review primarily used interviews - semi-structured/in-depth - as the preferred method for data collection (e.g., Dibbern, Winkler, & Heinzl, 2008; Dimitratos, Lioukas, Ibeh, & Wheeler, 2010; Mehta, 2008). A few articles (5.65%) used *mixed methods* by combining secondary data with interviews and/or surveys (e.g., Collinson & Gregson, 2003; Loane & Bell, 2006) or interviews with survey data (e.g., Asseraf, Gnizy, & Shoham, 2021; Corredoira & McDermott, 2014). The nonempirical studies included in our review (15.32%) are mostly *conceptual papers*, which generally explain IB phenomena through knowledge-based approaches (e.g., Harvey, Novicevic, Hench, & Myers, 2003; Javalgi, Hall & Cavusgil, 2014; Li & Scullion, 2010; Morris, Snell, & Björkman, 2016; Regnér & Zander, 2011).

Table 5

Summative information on the main differences and similarities identified between articles belonging to distinct conceptualizations.

Conceptualization	KBV the only theory or KBV and other theories	Most common theories KBV is combined with	Methodology	Level of analysis	IB concepts/phenomena investigated	Context
Resource	55% employed the KBV in combination with at least one more theory	RBV/Resource dependency theory, Social capital theory, Transaction cost economics, Institutional theory	73% quantitative	No relevant differences. The majority of studies in all categories (60 to 90%) situated the analysis at either the firm or interfirm level.	No relevant differences. The most studied concepts/ phenomena were: MNC/MNC subsidiaries, international partners and strategic alliances, IJVs, expatriates, foreign market entry mode choices, entrepreneurial/SME internationalization, international new ventures, returnee entrepreneurship, export/ international performance and growth, internationalization speed.	No relevant differences. The most studied contexts were: China, USA, Japan, UK, Germany and other European Union countries, India.
Capability	58% employed the KBV in combination with at least one more theory	Dynamic capabilities, RBV	64% quantitative			
Asset	86% employed the KBV as the only theory	Social exchange theory	71% quantitative			
Tacit/explicit	57% employed the KBV as the only theory	Network theory	43% quantitative			
Process	80% employed the KBV as the only theory	Attention-based view	40% quantitative			
Combined approaches	70% employed the KBV as the only theory	Dynamic capabilities, Organizational learning, Network theory	70% quantitative			

Knowledge was operationalized as independent, dependent, mediator, and moderator variables<sup>2</sup> in the quantitative studies included in this review. Knowledge was operationalized as an *independent variable* in 58.70% of the quantitative studies to explain firm (or subsidiary/project) general or international performance outcomes (Crespo, Griffith, & Lages, 2014; Fang, Jiang, Makino, & Beamish, 2010; Filatotchev et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2015). Moreover, a few studies employed the KBV to analyze entry mode choice (e.g., Pehrsson, 2020; Pla-Barber et al., 2014), innovation-related outcomes (e.g., Bai, Johanson, & Martín Martín, 2019; Liu, Lu, & Choi, 2014), or competitive advantage (Côrte-Real, Ruivo, & Oliveira, 2020). Conversely, 31.52% of the quantitative studies approached knowledge as a *dependent variable* and tended to explore knowledge sharing or seeking, or identifying knowledge sources within MNC teams, and more broadly, within the IB context (e.g., Colakoglu, Yamao, & Lepak, 2014; Haas & Cummings, 2015). Knowledge was also operationalized as a *mediator* or *moderator* in 21.74% of the empirical studies in this review (e.g., Swoboda et al., 2015; Verwaal, 2017).

About two thirds of the empirical papers in our review conducted cross-sectional studies while the remaining third used longitudinal research designs. These are generally studies which involve panel data analysis such as Autio, Sapienza, and Almeida (2000), McGaughey, Raimondos, and la Cour (2020), or Saldanha, Sahaym, Mithas, Andrade-Rojas, Kathuria, and Lee (2020).

Our review also reveals some variations between the conceptualizations. Specifically, research that conceptualizes knowledge as a *resource*, a *capability*, or as an *asset*, or *combined* conceptualizations (e.g., Dutta & Beamish, 2013; Nakos et al., 2019) typically embraces a positivist approach and adopts a quantitative research design. Conversely, studies in which knowledge is conceptualized as a *process* or as *tacit/*

*explicit* (e.g., Loane & Bell, 2006; Srikanth & Puranam, 2014) appear to be somewhat more inclined to select a qualitative or a mixed-methods research design. Additionally, nonempirical studies are present under most conceptualizations.

Overall, most studies included in our review adopted a quantitative methodology. While these studies represent valuable contributions to the development of the IB literature, they suffer from a main common problem. Specifically, knowledge resources/assets/flows are difficult to define and measure. They typically involve tacit knowledge that is inherently hard to articulate and measure (Dyck, Starke, Mischke, & Mauws, 2005; Storey & Hull, 2010). Furthermore, the literature is fragmented in terms of how knowledge is operationalized, with studies operationalizing knowledge (or knowledge-based variables) as independent, dependent, or mediator/moderator variables. This, on the one hand, reflects the versatility of knowledge and knowledge-based phenomena, which could be approached from different perspectives. However, on the other hand, it is a result of a certain level of confusion regarding the main tenets of the KBV and the lack of a core body of generally acknowledged theoretical assumptions behind the KBV.

#### 4.3. The loci of knowledge

Most studies, either implicitly or explicitly, adopted a collectivist approach to knowledge (87.10%), situating knowledge types and processes either within the firm (e.g., headquarters and subsidiaries) (Colakoglu et al., 2014; Crespo et al., 2014; Hsu et al., 2016; Kyläheiko, Jantunen, Puumalainen, Saarenketo, & Tuppurä, 2011) or, in some cases, between the firm and other actors (e.g., international partners). The interfirm level studies largely focused on international alliances (Li, Boulding, & Staelin, 2010; Wen & Chuang, 2010) and IJVs (Cheng, Cai, & Jin, 2016; Fang & Zou, 2010; Xu & Lu, 2007).

Comparatively, only a few studies adopted an *individualist approach* (Felin & Hesterly, 2007; Simon, 1991) (3.23%). For instance, Ahrens et al. (2018) studied knowledge transfer via expatriates; Stoian et al.

<sup>2</sup> In some studies, knowledge variables appear as more than one type of variable.



(2018) investigated the understanding of managers and advisers regarding the knowledge types needed by micromultinational firms; and Teigland and Wasko (2009) looked at the role of individuals and their intrinsic motivations for knowledge process in MNCs.

