

# **Strategic agility in international business: A conceptual framework for “agile” multinationals**

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## **Abstract**

Strategic agility is a fuzzy concept that may be counter intuitive as well as confounding to some scholars in terms of the agile strategies’ contextual issues. At the same time, the need to be agile is crucial for firms, especially for Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) that operate in culturally different host countries. Thus, a deep understanding of strategic agility is very intriguing for both academics and executives, as several gaps are apparent in the extant literature. In this paper, we review mainstream studies on agility in the international business context, discussing its relevance and proposing main aspects of strategic agility to clarify further this indistinct concept. Moreover, we provide a novel conceptual framework based on the integration of agility in different operational areas (e.g. Information Technology, supply chain and production) that organizations should foster to become an “agile multinational”. Our synthesis represents an innovative strategic direction for MNEs to understand better strategic agility, which clearly extends the concept of flexibility, while managing stakeholder relationships in order to develop key dynamic capabilities. Finally, we also discuss the main contributions of the other articles included in this special issue, thus providing specific examples of agility in well debated IB contexts (e.g., emerging markets). We also suggest some future research areas for this complex and ambiguous concept.

Keywords: strategic agility, international business, supply chain, ambidexterity, multinational companies, dynamic capabilities.

## 1 Introduction

In a turbulent international scenario, where globalization affects consumer behavior and markets are impacted by continuous change, one of the most important success factors for international firms is strategic agility (Morton et al., 2018; Vaillant and Lafuente, 2019). Strategic agility is defined as “the ability to remain flexible in facing new developments, to continuously adjust the company’s strategic direction, and to develop innovative ways to create value” (Weber and Tarba, 2014, as cited in Ivory and Brooks, 2018, p. 348). In addition, strategic agility has been defined as the “ability of the organization to renew itself and stay flexible without sacrificing efficiency” (Junni et al., 2015, p. 596). Here, the terms “renewal” or “adjust” could be considered from perspectives of different organisational settings. Thus, the key focus in strategic agility is how a firm could remain flexible and quickly adapt to new ideas, technologies, socio-economic aspects, host countries’ and host stakeholders’ norms and values, along with the concerns of various government and non-government organizations of those target markets (Vrontis et al., 2009; Doz and Kosonen, 2010a).

The main purpose of this editorial is to analyze deeply the “agility” concept and the mechanisms beyond such strategic adaptation/renewal in order to allow MNEs to allocate/reallocate their organization’s resources and structure/restructure their strategies and processes without sacrificing the core organizational policy and efficiency (Doz and Kosonen, 2008a). The expected results are to provide readers with key knowledge related to agility to understand which are the key aspects MNEs may look at in order to swiftly exploit a new business opportunity or to neutralize an extant business risk, with the final aim to deliver value to stakeholders in line with their expectations.

In fact, MNEs are big organizations with operations in different countries and are at greater risk than smaller firms to fall into a “rigidity trap” due to institutional and organizational inertia related to multiple embeddedness (Meyer et al., 2011; Ferraris, 2014). For MNEs, it is even more important to adapt the organization to socio-economic changes (Shams, 2016) with a goal to sustain their market-offerings in cross-border socio-economic settings. In fact, this means that MNEs need to change in a way that is not having to regularly overcome routine rigidities (as pointed out by Gilbert, 2005), although some international business scholars argued that the development of routines may be a critical firm specific advantage (FSA) that can be exploited across borders (Rugman and Verbeke, 2008; Nguyen and Rugman, 2015).

Unfortunately, the extant literature on strategic agility suggests that we have limited knowledge to fully and proactively exploit the potentials of businesses to introduce flexibility

in their local or international operations, without sacrificing their fundamental values and current efficiency, but with the aim to survive and prosper in domestic and cross-border markets. One notable exception is the framework developed by Fourné et al. (2014) to guide MNE executives in foreign markets in developing strategic agility within their organizations. The authors illustrate the key strategic organizational capabilities related to “agility” through which MNEs may effectively compete across international markets. In addition, it conceptually proposed that MNEs should allocate an adequate amount of monetary and non-monetary resources to build and embed all three key capabilities of strategic agility (individuating the sense of local opportunities, the enactment of global complementarities and the appropriation of local value) and contextually they need to balance those capabilities dynamically over time.

While different definitions and key meta capabilities underlining strategic agility have been discussed so far in the literature, it is still vague how strategic agility is positioned and integrated in mainstream studies on agility in MNEs and which are the key strategy related factors that firms should develop to incorporate agility in their core values and organizational settings. Literature on agility in international business is still scarce and fragmented and, consequently, there is a lack of comprehensive frameworks aimed at conceptualizing what the main factors are in an international scenario. In fact, many studies have empirically showed that other strictly strategy related factors may lead to agility and they have to be taken into consideration when we look at strategic agility in MNEs. This is the research gap that this introductory article and the overall special issue would like to contribute.

