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Mapping the Scientific Landscape of International Business: Trends, Gaps, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

Tracing where the field has been is a prerequisite for charting where it should go next. Guided by that logic, this study offers a bibliometric review of international business scholarship to gauge its integration with the administrative sciences. We began with 542 Scopus-indexed publications published between 1977 and August 2024 and, after removing 41 outside the study's scope, analyzed the remaining 501 using quantitative and bibliometric techniques. Two broad lines of inquiry emerged: (1) environmental forces shaping international business and (2) internal functions: marketing, human resources, finance, and operations, that mirror classic management subsystems. The corpus also revealed uniquely international business issues such as export-import procedures, customs regulations, and global logistics. Overall, the evidence portrays international business as a specialized and interconnected branch of administrative science, rather than a standalone discipline. The thematic map that emerges from this analysis not only identifies areas that remain underexplored but also offers a foundation for future research that seeks to address global challenges, support strategic decision-making, and inform managerial practice.

Keywords: International business, Administrative Sciences, Scientific publications.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in transportation and information technologies have profoundly transformed international trade, dismantling the barriers of distance and time. Cross-border transactions now move faster and more efficiently, while spanning a far broader spectrum of activities—from digitized supply chains to global service platforms—that raise business complexity and compel firms to rethink how they operate across multiple markets. Globalization has woven markets, industries, and supply chains across borders into a seamless web (Karelina & Baykov, 2022). As a result, international trade now extends well beyond the movement of physical goods. It now demands regulatory harmonization, cross-cultural coordination, sophisticated international financing, and strategic decision-making that unfolds on a truly global stage.

Despite the field's ongoing evolution, scholars remain divided over whether international business deserves recognition as an independent discipline or should be viewed simply as a specialization within the broader administrative sciences. Proponents of full disciplinary status argue that international business builds on its theoretical foundations and that the distinctive practical challenges of cross-border operations shape the field. Others, however, see it as a specialized offshoot of the broader field of management studies, shaped by the unique challenges of operating across borders (Felzensztein et al., 2020). This conceptual divide shapes how university curricula are designed and directs the priorities that dominate current research agendas.

To succeed in today's global environment, international business professionals must begin by mastering the practical dimensions of cross-border trade, such as exports, trade finance instruments, logistics coordination, and customs compliance (D'Angelo et al., 2023). However, operational expertise alone is no longer sufficient. Executives must also weave the four classical

management functions: planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, into their work at both the strategic and operational levels. Competing in global markets likewise demands a clear view of political risk, cultural differences, economic fluctuations, and diverse legal frameworks. Addressing this complexity calls for a systems perspective that links external conditions to internal decision-making and performance, as Oña-Sinchiguano (2020) emphasizes.

As firms venture into foreign markets, the human resource landscape grows markedly more intricate. In today's global context, success depends more than ever on the ability to lead multicultural teams, coordinate diverse work practices, and promote leadership styles that genuinely value inclusion. These shifting demands underscore the evolving role of human resources—from a traditional administrative function to a strategic force for adaptability and organizational transformation (Obedgiu, 2017). Cross-border talent management, which spans recruitment, development, motivation, and performance appraisal, has therefore become a core executive competence.

Operational coherence hinges on a company’s ability to satisfy production commitments while adhering to global standards. Managers must synchronize lead times, quality assurance, legal compliance, and logistics so that they align with both foreign partner expectations and external regulatory mandates (Afonichkina et al., 2020). Any mismatch in these areas can sap efficiency and undermine the firm's long-term competitive position.

Doing business across borders introduces layers of transactional complexity that are often absent in domestic markets. Executives juggle a demanding mix of tasks: parsing dense documentation, navigating multiple payment platforms, tapping trade-finance tools, and staying within the legal boundaries that govern international contracts (Lee, 2023). On top of these challenges, currency volatility remains a constant threat—sudden exchange-rate fluctuations can rapidly erode profit margins, making sophisticated hedging strategies and risk-management capabilities essential for sustainable operations (Kumar et al., 2019).