Despite the benefits of studying knowledge at multiple levels of analysis and the calls for research in this sense made by conceptual papers (Foss & Pedersen, 2004, 2019; Gnyawali et al., 2009; Grant & Phene, 2022), research conducted on multiple levels of analysis remains limited. Only 7.26% of the empirical studies in our sample engaged in a *multilevel analysis*. For instance, Almeida, Song, and Grant (2002), in a study questioning whether firms are superior to alliances and markets, considered firm and regional levels of analysis, whereas Morgan, Zou, Vorhies, and Katsikeas (2003) adopted both an individual as well as a firm level of analysis to investigate the role of different types of knowledge for the architectural marketing capabilities of export ventures and, in turn, for the adaptive performance of export ventures. The remaining 2.42% are conceptual studies that did not specify (either explicitly or implicitly) the level of analysis adopted.

Our review also considered the *unit of analysis*, namely, the entity that was the target of the investigation. Mirroring the choices made at the level of analysis, the main unit of analysis adopted by the studies reviewed (59.68%) was the *firm* (either MNCs or SMEs) (e.g., Jonsson & Foss, 2011; Saarenketo, Puumalainen, Kyläheiko, & Kuivalainen, 2008). After that, the *subsidiary* was the most commonly used unit of analysis (11.30%) (e.g., Ambos, Ambos, & Schlegelmilch, 2006; Williams, 2009). Only a handful of articles focused on other units of analysis such as, for instance, *alliances* and *IJVs* (e.g., Cheng et al., 2016; Li et al., 2010), *projects* (e.g., Kotlarsky, van Fenema, & Willcocks, 2008; Srikanth & Puranam, 2014), *individuals* (e.g., Stoian et al., 2018; Teigland & Wasko, 2009), or *teams* (e.g., Haas & Cummings, 2015; Morris et al., 2015).

Overall, while the KBV states that knowledge exists both at the individual as well as the firm level (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Cohen, 1991; Grant and Baden-Fuller, 2004), and numerous calls for research have been made to adopt multiple levels of analysis to further elucidate knowledge types and processes (Foss, Husted, & Michailova, 2010; Foss & Pedersen, 2004, 2019; Gnyawali et al., 2009), the majority of studies still mainly placed knowledge loci at the collectivist level represented by the firm. Thus, similar to Felin and Hesterly (2007), we note that a prevalent assumption appears to exist in most of the studies adopting a collectivist approach, namely, that knowledge belongs to the firm. Consequently, both the microlevel and higher levels of analysis are generally neglected. In part, this is a shortcoming resulting from a reliance on the available datasets, but it could also be a consequence of predominantly focusing on designing survey instruments situated solely at the firm level of analysis. Nonetheless, a nascent trend exists to focus on individuals as the main knowledge creators and to engage in multi-level analyses.

#### 4.4. Context

Our review shows that the continent with the highest representation in our empirical sample was Asia (part of the sample in 59.43% of the studies), followed by Europe (part of the sample in 47.17% of the studies), North and South America (part of the sample in 35.85% of the studies), Australia and Oceania (part of the sample in 8.51% of the studies), and Africa (part of the sample in 6.60% of the studies). From studies focusing on countries, at least 22.64% included China, 21.69% the USA, 16.98% Japan, 16.98% the UK, 15.09% Germany, 12.26% India, 8.49% Spain, 7.55% Finland, and 5.66% Taiwan. The findings reported above represent an estimate, as some studies did not mention specific countries but referred instead to supranational regions or continents.

Overall, we remark that despite ongoing calls to conduct research in emerging market settings expressed by IB scholars for over a decade (e.g., Aybar & Ficici, 2009; Bonaglia, Goldstein, & Mathews, 2007), studies on the KBV in IB are still predominantly focused on developed market

contexts. Similar to Zhao et al. (2022), we found that the main exception to this is China, which is, in fact, the most studied country setting in our dataset. Apart from this, a few studies have also focused on the Indian context, while the other emerging market contexts, such as Latin America and Africa have been relatively neglected. These results are, in part, a reflection of data availability as well as the number of IB scholars from different geographical areas.

#### 4.5. Content

In terms of the areas of study, research at the intersection of the IB literature and the KBV is *content diverse*, spanning a wide range of IB topics ranging from (reverse) knowledge transfer in the MNC or learning and new knowledge creation in IJVs to the role of returnee entrepreneurs' knowledge for new venture internationalization and knowledge exchange in global outsourcing.

Drawing on our data analysis, it became apparent that most of the studies considered focused on five main areas:

- (1) *MNCs and MNC subsidiaries* (53.23%) - including studies on knowledge sharing/transfer and reverse knowledge transfer (Crespo et al., 2014; Fey & Furu, 2008; Martin & Salomon, 2003; Teigland & Wasko, 2009), knowledge combinations and re-combinations (Corredoira & McDermott, 2014; Regner & Zander, 2011), and the use of expatriates' knowledge (Ahrens et al., 2018; Fang et al., 2010; Hébert, Very, & Beamish, 2005; Kawai & Chung, 2019);
- (2) *International new ventures/SMEs/entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs* (17.74%) - including studies on the role of returnee entrepreneurs' knowledge (Bai, Johanson, & Martín Martín, 2017; Dai & Liu, 2009; Filatotchev et al., 2009) and of technological, market, and experiential knowledge (Arte, 2017; Mejri, MacVaugh, & Tsagdis, 2018; Tiwari & Korneliusen, 2018) for the internationalization of SMEs/entrepreneurial ventures;
- (3) *International alliances and IJVs* (8.06%) - including studies on learning and knowledge development/acquisition in international alliances and IJVs (e.g., Fang & Zou, 2010; Pollitte et al., 2015; Wen & Chuang, 2010);
- (4) *Global outsourcing/suppliers/value chains* (6.45%) - including studies on global outsourcing decisions and the importance of knowledge exchange in global outsourcing (Tiwana & Bush, 2007; Verwaal, 2017) as well as studies that outline the role of knowledge for global suppliers and value chains (Islam, Chadee, & Polonsky, 2023; Jean, Sinkovics, & Hiebaum, 2014); and
- (5) *Global talent management/staffing* (3.23%) including studies on global knowledge reach and search (Harvey, Speier, & Novicevic, 1999; Morris et al., 2016) as well as the role of global talent management practices and knowledge sharing through artificial intelligence for employee-related outcomes (Malik, De Silva, Budhwar, & Srikanth, 2021).

As far as knowledge types and processes are concerned, our review shows that very similar knowledge types (e.g., technological knowledge and market knowledge) and knowledge processes (e.g., knowledge creation/building, knowledge development, knowledge sharing, knowledge acquisition, knowledge transfer, learning, and knowledge management) were investigated in the three main groups. Here it is also important to note the prevalence of tacit knowledge (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) in studies across groups. However, since in this study, we consider the approach to knowledge as tacit/explicit under knowledge conceptualization, we have chosen not to include it under knowledge types for reasons of clarity. Further information is provided in Table 6.