Thus, we would like to add knowledge to the existing literature by shedding light on different aspects of “agility” in an international business scenario, suggesting strategic agility as one key intangible asset that multinational firms should nurture continuously. Within this context, only few studies (e.g., Mavengere, 2013) proposed insights from an integrated and holistic perspective. In this introductory paper, we firstly discuss and propose mainstream definitions and key characteristics of strategic agility and its related capabilities. After that, we propose that agility in some key operational areas - IT, supply chain and (sustainable) productions - is critical for becoming “agile multinationals” that continuously adapt their activities to proactively deal with multiple stakeholders in several different national contexts. As a strictly related consequence, this special issue aims also to enhance our understanding on how stakeholder relationship management could play a critical role in international businesses’ strategic agility management in order to ensure the businesses’ sustainability in different cross-

border markets. Finally, this editorial introduces the individual papers in this special issue that enrich our conceptual framework, and ends by offering observations for future research.

## **2 Strategic agility: a preliminary research backbone**

### **2.1 Key definitions and main characteristics**

Strategic agility encompasses a set of activities carried out by a company that create value in a turbulent and unpredictable environment (Weber and Tarba, 2010). These activities and related continuous organizational changes are systematic variations in specific processes, products and structures (Weill et al., 2002). The power and diversity of these changes are important for being agile multinationals (Mohrman and Worley, 2009; Sarker and Sarker, 2009), meaning that firms need to dedicate different sets of resources to preserve the high levels of flexibility and speed necessary to be agile in international contexts in order to proactively encounter unexpected external changes (Weber and Tarba, 2010).

In line with Weber and Tarba (2014), strategic agility is a meta-capability that involves not only allocating sufficient resources to the development and deployment of all specific capabilities, but also staying agile by balancing those capabilities dynamically over time. Brueller et al. (2014) emphasized that strategic agility is an invaluable capability that enables a firm to turn around quickly without losing momentum, which increases its viability in uncertain, volatile, and rapidly changing environments. The authors individuated three enabling capacities that should be developed by MNEs to create an agile organizational system: (a) making sense quickly; (b) making decisions nimbly; and, (c) redeploying resources rapidly.

Practically speaking, the key operational issue is whether a firm can act quickly and correctly. In this guise, IT systems and tools and related organizational IT capabilities - e.g., business intelligence - can help middle and top managers to act quickly and with more accuracy.

In this guise, one milestone of mainstream literature has been proposed by Doz and Kosonen (2008b, p. 96) that argued that strategic agility aims to find a way to “prevent stagnation and painful transformation so that companies do not become elephants that need to learn to dance”. This means that being flexible may prevent organizations from “rigidity traps” and from external over-embeddedness (Meyer et al., 2011; Ferraris, 2014; Bresciani and Ferraris, 2016) that affect MNEs in multi-country operations.

Through MNEs case studies, Lewis et al. (2014) revealed several leadership guidelines that may facilitate strategic agility: (a) value paradoxes; (b) identify and raise tensions in a proac-

tive way; (c) limit anxiety and defensiveness; (d) continuously deliver reliable vision; and, (e) distinguish efforts to put attention on both edges of a paradox.

Thrassou et al. (2018a,b) proposed a consumer-focused framework for agility in a multicultural context, suggesting a dynamic balance between agility and innovation, as well as externally between changing environmental forces, with the aim to build up a “Strategic Marketing Multicultural Agility Pendulum”.

Furthermore et al. (2017) suggested that strategic agility entails four key routines: (a) “strategizing” – giving a shared strategy and motivating people that should operate in a good organizational climate; (b) “perceiving” through continuously monitoring the environment to anticipate major changes and quickly providing this knowledge to executives who should interpret them and take and formulate decisions; (c) “testing” through ongoing trials and errors and experiments; and, (d) “implement” both incremental and radical changes, and measure their performances.

## **2.2 Dynamic capabilities, ambidexterity and strategic agility**

Mainstream literature associates deeply the concept of strategic agility to both dynamic capabilities and ambidexterity. From a carefully literature review, all these concepts are in some way interconnected but different evidence makes it difficult to fully understand these associations.

Regarding the association between dynamic capabilities and strategic agility, main contributions are directed to underline that some dynamic capabilities are meta-capabilities to allow MNEs to achieve strategic agility.

For example, Doz and Kosonen (2010) suggested that strategic agility combines different dynamic capabilities such as resource fluidity, strategic sensitivity and leadership unity. Similarly, Ivory and Brooks (2018, p. 347) proposed strategic sensitivity, collective commitment, and resource fluidity as three main organizational, meta-capability building blocks of strategic agility which “requires [the organization] having a keen awareness of incipient trends, the ability to quickly make bold decisions, and knowing how to reconfigure business systems and redeploy resources” (Gurkov et al., 2017, p. 12). Teece (2007) argued that dynamic capabilities can be grouped into three main sets that make the company able to compete and survive in the longer term while facing changes in customers’ demands and technologies. These sets are (a) “sensing” unknown futures by identifying major environmental changes; (b) “seizing”, by making the correct choices in resource allocation; (c) “shifting”, through a continuous re-

newal of competencies. Hock et al. (2016) suggested how a “novelty-oriented cultural values” might improve meta-capabilities of strategic agility (strategic sensitivity, collective commitment, and resource fluidity) in order to innovate their business model.