Because of these challenges, managers need both broad and specialized accounting and finance expertise. Core accounting practices support cost monitoring, revenue recognition, and compliance with international reporting standards (Van Dyke, 2011). At the same time, international business leaders must be fluent in trade finance products, global tax regimes, and transfer-pricing regulations to protect financial sustainability and satisfy regulatory demands (Mukherjee, 2018).

Marketing across borders also requires a two-pronged strategy. On one hand, practitioners need specialized skills: selecting entry modes, managing cross-cultural messaging, and building brands that resonate in multiple markets (Thaichon et al., 2019). On the other hand, they still rely on the fundamentals of the discipline: segmentation, consumer-behavior analysis, positioning, and the complete marketing-mix toolkit. Blending these advanced capabilities with core principles is essential for steering through the cultural and economic complexity of global markets (Smith, 2014).

Against this backdrop, the present study treats international business both as an applied arena and as a distinctive specialization within the administrative sciences. Its primary aim is to map the Scopus-indexed literature on international trade and business, gauging how closely its concepts and methods align with or diverge from mainstream business-administration research. This synthesis sheds light on the extent to which international business functions as an integrated subfield or an autonomous discipline in its own right.

DEVELOPMENT

As Jurado (2018) explains, scientific management has its roots in Frederick W. Taylor's groundbreaking time-and-motion studies, which laid the groundwork for a systematic pursuit of workplace efficiency. Taylor's focus on task optimization, standardized procedures, and incentive-based pay not only cut production costs but also helped establish management as a field of scientific inquiry.

Henri Fayol broadened this foundation by proposing a more comprehensive framework. His 14 administrative principles, including division of labor, unity of command, and centralization, remain cornerstones of management theory. Fayol also identified four fundamental managerial functions: planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, and divided organizational activity into six areas: technical, commercial, financial, security, accounting, and administrative. These classifications paved the way for the functional specialization that underpins modern organizations.

The next major turn in management thought came with the Human Relations School, a reaction against the mechanistic focus of early scientific management. Sparked by the Hawthorne Studies, this school highlighted the decisive influence of employee motivation, social interaction, and leadership style on organizational outcomes. Management theory thus moved beyond purely technical prescriptions to embrace psychological and sociological insights, casting the administrator not only as a coordinator of tasks but also as a facilitator of human relationships.

The decades following World War II saw the rise of the Mathematical, or Quantitative, School. By weaving statistical analysis, computer modelling, and optimisation techniques into managerial decision-making, it revolutionised logistics, production scheduling, and inventory control. This movement gave birth to operations research and decision sciences—fields that still anchor contemporary management theory and practice.

In the second half of the twentieth century, management scholars, drawing on Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s general systems theory, reimagined organizations as open systems that constantly exchange resources and information with their surroundings (Félix, 2003). From this viewpoint, inputs, processes, and outputs are continually shaped by external forces, while internal subsystems: finance, marketing, operations, human resources, and others, interact dynamically to drive overall performance. This systems lens set the stage for holistic, integrative management models suited to an increasingly complex and interconnected global economy.

Later theoretical work pushed this contextual view even further. Contingency theory, for example, argues that there is no universally "best" way to organize or manage. Instead, a firm's effectiveness depends on how closely its managerial choices match specific conditions—its size, technologies in use, market volatility, and prevailing cultural norms (Oña-Sinchiguano, 2020). In short, firms must tailor their organizational design and practices to their specific operating context.

By the late twentieth century, a new wave of thinking broadened the horizons of management research. Complexity theory, in particular, emerged as a response to business environments that were growing more volatile, uncertain, and tightly interwoven. Paucar-Cáceres and Jerardino-Wiesenborn (2020) argue that organizations function as complex adaptive systems, marked by nonlinear interactions, emergent behaviors, and constant evolution, making flexible, adaptive management essential for navigating perpetual change and uncertainty.

Methodological advances complemented these ideas and strengthened core organizational functions. Process planning has matured into end-to-end supply-chain management—a coordinated system that synchronizes suppliers, manufacturers, and distributors across global networks (Shen et al., 2020). Likewise, marketing has moved past a strictly product-centric view toward a relational approach, prioritizing long-term customer engagement and the co-creation of value (Thaichon et al., 2019).