In terms of contributions to research, most of the studies considered were particularly concerned with contributing to the knowledge-based phenomenon being analyzed and paid less attention to further

**Table 6**  
Knowledge types and knowledge processes investigated in the main areas of study.

Main areas	Selected representative studies	Main knowledge types and processes
MNC and MNC subsidiaries	Ahrens et al. (2018); Ambos et al. (2006); Chang and Rosenzweig (2001); Chang and Singh (1999); Claver-Cortés et al. (2018); Colakoglu et al. (2014); Collinson (2001); Corredoira and McDermott (2014); Fang and Zou (2010); Fey and Furu (2008); Foroudi et al. (2021); Gnyawali et al. (2009); Hsu et al. (2016); Iwata et al. (2006); Jonsson and Foss (2011); Kawai and Chung (2019); Kurokawa et al. (2007); López-Sáez et al. (2021); Low and Ho (2016); Maksimov et al. (2022); Martín and Salomon (2003); Monteiro (2015); Nair et al. (2018); Ordóñez de Pablos (2004); Pak and Park (2005); Parker et al. (2019); Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. (2015); Raza et al. (2020); Regné and Zander (2011); Sekiguchi et al. (2011); Teigland and Wasko (2009); Un and Rodríguez (2018); Vahtera et al. (2017); Williams and Lee (2011); Zhong et al. (2013)	Market knowledge, subsidiary marketing and technological knowledge, technical knowledge, external knowledge  Knowledge creation, knowledge building, knowledge management, knowledge acquisition, knowledge transfer and reverse knowledge transfer, knowledge flow, knowledge sourcing, knowledge seeking strategy, knowledge move, knowledge integration, learning, knowledge recombinations, knowledge routines
International new ventures/SMEs/entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs	Arte (2017); Autio et al. (2000); Bucciari et al. (2021); Collinson & Gregson (2003); Dai & Liu (2009); Dimitratos et al. (2010); Freeman et al. (2010); Gassmann & Keupp (2007); Gnizy et al. (2014); Martin & Javalgi (2019); Mejri et al. (2018); Miocevic (2021); Nakos et al. (2019); Saarenketo et al. (2008); Tiwari & Korneliusen (2018); Williams et al. (2020); Yli-Renko et al. (2002); Zhang & Guan (2021)	Technological knowledge, knowledge intensity, international market knowledge, experiential knowledge  Knowledge development, knowledge management, knowledge-related learning process, knowledge sharing, knowledge acquisition, knowledge sourcing
International alliances and IJVs	Bos et al. (2017); Cheng et al. (2016); Dutta & Beamish (2013); Fang & Zou (2010); Li et al. (2010); Oxley & Wada (2009); Pollitte et al. (2015); Steensma & Lyles (2000); Wen & Chuang (2010); Xu & Lu (2007)	Technological knowledge  Knowledge building, knowledge development, knowledge acquisition, knowledge transfer, learning, knowledge move, knowledge integration
Global outsourcing/suppliers/value chains	Choi et al. (2019); Islam et al. (2023); Jean et al. (2014); Liu (2012); Tiwana & Bush (2007); Verwaal (2017)	Knowledge exchange, knowledge acquisition, knowledge mobility, learning, knowledge protection
Global talent management/staffing	Harvey et al. (1999); Malik et al. (2021); Morris et al. (2016)	Knowledge transfer, knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing

developing the KBV. However, notable exceptions exist. Specifically, about a quarter of the studies analyzed (e.g., Almeida et al., 2002; Bos, Faems, & Noseleit, 2017; Dau, 2013; Eapen & Krishnan, 2019; Fransson et al., 2011; Morris et al., 2015; Nakos et al., 2019; Parker, Tippmann, & Kratochvil, 2019; Pehrsson, 2020; Stoian et al., 2018; Tiwari & Korneliusen, 2018; Wen & Chuang, 2010) endeavored to contribute to the KBV. For example, Wen and Chuang (2010) state that they contribute to the KBV by introducing a new knowledge-based construct specific for international alliances; Morris et al. (2015) claim they add to the KBV of MNCs by investigating processes related to knowledge reach at a more microlevel, specifically at the team level; Tiwari and Korneliusen (2018) assert that they contribute to the literature on a KBV of internationalization by studying the sources and role of experiential knowledge in relation to the internationalization of micro export firms from an emerging market context; and Kotlarsky et al. (2008) claim they contribute to the KBV by advancing a new model of coordination.

Overall, studies at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field could generally be classified with five main areas of research as highlighted above. These studies discuss a broad range of knowledge types and processes. However, no significant differences were observed between the key knowledge types and processes highlighted in different research areas. These studies have significantly contributed to the development of the IB literature over the years and some of them have made notable efforts to contribute to the KBV. However, given the lack of consensus regarding the core tenets of the KBV, it is difficult to gauge their effect on potentially unifying and strengthening the KBV.

#### 4.6. Summary of findings and reflections

Drawing on our analysis of the studies situated at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field, we identified that: (1) the studies considered did not consistently define knowledge; (2) knowledge was treated differently by different scholars (e.g., as resource, capability, process etc.) and an imbalance, in terms of adhering to an objective as opposed to a subjective, social constructionist conceptualization, prevails; (3) the

core theoretical assumptions of the KBV were never either fully articulated or consolidated and the KBV often relies on the tenets of the RBV; (4) the bulk of research reviewed is quantitative, which, while having obvious merits, suffers from inherent difficulties related to operationalizing and measuring (tacit) knowledge; (5) despite the importance of investigating knowledge at multiple levels of analysis, to date, most studies still focus solely on the firm level; (6) the majority of studies investigated developed market settings and, with the notable exceptions of China and India, the emerging market context is underrepresented; (7) the content of the studies analyzed spans a broad range of knowledge types and processes, which are analyzed under the umbrella of five areas: MNCs and MNC subsidiaries, international new ventures/SMEs entrepreneurial firms and returnee entrepreneurs, international alliances and IJVs, global outsourcing/suppliers/value chains, and global talent management/staffing.