Other authors pointed out the opposite. For example, Fourné et al. (2014), based on analysis of several Fortune 500 MNEs, identified and illustrated the strategic agility concept as a meta-capability that allows firms to implement three dynamic capabilities: (a) identifying local opportunities; (b) favoring global complementarities and, (c) appropriating local value.

Moreover, Gurkov (2017, p. 18) argued that agility is also “known as dynamic capability”, indicating that the two terms have somewhat overlapping meanings.

Similarly, Teece et al. (1997) argued that dynamic capabilities are the set of capabilities that provide a clear direction on how firms can assimilate, create and reconfigure internal and external knowledge to face agilely shifts in external business environments. As knowledge and its management is recognized as a key asset for multinational firms (e.g., Del Giudice et al., 2014), dynamic capabilities represent a portfolio of key organizational and managerial capabilities (e.g., knowledge management) that allow the firm to anticipate and shape the environment. This, in turn, allow MNEs to constantly develop new business models while renewing competencies to be agile in addressing new threats and opportunities (Teece et al., 2016; Pereira et al., 2018). This is also strictly related to the firm’s ability to transform their activities and business model to adapt them to different external contexts and create new products and services for different and heterogeneous markets (Doz and Kosonen, 2010).

Summarizing, to respond quickly to multiple heterogeneous and external environmental changes, MNEs need to develop adequate organizational agility in order to implement an agile strategy. Within this context, an important stream of literature showed how one of the key points in achieving organizational agility is the development of an ambidextrous organization (or ambidextrous capabilities). Ambidexterity is composed of two actions: exploration and exploitation (March and Simon, 1958). While the first one refers to the discovery of new knowledge (e.g., R&D) and to take advantage of new opportunities leading mainly to radical innovation, the second one, grounded mainly on existing knowledge (Nonaka, 1994), aims at developing incremental innovation (Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996).

Therefore, the mechanism of ambidexterity becomes a strategic imperative for an agile organizational structure, because “the strategic agility process entails contradicting efforts and tradeoffs between the use of resources for both routine processes and new business models” (Weber and Tarba, 2014, p.8). However, carrying out both these activities simultaneously appears to be paradoxical (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2010; Vrontis et al., 2017). Thus, an ambi-

dexterity may be a key capacity of an organization to balance and align systems and resources with mutually exclusive (or different) aims and processes. Moreover, this is a factor of company success, and researchers clearly recognize the limitations of pursuing just exploration (risking no knowledge gains) or just exploitation (risking obsolescence) (e.g. Mom et al., 2009). Consequently, overall company performance is linked to its ability to jointly pursue both orientations and develop associated dynamic capabilities (Li and Huang, 2012; Junni et al., 2015).

For example, a widespread problem within MNEs, nowadays, is the organizational tensions that arise between the capabilities that the company develops in different organizational units (e.g., subsidiaries), because they are associated with a strategic logic and different objectives (Chebbi et al., 2015; Bresciani and Ferraris, 2016). Hence, the related dissemination of knowledge can create problems among MNE subsidiary managers that aim to capture value locally and meet agreed targets while corporate managers aim at stimulating reverse knowledge transfer (from subsidiaries to HQs), avoiding the creation of islands of expertise that are not conducive to synergies (Fourné et al., 2014; Ferraris et al., 2017). An ambidextrous company manages to overcome organizational tensions in order to make the structure more agile and “open” thus creating more internal synergies (Santoro et al., 2019). In fact, Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008) underlined how the development of a climate based on creativity, sharing, communication, and coordination may be a key ambidextrous capacity leading to the achievement of organizational agility. Thus, it becomes clear how ambidexterity is a useful component for assuming flexibility and, consequently, organizational agility in order to elaborate concrete planning with a view to strategic agility. Summarizing, both ambidexterity and dynamic capabilities lay at the heart of, or it is strictly connected to, strategic agility.



### **3 A Conceptual Framework for “agile” multinationals**

Looking at the general literature on agility in IB contexts, different streams of studies focused on some key operational areas that enable firms to be agile in an international arena. This suggests that agility is not a stand-alone competence but a characteristic resulting from a cluster of competences that integrate adaptability, speed, innovation, sustainability and organisational resilience.