Human resource management (HRM) has changed dramatically: once confined to transactional paperwork, it now acts as a strategic partner that aligns talent policies with organizational goals and competitive advantage (Obedgiu, 2017). Quality assurance has followed a comparable trajectory: comprehensive quality-management systems have replaced the earlier focus on end-of-line inspection, weaving preventive controls into every phase of production and service delivery (Hamid et al., 2019).

However, these managerial subsystems —marketing, operations, human resources, quality, and others— have not advanced in lockstep. Their evolution reflects differing organizational priorities, industry demands, and external pressures. Moreover, some functions did not arise organically within firms and are still unevenly institutionalized. Areas such as innovation management or industrial property stewardship, for instance, emerged to address specific technological and competitive challenges and remain underdeveloped or inconsistently practiced across organizations (Guerra Betancourt et al., 2013).

Newer managerial specialties: environmental management (Ormazabal et al., 2017), information management (Aliev et al., 2022), and technology management (Wu et al., 2020), have expanded the administrative toolkit in response to sustainability goals, digital transformation, and knowledge-based competition. Despite their strategic relevance, many firms still handle these functions piecemeal, exposing a persistent gap between theoretical progress and day-to-day practice.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has undergone a parallel rise to prominence. As Silva et al. (2016) note, CSR now serves a dual purpose: protecting economic interests while meeting

broader environmental and social expectations. This shift moves organizations beyond a purely profit-driven mindset toward holistic models that integrate sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and ethical governance. Today's CSR agendas include environmental stewardship, community engagement, fair labor standards, and transparent governance, each designed to align business goals with society's long-term well-being in response to growing pressure from regulators, consumers, and civil-society groups.

Internationalization —the purposeful extension of a firm's activities beyond its home borders— often advances in step with a broader commitment to corporate social responsibility. As Felzensztein et al. (2020) note, entering foreign markets is far more than a logistical maneuver; it forces firms to rethink their value proposition, cultivate new alliances, and reposition themselves within a different competitive landscape. In practice, companies pursue internationalization to unlock fresh growth trajectories, exploit comparative advantages, and weave themselves into cross-border supply and innovation networks. Nevertheless, only organizations with adequate resources, adaptive capacity, and managerial know-how can manage the attendant cultural adaptation, regulatory compliance, and risk-management challenges. For that reason, internationalization has become a specialized domain within administrative studies.

At the same time, researchers have continued to classify and reclassify the branches and functions of management science to capture this growing complexity. According to Félix (2003), several taxonomic proposals have been advanced in the literature, most of which adopt a functionalist perspective. Scholars use these classifications to map an organization's internal architecture by breaking managerial work into specialized domains —finance, marketing, operations, human resources, and strategy— each supported by its tools, theories, and best practices. Such taxonomies not only facilitate a clearer understanding of the division of labor within organizations but also help structure academic curricula and research agendas. However, globalization and rapid technological change have woven organizational functions so tightly together that we now need more integrative, dynamic classification systems, frameworks capable of capturing the whole, multifaceted reality of modern business administration.

METHODOLOGY

We began the study with a thorough search of the scientific literature on *international trade* and *international business*. Using the search terms outlined above, we pulled 542 records from Scopus, covering publications from 1977, the first year that met our criteria, through August 2024. A careful relevance screening then eliminated 41 papers, leaving a final analytical corpus of 501 documents.

The study followed a three-stage protocol designed to maximize rigor and validity. **Stage 1.** Database Construction: We built a reliable dataset with a carefully specified search equation. **Stage 2.** Review and Classification: Two levels of expert review assigned each article to a thematic category based on its title and keywords, with a third round resolving any discrepancies. **Stage 3.**

Information Processing: We applied bibliometric software, descriptive statistics, and visualization tools to track research trends, topical emphases, and temporal evolution.

Together, these steps gave us a clear map of international business scholarship and showed where it intersects with the wider administrative sciences.