These studies have contributed substantially to the development of the IB field for over two decades by illuminating key IB phenomena as well as the corresponding internationalization outcomes. However, due to issues related to a lack of clarity regarding the core tenets of the KBV, they have done much less in terms of establishing the KBV as a unified, standalone theory. It is thus fair to argue that the literature published at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field significantly enriches the knowledge-based literature and the IB discipline, highlighting the knowledge types and processes needed to operate in the international arena, rather than directly contributing to the KBV. This is, perhaps, not surprising since the main objectives of most of the empirical literature considered by this review prioritized elucidating the IB, knowledge-based phenomenon being analyzed rather than enhancing the KBV. Consequently, the KBV in the IB field has not evolved much over time and still broadly relies on the assumptions put forward by the RBV and the initial seminal studies (e.g., Grant, 1996a; Grant and Baden-Fuller, 2004; Kogut & Zander, 1993; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et al., 2000). While in the embryonic stages, some signs of notable future potential extensions to the KBV could be that: (1) studies started considering outcomes beyond competitive advantage or (international) economic performance

and their proxies, such as, for instance, the development of a proactive environmental strategy (Aguilera-Caracuel et al., 2012) and that, (2) in line with recent developments in the broader business management literature, scholars started investigating the role of artificial intelligence for knowledge processes (Malik et al., 2021). If taken further, these two initiatives, namely, considering the role of knowledge not only for competitive advantage and related performance outcomes but also for sustainability, environmental, and social outcomes as well as incorporating the role of artificial intelligence and machine-based learning in the study of knowledge types and processes, among others, may bring fresh insights to the underlining assumptions and applications of the KBV.

Based on our findings, and in response to Grant and Phene's (2022) research call, we have generated a framework, presented in Fig. 3, that represents the state-of-the-art of the KBV-IB literature and reveals the knowledge types and knowledge processes required for operating internationally.

This framework serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it reveals the knowledge types and processes needed by firms, including both MNEs and SMEs, to navigate the global environment, as disclosed by our review. Simultaneously, our framework shows the main knowledge conceptualizations identified by our analysis. We note that overlaps exist between the knowledge conceptualizations and the knowledge types, since the conceptualizations frequently draw on specific knowledge types. On the other hand, it presents in a summative manner the most important antecedents and outcomes of the knowledge-based phenomena analyzed by the studies at the intersection between the KBV and the IB field.

### 5. Future research directions

Drawing on our analysis, we have identified several research opportunities that, if pursued, would help advance the KBV as well as the IB field. We have organized these future research directions into three main categories related to theory, methodological approaches, and content, which we present in the rest of this section.

#### 5.1. Theory

In this section, we recommend research directions related to the KBV theoretical assumptions, approaches to conceptualizing knowledge, and promising theoretical combinations.

##### 5.1.1. KBV theoretical assumptions

To date, the KBV has not attained the status of a theory of the firm, given a lack of agreement regarding knowledge conceptualization, the core tenets of the KBV, and its precarious independence from other theories. To develop the core tenets of the KBV, a way forward could be to revert to the seminal papers published around the turn of the century where the initial foundations of knowledge-based approaches were established (e.g., Bresman et al., 1999; Eisenhardt & Santos, 2001; Grant 1996a; Kogut & Zander, 1993; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Toyama, 2005; Spender, 1996; Tsoukas, 1996) and try to distil more robust tenets by extending these key contributions in light of the empirical research conducted over the past two to three decades, combined, where necessary, with new empirical analysis. Hence, a more robust contribution to the KBV could hopefully be derived by drawing on this very rich, yet very fragmented literature.

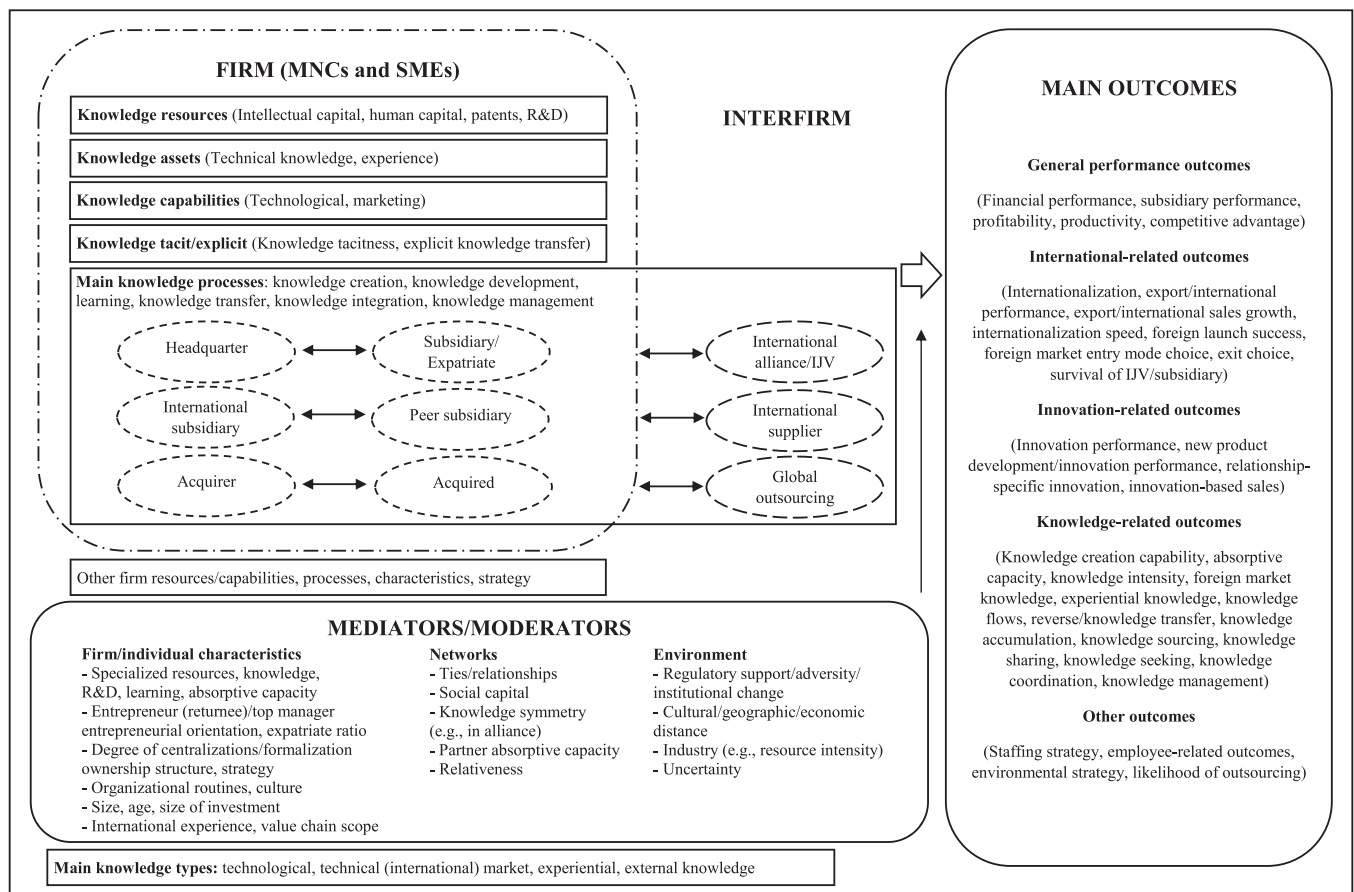


Fig. 3. Framework illustrating the state-of-the-art of the KBV in IB and the knowledge types and knowledge processes required for operating internationally.