In this section, we propose a more comprehensive view of strategic agility by integrating agility in different operational areas that MNEs should look at if they want to become an “agile multinational”. They are Information Technologies (IT), supply chain and sustainable production. These are separate, established research streams, but they have not explored (in depth) how these could complement each other and help MNEs to become more agile. Only a few studies analyzed the strategic agility construct in combination with other strategy related factors, such as the required IT services and capabilities to enhance agility and similar implications of supply chain (SC) adaptations. One exception is the study of Mavengere (2013) which found that different IT capabilities are requested within the whole chain, showing how the promotion of “sensitivity” is more important downstream, while the relevance of “response” is more important upstream. Moreover, they showed how IT enhances collective capabilities that are indirectly and positively associated with strategic agility, making IT essential in achieving strategic agility along the whole supply chain (Karagouni et al., 2013; Alsaad et al., 2018).

In this context, we propose a preliminary conceptual framework that shows the key necessary conditions that firms need to take into account in order to achieve agility and international success through the development of strategic agility and strategic factors. Revising the literature on agility we found three well developed factors associated with agility: IT agility, supply chain agility (SCAGI) and agile and sustainable productions<sup>1</sup>.

#### **3.1 IT agility**

Nowadays, it is accepted that the possession of superior IT (information technologies) capabilities and skills within a company can improve different kinds of organizational performances. In fact, the wide use of information technology in multinational firms makes it easier to communicate among managers across functional and geographical boundaries, and im-

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<sup>1</sup> Literature on agility is huge and wide so we decided to focus on well-established and developed concepts and factors strictly connected to strategic agility in MNEs. Other factors, such as international marketing agility, were still not studied in depth so we decided only to cite and incorporate main findings later on in the paper.

proving coordination of multiple country activities that are associated with superior performance (Andersen and Foss, 2005). However, multinationals need to know how to be more agile in identifying and defending against market threats and in exploiting market opportunities. For example, big data analytics and related capabilities improve decision-making processes (Rialti et al., 2019) and, when combined with knowledge management capabilities, have been found to be associated with performances (Ferraris et al., 2019). However, MNEs' existing IT infrastructures may be a serious obstacle to the implementation of strategic agility (Sambamurthy et al., 2003; Lu and Ramamurthy, 2011). This is because many of these IT solutions and capabilities do not allow for flexibility and dynamism that is required to implement agile strategies, making IT a critical enabler or constraint for the achievement of agility in international businesses (Mooney and Ganley, 2007).

Within this domain, some studies connect IT capabilities to agility. For example, Lu and Ramamurthy (2011) found that IT capability enhances organizational agility, suggesting that IT capacity allows both market capitalizing agility and operational adjustment agility. In addition, they argued that a deep study of a company's IT capacity is essential for achieving agility (Lu and Ramamurthy, 2011).

Differently, Chen et al. (2014) explored the role of agility in business processes as a moderating variable on the relationship between IT capabilities and organizational performance, proving how an IT-based capability can generate a positive impact by creating flexible and reactive operations and processes. Similarly, Tallon and Pinsonneault (2011) aimed at exploring the relationship between alignment and agility performance under varying conditions of IT infrastructure flexibility. Despite market volatility, alignment helps rather than hinder agility and organizations may need to accept a less than perfect alignment between IT and business strategy to stay agile (Tallon and Pinsonneault, 2011). The results highlight a significant positive effect of the flexibility of the IT infrastructure on agility, thus suggesting that the alignment and flexibility of the IT infrastructure can act as complementary capabilities that facilitate agility.

### **3.2 Supply chain agility (SCAGI)**

As international supply chain management may be one of the key drivers of superior corporate strategy for multinational firms (Kotabe and Murray, 2018), in terms of its agility, the contemporary literature acknowledges "gaps in understanding and development of agility and flexibility in supply chains" (Fayezi et al., 2017, p. 379), directed mainly to contextual factors.

The concept of supply chain agility (SCAGI) (Sharp et al., 1999) highlighted the relevant role of the supply chain as a driver to respond quickly to market changes and customer needs, with the final aim to achieve agile operations. Ismail and Sharifi (2006) described SCAGI as a capability that allows the firm's network to meet unpredictable conditions that are constantly changing. Thus, the capacity to respond rapidly to altering external factors is emphasized in both definitions, and it can be traced across many of the agility definitions from the manufacturing domain (e.g., Vinodh, 2010).

Whereas some studies on SCAGI focused more on the potential outcomes, empirically testing and finding evidence of a direct and positive effect of supply chain agility on customer effectiveness and cost efficiency (Gligor et al., 2014), others focused more on the antecedents of SCAGI. For example, Gligor and Holcomb (2012a) analyzed how some behavioral/relational elements, such as coordination, cooperation, and communication affects SCAGI. The results showed that cooperation, surprisingly, does not directly affect SCAGI but does so indirectly, through coordination and communication, suggesting that aligned interests, although important, are not enough for quick adjustments of a supply chain's tactics and operations. Gligor and Holcomb (2012b) tried to find out the enablers of agile supply chains in establishing the role of logistics capabilities in achieving agility, and pointed out manufacturing flexibility, supply chain speed and lean manufacturing as key drivers.

From this perspective, international logistics can allow the firm to maintain operational synchronization as well as to reduce redundancy by linking systems and operational interfaces (Mentzer et al., 2004; Gligor and Holcomb, 2012b). This may result in the development of unique capabilities that should be even more important in an international context, driving MNEs to become more agile.