Database creation

We assembled the dataset using Scopus, selected for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed business and management research. To isolate studies on international commerce, we searched the title, abstract, and keyword fields with this Boolean string:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY("International Business") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY("international trade") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY("foreign trade"))

The search returned 542 records, covering 1977 —the first year with a relevant entry— through August 2024. We next ran each item through an initial relevance check, keeping only those whose focus aligned with our objective: analyzing international business as a field situated within, or closely connected to, the administrative sciences.

After screening the initial corpus, we set aside 41 papers that either strayed from our theme or lacked methodological rigor. The remaining 501 studies became the bedrock of our classification and analysis, giving the bibliometric map both clarity and depth.

Classification of publications

We classified the selected publications based on the subject matter addressed in each article, inferred primarily from their titles and keywords. We treated these metadata elements as dependable signals of each publication's thematic focus—a practical choice given the study's bibliometric scope and the large number of records

. To keep the classification both rigorous and consistent, we followed a structured, multi-stage review protocol. First, we split the 501-article corpus into five manageable subgroups. Working within an inverse-pyramid framework, a subject-matter expert then reviewed each subgroup and assigned every article to the thematic category that best captured its core focus. Two independent reviewers then audited those assignments in a second tier, flagging any inconsistencies or ambiguous cases. When disagreements arose, three additional experts activated a third tier, revisited the contested items, debated alternative interpretations, and reached a consensus.

Running the classification through three layers helped us curb individual bias and bolster the reliability of the thematic codes that underpinned our later analyses of temporal trends and topic distribution.

Processing

We examined the classified database with a mix of quantitative methods and specialized software, giving us a detailed view of trends, patterns, and topic clusters in international business research. For geographic analysis, we relied on the Bibliometrix package in RStudio —a standard

in bibliometrics for visualizing collaboration networks, country-level output, and citation flows. This tool pinpointed leading publication hubs, revealed cross-border co-authorship patterns, and highlighted regions with scant scholarly activity. Once classification was complete, we ran the full dataset through a broader set of descriptive statistics programs to flesh out the remaining analyses.

We used these analyses to see how often each thematic category appeared and to trace how research output has shifted over time. Visualization tools then helped us plot those trends and spotlight which topics dominate the field.

Two central research questions guided the analytical process:

- How are the investigations distributed by areas or topics? This question aimed to reveal the thematic composition of international business research and identify which dimensions, such as marketing, policy, law, management, or globalization, have received more sustained scholarly attention.
- What has been the behavior over time of the investigations by topic? This question sought to uncover temporal trends, highlighting emerging areas of interest, under-researched topics, and the stability or variability of research attention across the decades.

The use of both quantitative and visual analytics allowed for a robust interpretation of the data, setting the foundation for the discussion of knowledge gaps and the formulation of future research agendas in the domain of international business and administrative sciences.

RESULTS

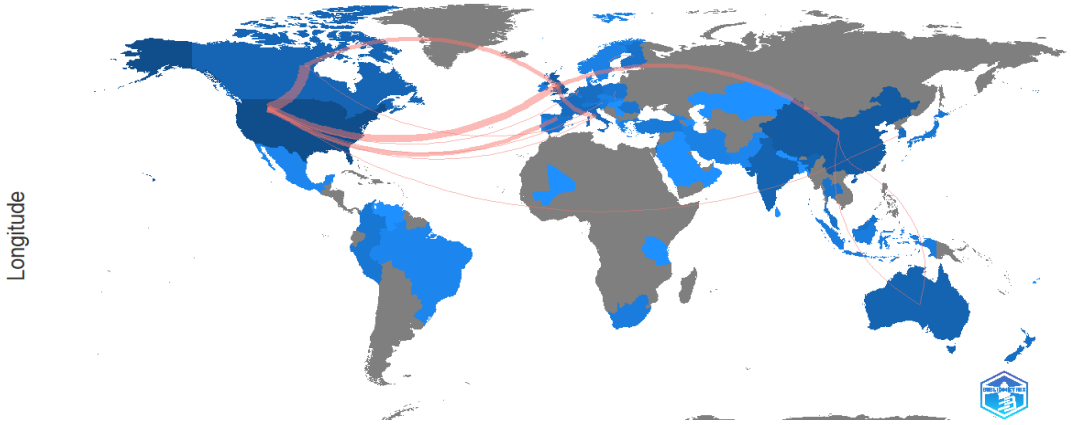
Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the geographical distribution of the publications analyzed, along with the collaborative linkages identified between countries in co-authored studies. This spatial mapping reveals significant asymmetries in the global production of scientific knowledge related to international business.