### 5.1.2. Approaches to conceptualizing knowledge

Our review shows that most studies adopted a positivist objective conceptualization. Future research is encouraged to embrace a social constructionist perspective to knowledge. While being relatively ignored by prior IB research, the social constructionist perspective to knowledge would offer an increased potential to deliver a contextualized, in-depth understanding of IB phenomena (Grant & Phene, 2022). It would also provide the opportunity to further highlight the dynamic nature of the KBV. Specifically, the social constructionist perspective assumes that knowledge is embedded in history and culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1992). In other words, individuals have different experiences resulting from interaction with other individuals, and these are rooted in a specific time and space. The ongoing daily interactions between individuals result in the construction of shared versions of knowledge, contingent on the social and economic arrangements prevalent in specific cultures and time frames. Different individuals and social entities interpret firm processes and results in different ways, and these are constantly evolving over time (Spender, 1996). Individuals' knowledge of the external environment is influenced by the methods used for interpreting external stimuli. As Grant and Phene (2022, p. 21) state: "individuals' knowledge is determined by social context ... and how it is deployed is determined by the localized and geographically distributed communities within which practices and cognition are embedded". Data collection for such studies would ideally adopt a longitudinal perspective where in-depth interviews would be conducted with managers and the international stakeholders of their firms (e.g., international partners, customers, and competitors) over time. Embracing a social constructionist perspective to knowledge would make it possible to gain an in-depth, nuanced understanding of how knowledge develops and evolves in interaction with key international stakeholders. Specifically, it could bring fresh insights to understudied aspects of knowledge in IB, such as the microfoundations of knowledge processes and the interrelations between different levels of analysis while simultaneously accounting for the role of the context and language, which are fundamental in IB research (Child, Karmowska, & Shenkar, 2022; Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2014; Welch, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, Piekkari, & Plakoyiannaki, 2022).

### 5.1.3. Promising theoretical combinations

Many scholars have combined the KBV with other theoretical underpinnings to explain international phenomena. Nonetheless, while some theoretical approaches (e.g., dynamic capabilities perspective and institutional theory) are frequently combined with the KBV, combinations with other theories, particularly with those theories that would make it possible to underscore the role of managers, have been relatively neglected. For instance, managerial selective attention can drive the firm to address certain issues and pursue specific internationalization goals. While combining the KBV with the attention-based view (Ocasio, 1997) could enhance our understanding of IB phenomena, only one article in our sample (Monteiro, 2015) used these combined theoretical underpinnings. Likewise, combining the upper echelon theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) with the KBV has the potential to offer a fine-grained contextualized understanding of the role of managers' embeddedness and cognitive processes in creating and shaping the knowledge types and processes required for firm internationalization. However, in this case too, only one study in our sample adopted this theoretical combination (Sekiguchi, Bebenroth, & Li, 2011). We recommend scholars use joint underpinnings from the KBV and the attention-based view or the upper echelon theory in an effort to strengthen theoretical foundations and bring to the forefront the role of individuals for the knowledge types and processes required for firm internationalization.

Moreover, it would be fruitful to conduct further research into the individual cognitive processes of sensemaking. While, conceptually, the importance of managerial cognition, mindset, and perceptions is considered key for firm behavior (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi,

1995), the empirical evidence is scarce. Top managers employ complex cognitive processes of sensemaking to analyze the surrounding world in order to interpret and react to it (Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993; Weick, 1995). Their information processing activities influence firm behavior and performance (Thomas et al., 1993). However, we know little about how managers make sense of the internal firm resources and capabilities and of the external environment and how their interpretations and mental models influence firm internationalization. Thus, both the KBV and the IB field would benefit from further exploration of IB phenomena by jointly using underpinnings from knowledge theory and sensemaking.

## 5.2. Methodology

In this section, we present opportunities to advance the research at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field from a methodological perspective including considerations regarding the level of analysis, the research design, and the context.

### 5.2.1. Multilevel analysis

To date, despite calls to investigate knowledge-based phenomena at multiple levels of analysis (e.g., Foss & Pedersen, 2004, 2019; Zhao & Anand, 2009), a single level of analysis is utilized in most empirical studies. In line with Eden and Nielsen (2020), Foss and Pedersen (2019), and Phelps, Heidl, and Wadhwa (2012), we underscore a strong need for multilevel analysis since knowledge is a complex phenomenon encompassing multiple actors on multiple levels, with multiple interactions between actors, where actors and interactions are affected by time and history. Multilevel studies have the potential to deliver an in-depth understanding of knowledge-based phenomena and to provide an opportunity to integrate micro and macro perspectives (Foss et al., 2010; Zahra, Neubaum, & Hayton, 2020). A further emphasis on interaction effects across levels of analysis represents a viable solution to studying the richness, complexity, and contingency of knowledge in IB (Andersson, Cuervo-Cazurra, & Nielsen, 2020), particularly considering that the interaction studies in this review mainly investigated the multiplicative effect on only one level. Nested models involving, for example, three levels or more (individuals-teams-subsidiary-MNC-industry-country-region), could account for the variety of conditions affecting the expected and established relationships.

### 5.2.2. Research design and methodological pluralism

The complexity of knowledge as an asset and process as well as the role of context for knowledge creation and sharing could be further explained by conducting qualitative studies. For example, process research, historical methods, the extended case method, and configurational logic have recently attracted increased attention (Welch et al., 2022). These approaches typically involve primary data collection based on carefully designed guidelines that would allow enriching information about key issues for IB knowledge research. For instance, process research could answer questions related to the emergence and change of knowledge assets; historical methods could use a reconstruction of the past to show how knowledge assets develop over time in particular contexts; the extended case method could use microlevel observations of how knowledge develops in social interactions and how this is shaped by broader socio-material structures; finally, configurational logic based on in-depth fieldwork might be used to uncover previously undetermined causal conditions behind a specific outcome, such as valuable knowledge (Burawoy, 2009; Langley et al., 2013; Ragin, 2014; Sewell, 2005; Welch et al., 2022). Moreover, the case study method can also be enriched by a more longitudinal approach (such as by using repeat interviews, long-term ethnography, or restudies of classic research projects) with the possibility of developing more complex and realistic theoretical models based on higher order understandings of how and why individuals, groups, and firms behave as they do (Thomson, 2007; Thomson & McLeod, 2015).