Differently, Christopher and Towill (2000) identified three key enablers of SCAGI: (a) the quality of supplier relationships; (b) a high level of shared information; and, (c) a high level of connectivity between firms in the supply chain. Moreover, Lin et al. (2006) make an important contribution in adding the mechanism of customer/marketing sensitivity to the most addressed factors related to relationships, integration and information, which can be seen as a form of dynamic capability (e.g. Parente et al., 2011).

### **3.3 Agile and sustainable productions**

Today, sustainability is a hot topic, in particular, with regard to MNEs (Burritt et al., 2018; Wettstein et al., 2019), and it has been coupled with agile productions (e.g. Vinodh, et al., 2010) and agility (e.g., Singh and Vinodh, 2017). In fact, modern multinationals have been

forced to transform their production pattern in to sustainable operations due to increasing product complexity and market dynamism. However, a few studies have examined how specific capabilities, managerial innovations or new behaviors influence sustainability, and particularly, how agility as a capability may influence sustainable productions (Belyaeva et al., 2016).

In this context, on one hand, agility and sustainability are “regarded as performance measures for contemporary organisations” (Vinodh, 2010, p. 1015). On the other hand, sustainability and strategic agility are both separately established research streams, but “researchers have focused on the areas of sustainability and agility individually, leaving unexplored (profoundly) how these could complement each other and help organizations become more efficient and competitive” (Singh and Vinodh, 2017, p.113). Therefore, going deep in to the literature on agility, we found many studies that suggest that the integration of sustainability and agility in productions leads the company to assume a better position and greater reactivity to external stimuli (e.g., Ivory and Brooks, 2018).

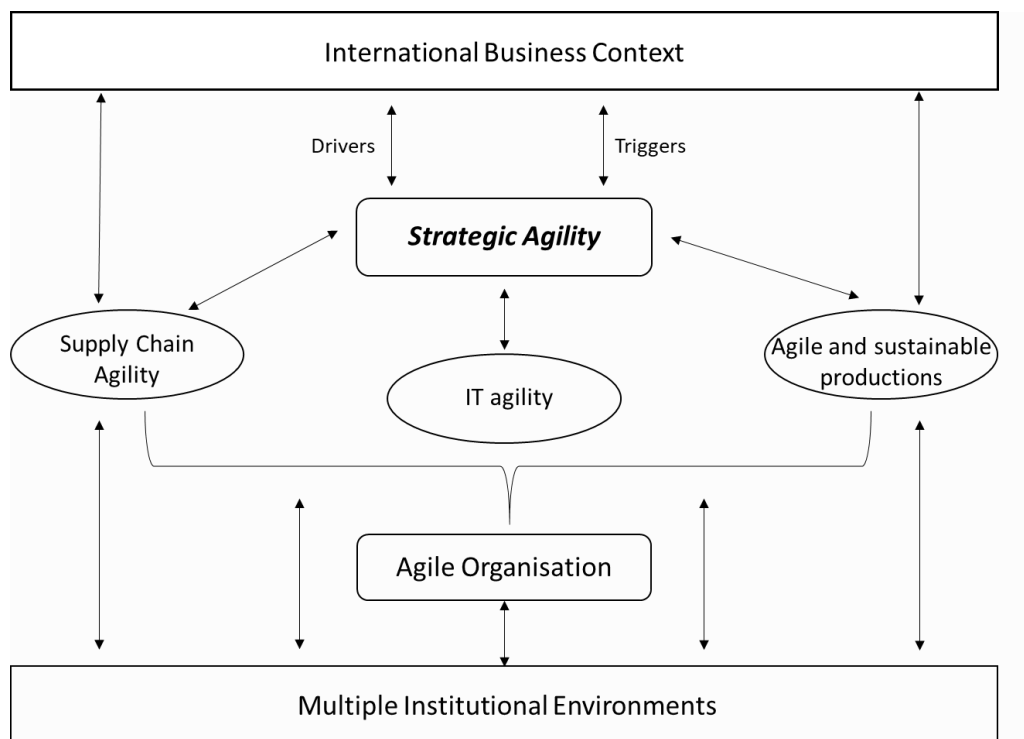
One potential answer is, for example, the development of agile manufacturing that represent a key condition in being flexible and agile. In fact, previous studies highlighted the agile manufacturing (AM) concept (Vinodh, 2010), which enables an organization to survive in the competitive environment of continuous and unanticipated changes by responding quickly to customers' dynamic demands (Vinodh et al., 2009). Agility is the key performance measure of AM practices and can be also conceived as the ability of an organization to produce a variety of products within a short period of time in a cost-effective manner; however, sustainability refers to minimizing the business's impact on the environment and increasing the rate of recycling materials. The integration of these two concepts offers several business benefits, such as improved product variety with minimal environmental impact; time compression coupled with cost effectiveness; survival in the competitive business environment (Ivory and Brooks, 2018). This has a great impact also on the MNC's corporate image and on stakeholders' relationships.