A small group of countries produces most of the publication output.. The United States, China, the United Kingdom, and India together produce much of the scholarship on the topic and sustain dense networks of international collaboration, highlighting their central role in the field of international business.

By contrast, contributions from many nations —especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Eastern Europe, and Latin America such as Chile and Argentina— are scarce. Their limited presence likely stems from structural hurdles: inadequate funding, fragile research infrastructure, and the low international visibility of locally published journals, all of which constrain scholarly production and dissemination.

Figure 1.

Geographic distribution of publications on international business



Note: Biblioshine

While the figure offers a helpful snapshot, our expertise confirms that international business scholarship remains thin in many parts of the world. Unlike other areas of management research, its knowledge base is still clustered in just a few countries, leaving little space for the regional insights that could enrich theory and practice.

Closing this gap will take research networks that are both more inclusive and geographically broader. Bringing fresh voices from understudied regions into the conversation would not only enrich the global agenda but also reveal the on-the-ground challenges businesses face in emerging and underrepresented economies.

Among the 501 articles we reviewed, only nine qualify as bibliometric studies. Each adopts a meta-level view of the field, tracing how scholarship on international trade and business has evolved and where it now concentrates. For example, Singh et al. (2024) chart the latest research trajectories in foreign trade, Ohlan et al. (2024) examine the scholarly dialogue surrounding the World Trade Organization, and Castagnoli et al. (2022) analyze how Industry 4.0 has redirected research priorities within international trade.. Other bibliometric studies spotlight cross-border intermediaries (Virtanen et al., 2023), zoom in on sector-specific patterns such as the textile industry (Lacka et al., 2020), or track how sociopolitical shifts reshape trade flows and practices.

Beyond these bibliometric pieces, we identified seven articles classified as case studies, rich, in-depth looks at individual firms, sectors, countries, or international business strategies. These works blend narrative reconstruction with empirical analysis to illuminate how organizations operate in global markets. Fell's (2006) qualitative study of a telecommunications firm's expansion uncovers the nuanced choices and obstacles that remain hidden behind the numbers. By grounding theory in lived experience, case studies like this add the contextual richness that macro- and meso-level quantitative work often overlook, bringing the mechanics of international business into sharper focus.