As previously stated, few of the studies reviewed applied mixed methods. Therefore, future studies would benefit from methodological pluralism (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006). Combining qualitative and quantitative research can enhance the validity of the findings, as it provides a more comprehensive picture of the knowledge phenomena being analyzed, and it holds the potential for a more extensive understanding of the research subject(s) (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). Authors applying mixed methods in our sample cite the ability to develop more holistic insights and to provide a better understanding of the processes and issues involved, which would not be discernible from using quantitative data alone (Corredoira & McDermott, 2014; Loane & Bell, 2006; Pruthi, Wright, & Meyer, 2009).

Many studies also suffered from some of the main methodological challenges related to the IB field such as psychometry and limitations in the research designs (Aguinis, Ramani, & Cascio, 2020). Regarding psychometrical deficits, scholars have pinpointed issues related to measuring knowledge as a single-item construct (e.g., Harzing, Pudelko, & Reiche, 2016) or using only self-reported survey data in the measurement of knowledge constructs (e.g., Haas & Cummings, 2015). In terms of research design, many of the studies cited limitations regarding data unavailability, data being drawn from specific contexts, or the level of analysis as factors preventing a more comprehensive model from being tested (e.g., Filatotchev et al., 2009; Harzing et al., 2016; Williams & Lee, 2011). The use of primary data, collected for the specific purposes of the studies and drawing on carefully designed instruments, would provide increased opportunities to offer more comprehensive models and interpretations.

### 5.2.3. Context

A few of the studies relied on global data, while others were country-centric or studied geographically or institutionally proximate countries. Conducting more inquiries in multiple, very different country (or industry) environments may reveal how, for example, formal and informal institutions can be employed to shape knowledge processes. Also, we have limited evidence originating from developing Asian (beyond China/India) or Latin American and African countries. Researching these country environments may lead to new theoretical developments.

Furthermore, the KBV should be employed in the study of firms in new, cutting-edge sectors enabled by the advancement of digital technologies such as 3D printing, blockchain, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence. Exploring such new firm contexts where human knowledge coexists with machine learning, has the potential to bring novel insights to the KBV.

## 5.3. Content

In this section, we discuss research opportunities related to the content future studies could focus on. Particularly, we refer to exploring different types of internationalization, considering new antecedents and outcomes, investigating knowledge beyond firm boundaries, and conducting research on understudied actors and phenomena.

### 5.3.1. Type of internationalization

Our review reveals that while a wide variety of IB phenomena have been investigated, many papers have analyzed knowledge in conjunction with outcome variables typical for outward internationalization. Conversely, the influence that knowledge types and processes may have on inward internationalization (Holmlund, Kock, & Vanyushyn, 2007; Turunen & Nummela, 2017) has generally been ignored. Consequently, the KBV in its current format does not explicitly include any specific assumptions related to inward internationalization. Hence, we recommend future research explore how managers develop and use knowledge in collaboration with international suppliers and international partners in the domestic market. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore the knowledge configurations used by firms to attract foreign customers to

their local market as a means to enrich the KBV as well as the IB field.

The literature remains silent regarding the knowledge types and processes that inform international withdrawal from certain markets or re-internationalization (Kafouros, Cavusgil, Devinney, Ganotakis, & Fainshmidt, 2022; Welch & Welch, 2009). Although perhaps less attention grabbing compared to international performance, these are international phenomena that affect many firms and their subsequent international development. Hence, we encourage IB scholars to identify the knowledge types and processes that underpin such phenomena and to highlight the potential new insights they can bring to the KBV.

It would also be interesting to conduct further studies that would offer a better understanding of whether (and how) the knowledge types and processes required for gradual internationalization (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 2009) are significantly different from those necessary for the rapid internationalization of smaller entrepreneurial firms (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Knight & Cavusgil, 2004), and from those required by born digitals (Monaghan, Tippmann, & Coviello, 2020).

### 5.3.2. New antecedents

To date, we have limited understanding of the impact of digital technology advancements on the knowledge types and processes required for firm internationalization. The COVID pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technology and increased the breadth and depth to which it is used (Amankwah-Amoah, Khan, Wood, & Knight, 2021). However, little is known about how knowledge is created, integrated, and applied in this digital environment and how, in turn, it affects firm internationalization. We join voices with prior calls to explore the role of digitalization in the knowledge flows used by multinational firms (Zhao et al., 2022). Future studies can connect big data analytics with the KBV, as new processes for knowledge creation, management, control, and governance may emerge within the digital context. Such studies could explore how platform-based multinational firms and multinational digital retailers (Li, Chen, Yi, Mao, & Liao, 2019) create knowledge and value based on big data collected from user activity on their platforms. Future research could also investigate the governance of platform multinational firms, scrutinizing whether digital platforms create conditions for the centralization and internalization of knowledge (Banalieva & Dhanaraj, 2019). Moreover, scholars may find it fruitful to explore how advancements in artificial intelligence (Loureiro, Guerreiro, & Tussyadiah, 2021) and global virtual teams (Hung, Cheng, Hou, & Chen, 2021) affect knowledge creation, integration, and sharing in the context of firm internationalization.

### 5.3.3. New outcomes

To date, the tenets of the KBV mainly support organizational goals related to gaining a competitive advantage and achieving performance goals. However, the KBV would be a fertile theoretical ground for explaining other international output variables, which despite their importance, have received limited research attention. Such outputs include the sustainability of international operations and the adoption of an environmental, social, and government (ESG) framework internationally, which would consider how value is created with multiple international stakeholders (e.g., international employees, customers, investors, and business partners). While such an investigation would without doubt be challenging, it would be interesting to reveal what types of knowledge underpin value creation, which goes beyond mere economic purposes and is likely to be dispersed in different parts of the multinational firm.

Moreover, knowledge is the backbone of the MNC as a 'global factory' that creates value by deploying and managing its global value chain (Buckley & Strange, 2015; Kano, 2018). Future research could further explore knowledge as a competitive resource that can be mobilized to improve the coordination and the organization structure of internationalized firms.

Additionally, we have only limited understanding of (reverse) knowledge transfer in the global value chain. In line with Kano et al.



(2020) and Soontornthum, Cui, Lu, and Su (2020), we recommend scholars investigate the channels through which knowledge travels in the global value chain as well as the factors that may influence its transfer.

5.3.4. *Dynamic knowledge beyond firm boundaries*

Studies increasingly recognize that knowledge useful for the internationalized firm is frequently created outside the firm, in interaction with essential external actors, such as international customers, consultants, and international business partners. However, to date, most research has taken a firm-centric approach to the knowledge types and processes required in internationalization. In line with Brouthers, Chen, Li, and Shaheer (2022), we argue that future research should go beyond the nature of knowledge as held by the firm - as understood by Kogut and Zander (1993) and by scholars who adopt the RBV assumptions to underpin the KBV. Specifically, future research should embrace a dynamic, evolutionary approach to the KBV, which considers the role of key international stakeholders for developing and recombining knowledge across time and space.