Within these studies, a group of researchers have been working on the incorporation of flexibility in manufacturing systems (e.g., Mehrabi et al., 2000), which can be conceived as a dynamic firm capability (Wu et al., 2013). Another group of researchers has been concentrating more on the deployment of lean manufacturing principles for developing AM infrastructure and exploiting the potentialities of IT. For example, Sarkis (2001) stated that AM is the combination of principles of lean and flexible manufacturing system and various agility perfor-

mance indicators, including customization, replaceability, robustness, effectiveness and product development flexibility.

In line with this reasoning, AM is the capability of a manufacturing system to respond quickly in accordance with the customers' dynamic demands, very often pursued by the development of SCAGI, as well as superior IT capabilities. As a consequence, we conclude our framework by arguing that sustainability of the productions should be generally embraced by MNEs and taken into consideration along with all the strategic factors proposed and incorporated within MNE agility strategies. Other key general contextual factors include the turbulent international business environment (e.g., Clauss et al., 2019), multiple institutional environments (e.g., Kostova et al., 2008). In Figure 1, the overall framework is graphically proposed.

FIGURE 1 – The conceptual framework for agile multinational firms



Source: own elaboration based on the literature

### Other articles included in the Special Issue

Previous discussion is mainly based on established literature that is grounded more on traditional MNEs. To provide new theoretical developments of strategic agility in MNEs it thus becomes really intriguing to analyze specific cases/contexts that are related to well debated and established International Business (IB) streams of literature, such as emerging market

MNEs (e.g. Kumar et al., 2018). We believe that all the articles included in this special issue made a valuable contribution in the field of IB and strategic management, highlighting specific features of agility in different MNEs or contexts of analysis. Summarizing, all these theoretical contributions seem to be highly generalizable also to traditional MNEs and specific cases (e.g. emerging market MNEs) make scholars more acknowledge on some key features that should be considered beyond the general framework we proposed in this editorial.

This special issue comprises four papers in addition to the current editorial. The first one is entitled “Strategic agility and international joint ventures: the willingness-ability paradox of family firms”. Debellis et al. (forthcoming) highlight the relevant role of international joint ventures in achieving strategic agility. In addition, they show how differently family MNEs (compared to non-family MNEs) pursue international joint ventures and how the three main components of strategic agility affect both the willingness and ability to establish and govern IJVs. More specifically, they argue that strong family emotional attachment reduces “strategic sensitivity”, creating a motivational gap in forming international joint ventures and thus preventing family firms from engaging in those international ventures. However, the authors show that family firms can overtake this motivational gap by gaining an “outside-in” perspective, through a full use of their board of directors. Once the motivational gap has been overcome, these companies may present unique characteristics that allow them to have superior “leadership unity” and “resource fluidity”, enacting the collaboration among firm members that lead them to make collective commitments in implementing IJVs.

In “Agile Route-to-Market Distribution Strategies in Emerging Markets: the case of Paraguay”, Boojihawon et al. (forthcoming) shed light on an underdeveloped aspect of agility, i.e. agile distribution strategies. Based on traditional food MNEs from USA (Mondelez International) and EU (Nestlé), the main contribution of this paper is to suggest how agility in distribution may be a new critical aspect that literature did not properly address in the past, in particular in dealing with specific issues in emerging markets.

In fact, the authors showed the factors that affect agile route-to-market (RTM) decisions that should be developed and implemented to enable strategic renewal and sustainability in such socio-economic contexts. The article fills an important gap in the strategic agility and international marketing literature by empirically finding evidences of the mechanisms through which MNEs enact and develop agile decisions at micro-market levels in dealing with continuous change and uncertainty. Their findings highlight several managerial capabilities underlying RTM agility (antecedents) that are: (a) market sensitivity and alertness (sensing); (b) accessibility and decisiveness (leveraging); and, (c) swiftness and flexibility in value capture

(appropriating). Moreover, they propose some local contextual influences (enablers) which affect the ways in which RTM strategies are defined and adapted that are regional, market segment-based, institutional, and distribution infrastructure-based adaptation influences. Thus, from an RBV and micro-foundational point of view, one key contribution to strategic agility is directed to international distribution strategies, and international marketing agility is proposed as a key organizational capability in emerging markets that integrate and extend the preliminary conceptual framework proposed in this editorial. In this context, strictly connected are the roles played by regional distribution strategies of MNEs in designing and implementing international marketing strategies to understand how agile RTM tactics and strategies are enacted and adapted at micro-market levels, balancing global autonomy and local coordination with strategic agility in sensing, leveraging and appropriating value capture across the MNEs' global distribution networks.

Golgeci et al.'s (forthcoming) contribution, "Linking Agility to Environmental Sustainability of Emerging Market MNEs: The Mediating Role of Individual Creativity and Flexible Work Arrangements", investigates the relationship between operational agility and environmental collaboration, mediated by individual creativity and flexible work arrangements. The specific topic is valuable because both developed and emerging market MNEs are nowadays forced to adopt more flexible and agile approaches to enhance collaborative processes geared toward environmental sustainability. This because they need to couple with multiple institutional pressures and social concerns in heterogeneous and culturally different contexts. Through a multilevel approach and building on the international human resource management and learning literature, the article reports that operational agility of MNEs is positively associated with environmental collaboration and that individual creativity and flexible work arrangements of MNE managers mediate the aforementioned link. The authors provide empirical evidence on the fact that agility positively influences a firm's ability to collaborate with stakeholders to reduce its environmental footprint. Moreover, this article contributes in closing a gap in the agility literature by adding knowledge on micro-level antecedents of agility within MNEs (i.e., employee-level factors). Thus, this study is a significant addition to nascent agility research in international business/management literature, as it tackles how emerging market MNEs apply their operational agility to support environmental collaboration through their managers.

The last paper is "Investigating Investments in Intangible Assets and Agility Strategies in Overcoming the Global Financial Crisis - The Case of Indian IT/BPO Offshoring Firms" developed by Pereira et al. (forthcoming). Looking at our framework for agile multinational

firms, the authors add an important aspect that is critical in the achievement of strategic agility, i.e. intangible assets, that may be conceptually valid for every kind of MNEs due to its intangible nature. In fact, the authors analyze the investments in intangible assets as well as the management and leadership practices carried out by MNEs operating within the information technology and business process outsourcing (IT/BPO) that supports the core tenets of strategic agility at a time when the global financial crisis (GFC) occurred.

Using a two-phase mixed methodology, the authors quantitatively show that the higher the investment in intangible assets by Indian IT/BPOs, the greater their technological performance, implying that organizational capabilities, knowledge and learning have resulted in strategic agility that helped the firms to face GFC. They also argue that agility, as a concept, is evident during periods of deep uncertainty. This analysis continues, further explaining the “how” and “why” of their findings through a qualitative analysis. These findings supported the main ideas that firms that had invested in market-sensing, learning and development, and critical data driven capabilities are more able to develop and take advantage of its strategic agility capability. More specifically, the authors report interesting quotes from top managers that support main meta-capabilities of strategic agility: (a) strategic sensitivity that allows MNEs, through their external market and learning orientations, to better sense the expressed and latent needs of the market, especially in response to the changing macro-environment during the GFC; (b) resource fluidity, quickly re-allocating resources and responding to the market changes, using insights they had gathered through extensive working with their clients across geographies on a number of core and new or diverse projects, as well as other internal capabilities (i.e., quality management capabilities), in order to deliver on the changes that the market demands; (c) leadership unity, even more important and fundamental, has been found as a necessary condition to implement the other two meta-capabilities and, thus, strategic agility. Leadership was able to make decisive and informed decisions, especially during and post-GFC in order to sustain growth and deliver on technological performance.

### **Contributions, concluding discussion and future lines of research**

MNEs are increasingly seeking to improve agility “as the capacity of an organization to efficiently and effectively redeploy/redirect its resources to value creating and value protecting (and capturing) higher-yield activities as internal and external circumstances warrant” (Teece et al., 2016, p. 17). As highlighted in this article, agility clearly extends the concept of flexibility and is associated with speedily sensing and responding to opportunities and threats in the business environment (Mao et al., 2015, p. 361).



This introductory paper revises key studies on agility in international companies, proposing definitions of strategic agility and highlighting its main aspects and its relation to dynamic capabilities, ambidexterity and flexibility of business processes and organizational activities (Ferraris et al., 2018a). We also position the concept of strategic agility within a framework that holistically includes other conduits to the achievement of an “agile multinational enterprise”. This recommends that MNEs develop strategic agility through agility in different operational areas (IT, SC and sustainable productions), thus facilitating MNEs to achieve their “agility” objectives.

This paper makes some major contributions. First, it proposes a new conceptual “agility framework” for MNEs, highlighting main and interrelated factors that drive MNEs to pursue agility. These key building blocks have mainly been addressed separately within mainstream literature without providing a fine-grained picture of the agility concept in MNEs (e.g., Doz and Kosonen, 2008a). So, the need to couple strategic agility with agility in IT infrastructures, supply chain (and distribution channels along the value chain), manufacturing operations (and sustainable collaborations), as well as with the development of intellectual capital and through international joint ventures, have been highlighted and underlined in the present article in order to effectively achieve strategic agility outcomes.

Second, we extend the literature on strategic agility in MNE as well as the literature on dynamic capabilities by giving a more comprehensive representation of this relevant phenomenon. In this regard, we argued that strategic agility is a dynamic capability composed of a combination of different organisational meta-capabilities that lead a company to develop organizational flexibility. In this paper, we theoretically discussed the main key capabilities related to or influence by strategic agility in the context of modern MNEs in nowadays VUCA world (Reid et al., 2016). We are in line with some scholars (e.g., Doz and Kosonen, 2010; Ivory and Brooks, 2018), arguing that strategic agility comprises organizational and managerial competences that allow the firm to anticipate and shape the environment, constantly renewing competencies to quickly address new threats and opportunities (Teece et al., 2016).