5.3.5. *Understudied actors and phenomena*

Although many theoretical studies on the KBV or knowledge-based processes (Fransson et al., 2011; Foss & Pedersen, 2004, 2019; Grant & Phene, 2022) have focused on MNCs, we note that studies on SMEs/rapidly internationalizing new ventures are starting to gain momentum, particularly since 2010. However, we currently know little about the knowledge creation and recombinations that underpin returnee entrepreneurship or the born global and micromultinational firms. Hence, we invite future KBV studies to further illuminate these entrepreneurial phenomena. Moreover, other underrepresented organization types in IB research, such as international social enterprises and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) could benefit from being explored using the KBV. Similarly, a few other relatively understudied key IB phenomena, such as global outsourcing and global talent management, could benefit from being further investigated using the KBV.

Fig. 4 presents in a summative manner the abovementioned future research directions and Table 7 displays promising research questions

corresponding to the research directions offered in this section, which we encourage scholars to address.

6. Implications and concluding remarks

Our review allowed us to identify relevant practical and policy implications. Our study reveals that research underpinned by the KBV highlights the heterogenous, dynamic character of the knowledge types and processes responsible for firm internationalization. Managers should be aware that different knowledge types (e.g., experiential, technological/technical, and marketing) may be required for distinct international activities and at different phases of firm internationalization. They should be mindful that such knowledge is often either acquired or created in interaction with international stakeholders (e.g., international customers, employees, and suppliers), and therefore, they should develop and maintain ongoing relationships with their international stakeholders and foster knowledge cocreation. Our review shows that, increasingly, studies consider not only knowledge transfer but also reverse knowledge transfer, from international subsidiaries to headquarters. Consequently, managers of multinational firms should value and make good use of the knowledge flows received from the international affiliates. Our study also reveals the relevance of returnees as key sources of knowledge for navigating the global environment. Entrepreneurs and managers are encouraged to use their own returnee experience should they have it, or alternatively, they could consider hiring returnee staff with international experience in the areas of interest pertinent to their internationalization strategy. Moreover, our study identified dynamic export capabilities, technological capabilities, and absorptive capacity, among others, as key for firm internationalization. Practitioners should be cognizant of the important role played by such knowledge-related capabilities for firm internationalization and should aim at developing, transforming, and recombining them in alignment with their strategic goals and specific context.

Based on our review, we identified a few relevant policy implications. Policy initiatives could facilitate the repatriation of skilled individuals, generally known in the literature as returnees or returnee entrepreneurs, thus fostering the transfer of valuable internationalization-related knowledge to domestic firms. In line with

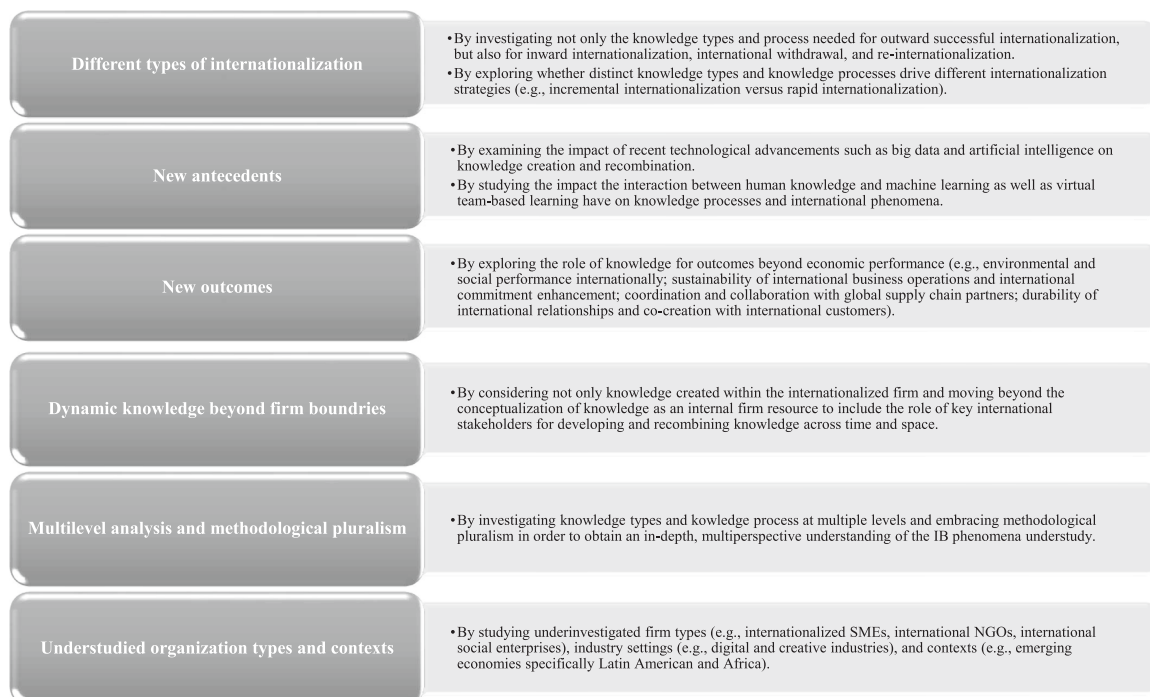


Fig. 4. Summative research directions to develop the KBV and the IB field.