Third, it has been recently argued that, in terms of corporate sustainability, there are few studies that highlight theoretical perspectives in order to understand the association of strategic agility and business sustainability at organisational-level (Ivory and Brooks, 2018). This research pointed out that strategic agility and MNE sustainability are mutually instrumental for long-term success in both local and international business environments. However, the discussion thus far demonstrates that we have very limited insights on the individual or reciprocal impacts of extant strategic agility and sustainability literature and practice on the progress

of different functional areas of international business management (see Chen et al., 2009 for a fine-grained picture).

With this regard, we may draw on stakeholder relationship management literature in offering diverse implications for both business sustainability and strategic agility. In fact, this stream of literature highlights the way through which firms proactively leverage stakeholder relationships and engagement in order to fully exploit the wide-ranging potential of the varied contexts of strategic agility (Axon, 2016) and business sustainability (Shams, 2016). Within it, Shams (2016, p. 676) argued, “the cause and consequence of stakeholder relationships and interactions, as a stakeholder causal scope (SCS)” aims to nurture strategic sensitivity, collective (stakeholder) commitment and resource fluidity in order to plan, implement and monitor agile decision(s) in response to the incipient trends and to sustain businesses in the international markets.

Recently, Gurkov et al. (2017) argued that an important requisite for strategic agility is the ability to see stakeholders (customers, suppliers, technology partners, investors, etc.) as suppliers of key resources for business development. The search for local partners – especially when the proposed partnership is simultaneously exploitative (seizing existing market opportunities) and explorative (creating new market opportunities) – amounts to identifying local entities that are both agile and persistent (Gurkov et al., 2017). This could be a very interesting avenue for future research.

In addition, this article enables future studies on agility-related fields of research. In line with Mao et al. (2015), limited information is available on the extent to which organisational knowledge management capabilities could affect strategic agility. Knowledge management researchers should try to connect their studies to the concept of agility starting with conceptual works aimed at developing the potential effects between these two well-known concepts (Shams et al., 2019). For example, it could be interesting to analyze the mechanisms developed by HQs to promote strategic agility within MNE’s subsidiaries located in different host countries and their effect on innovation and reverse knowledge flows (Ferraris et al., 2018b). Moreover, borrowing from the human resource management (HRM) literature, future studies should conduct in-depth quantitative analysis to understand the “human side of agility”, for example making frontline staff members aware of the changes so that they can be more efficient in their interactions (or transactions) with customers (Crocitto and Youssef, 2003). Very recently, e Cunha et al. (2019) developed an HRM oriented framework to highlight how improvisational capabilities may improve strategic agility of MNEs.

Furthermore, there are ongoing calls for new theories of management decision support systems (DSS) to develop greater knowledge from broader contexts in order to proactively include all organisational members and available infrastructure and technology in the DSS (Clark et al., 2007). Usually, strategic agility is crucial for developing better insights into the dynamic business environments and how the organisational members, infrastructure and technology could better be integrated in a firm's overall DSS (Chen et al., 2014). However, little is known on this issue, and some authors (e.g. Arbussa et al., 2017) argue that more research is needed to explore appropriate strategic agility-driven business models to productively and promptly support business firms' DSS in regard to the diverse perspectives of different organisational settings in local and international markets. For example, the approach to volatile, complex and ambiguous environments started a new stream of research in international business on value-based and agile business models (Holbeche, 2015). Thus, strategic agility may be the solution to proactively include all members of the organization and the infrastructure and technology available in the DSS (Clark et al., 2007).

In terms of strategic agility and risk, or uncertainty, management, researchers argue that "strategic responsiveness often fall beyond what is considered to be acceptable risk" (Reid et al., 2016, p. 151). Considering the prospective business risks and uncertainty, proactive agile decisions are imperative to avoid marketing myopia; however, few studies have analyzed the intersection of strategic agility and marketing myopia in order to plan, implement and monitor strategic renewal decisions (a notable exception is Johnston, 2009). Still, more studies are needed to connect marketing to agile strategies (as recently emphasized by Li et al., 2019), particularly in the context of emerging market multinational companies (EMNCs), distinguishing the different underlining capabilities that lead to international success (e.g., Kothari et al., 2013; Gomes et al., 2017). Very recently, Osei et al. (2019) found out that international marketing agility strategy and capabilities are crucial in developing relationships, being socially responsible and being innovative allowing them to compete nimbly in the VUCA world.

Concluding, we think that having in mind which are the key factors underlining an "agile" MNE could be helpful both theoretically, stimulating new research in this exciting domain, and practically, in reducing business risks associated with multiple and culturally different business environments.

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