**Table 7**  
Examples of future research questions for KBV research in IB.

Area	Future research direction	Examples of unanswered questions at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field
<b>Theory</b>	Extend the KBV based on seminal KBV studies and literature published in the IB field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the literature published at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field over the past two to three decades contribute to the KBV?</li> </ul>
	Adopt a social constructionist perspective of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the culture and history dimensions emphasized by social constructionism enrich the KBV in the IB context?                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do headquarter and subsidiary managers and employees construe different MNC knowledge processes to be embedded in specific space and time frames?</li> <li>• How do managers of firms involved in IJVs perceive knowledge is shared and developed over time?</li> <li>• How do international buyers and suppliers understand the mechanisms needed to enhance knowledge transfer and reverse knowledge transfer within the dyad in diverse contexts?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	Use combined underpinnings from the KBV and the attention-based view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the KBV and the attention-based view complement each other and improve the understanding of IB phenomena?</li> </ul>
	Use combined underpinnings from the KBV and the upper echelon theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the KBV and the upper echelon theory complement each other and enrich the understanding of IB phenomena?</li> </ul>
	Conduct further research into individual cognitive processes of sensemaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the KBV and the sensemaking theory strengthen one another and enhance the understanding of IB phenomena?</li> </ul>
	Conduct research using the KBV in IB at multiple levels of analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is knowledge creation, sharing, and reconfiguration relevant for internationalization perceived by different firm stakeholders and at different levels of analysis?</li> <li>• How is context-specific managerial knowledge (individual level) integrated in the MNC (firm level)?</li> <li>• How can different methods be combined to investigate knowledge processes at distinct levels of analysis?</li> </ul>
<b>Methodology</b>	Use distinct methodological approaches to unpack the complexity of knowledge as an asset and of knowledge processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can different methodological approaches (process research, historical methods, the extended case method, and configurational logic) enhance the KBV?</li> </ul>
	Alleviate methodological shortages of current studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can improved measurement tools enhance the understanding of knowledge processes in firm internationalization?</li> <li>• How can mixed-method research designs help further elucidate the knowledge processes used in internationalization and contribute to the development of the KBV in IB?</li> <li>• How can the design and implementation of more reliable and more comprehensive tailor-made primary data collection further illuminate the KBV in IB?</li> </ul>
	Conduct research in understudied geographical areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can exploring understudied contexts (e.g., Africa and Latin America) provide novel insights to the KBV?</li> <li>• Are there significant variations between the knowledge types and processes required for firms to internationalize in emerging markets compared to in developed markets? Can such potential differences add to the KBV?</li> <li>• Are there significant variations between the knowledge types and processes that underpin the internationalization of firms from developed compared to firms from emerging markets? Can such potential differences enhance the KBV?</li> </ul>
	Conduct sector studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can investigating sectors, where artificial intelligence and machine learning are prevalent, enhance understanding of IB phenomena and enrich the KBV?</li> </ul>
	Adopt the KBV in the study of inward internationalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the KBV a useful framework for explaining inward internationalization? Does the study of inward internationalization enrich the KBV? If yes, how?                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do managers and their employees create and share knowledge in collaboration with international suppliers?</li> <li>• What knowledge configurations do firms use to attract foreign customers to their domestic market?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	Explore international withdrawal using the KBV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can the KBV explain international withdrawal? If so, how does the exploration of international withdrawal add to the KBV?</li> </ul>
<b>Content</b>	Explore re-internationalization using the KBV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can the KBV explain re-internationalization? If so, how does the exploration of re-internationalization contribute to the KBV?</li> </ul>
	Compare the knowledge types and processes needed for incremental and rapid/digitally driven internationalization using the KBV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the KBV improve the understanding of internationalization strategies (e.g., gradual versus rapid)? How can such comparative studies contribute to the KBV?</li> </ul>
	Investigate how knowledge is created, integrated, and applied in the digital environment in relation to firm internationalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do digital technologies influence knowledge processes in internationalized firms and international strategic alliances? And are there any implications for firm internationalization and competitive advantage?                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does artificial intelligence influence the knowledge creation required by the internationalized firm? Does the use of social media affect international performance/growth?</li> <li>• How do virtual teams affect knowledge sharing, recombination, and new knowledge creation? Does the use of virtual teams and the knowledge thus created drive international performance/growth?</li> <li>• How do platform-based multinational firms and multinational digital retailers create knowledge and value based on big data collected from user activity on their platforms?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

(continued on next page)

Table 7 (continued)

Area	Future research direction	Examples of unanswered questions at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field
	Investigate the sustainability of international operations and the adoption of environmental/social considerations internationally using the KBV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do knowledge types and processes influence the sustainability of international operations and the adoption of an ESG framework internationally?</li> <li>• Do international involvement and international performance create knowledge that could be used to enhance environmental and social responsibility? If so, how does this relationship vary across countries with different development levels?</li> <li>• How can knowledge be used to enhance the coordination and the organizational structure of internationalized firms?</li> <li>• How does knowledge travel in global value chains and what factors influence such knowledge flows?</li> </ul>
	Explore knowledge beyond firm boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the knowledge required for firm internationalization created and recombined in interaction with essential international stakeholders over time?</li> </ul>
	Conduct research into the knowledge types and processes required for SMEs to navigate the global environment using the KBV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do early internationalizing firms create and recombine the knowledge required to maintain a high post-entry speed of internationalization?</li> <li>• How do micromultinational firms share knowledge between headquarters and subsidiaries? Are these knowledge flows similar to those of MNCs, or are there marked differences?</li> </ul>
	Further employ the KBV to elucidate understudied phenomena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the KBV further illuminate IB phenomena such as global outsourcing, global value chains, and global talent management?</li> </ul>
	Explore the interplay between human and machine knowledge creation and transfer in relation with firm internationalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do human and machine knowledge and learning interact to shape firm internationalization? Does such a combined knowledge production influence international performance?</li> </ul>

Kunczer, Lindner, and Puck (2019), we also argue that designing favorable immigration policies can provide companies with valuable knowledge about the immigrants' home countries and reduce uncertainty when internationalizing in those markets. The protection of intellectual property, which is often mentioned as a barrier to internationalization in certain foreign markets, could be reinforced with the aid of policy initiatives. Moreover, specific policies can transcend the local environment, determining, for instance, the extent and type of cross-border knowledge firms can access and deploy to support knowledge transfer in global value chains.

Overall, this study makes three important contributions. First, this study offers a systematic literature review on the KBV in the IB field, thus revealing the current state of KBV studies in an international context. Second, we critically evaluated the existing research, and in response to Grant and Phene's (2022) call, we developed a framework that shows the most important knowledge types and processes necessary for firms to navigate the global environment. Third, we indicated future research directions aimed at progressing the KBV as well as the IB research.

As is the case with all research, our study has some limitations. Specifically, our review, is derived solely from those IB studies that explicitly specified that their arguments were grounded on knowledge-based theories. However, there are studies in the IB field that discuss knowledge-related types and processes without specifically building on knowledge-based theories. Such studies generally refer to the phenomenon-based literature as their theoretical background (e.g., the knowledge transfer literature or the MNC knowledge flows literature) and make little or no mention of the KBV. We encourage future research to conduct reviews that adopt a broader inclusion criterion for knowledge-related studies or work that focuses on specific knowledge phenomena. Both could provide an extension to this study. Moreover, this research focused on the KBV studies published in the IB field. We recommend KBV scholars extend this research to other management fields (e.g., information systems or human resource management). This would make it possible to confirm if this study's findings are valid beyond the IB literature and would consolidate the role of the KBV in the broader management field.

To conclude, we hope this article encourages future research at the intersection of the KBV and the IB field as well as beyond.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

There are no competing interests.

#### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- Note: The studies included in this systematic literature review are marked with \*.
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