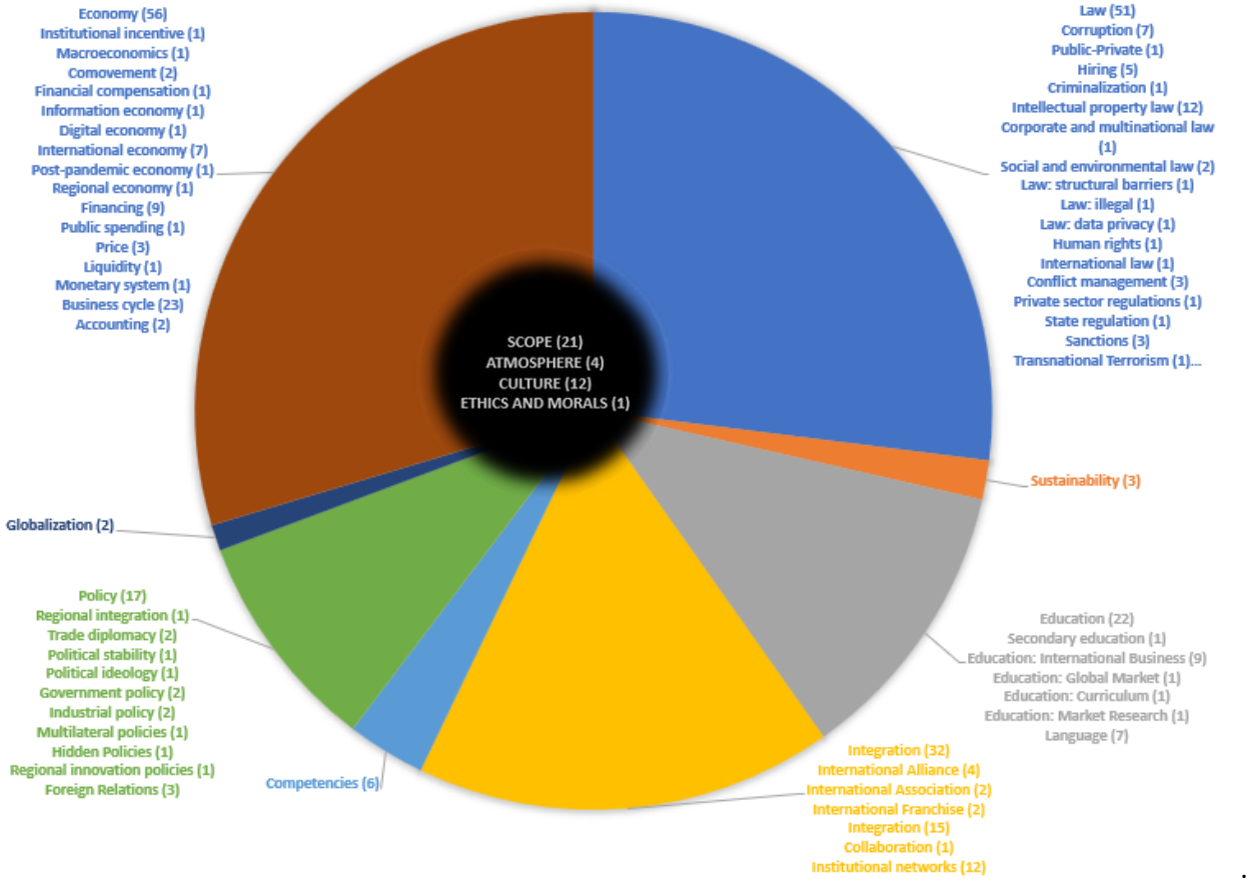
After removing the 16 specialized studies, we examined the remaining 485 articles and traced how their thematic focus has evolved. Our review shows that international business scholarship typically operates at two levels of analysis.

1. At the macro-environmental level, scholars examine how external forces—economic systems, political institutions, legal frameworks, cultural norms, and environmental conditions—shape the way firms operate across borders.
2. The organizational level involves the internal dynamics of firms and reflects the classical subsystems of administrative sciences**,** such as management, finance, marketing, operations, and human resources. We examine these areas through the lens of how internationalization alters or redefines managerial priorities and functional strategies.

Figure 2 graphically presents the structure and interrelation of the variables classified under the macro-environmental domain. This framework clarifies how the literature conceptualizes external forces as determinants of international business success or failure.

Figure 2.

Structure of the variables specific to the environment



Organizational theory reminds us that firms operate within complex external environments that shape their strategies, day-to-day effectiveness, and long-term viability. Researchers typically capture this context with a wide set of variables that together define the opportunities and constraints of international business.

Within our corpus, several studies adopt a broad view of the environment. Davies (2015), for instance, describes the international landscape as an intricate web of forces that stretches managers' strategic capabilities. Other work narrows the focus to specific dimensions:

- Natural environment. Chen et al. (2024) examine how green trade policies and ecological impacts influence Chinese investment in African economies.
- Culture. Van Herk and Torelli (2017) analyze how national and organizational cultures shape bargaining styles, leadership norms, and consumer preferences.
- Ethics. Neiman (2013) applies a social-contract perspective to explain firms' ethical obligations when operating abroad.
- Globalization. Karelina and Baykov (2022) show how digital platforms and integrated services can magnify transnational competitive advantages.
- Human capital. Beaudreau (2016) links cross-national competency differences to comparative advantage and trade performance.
- Sustainability. Kourula et al. (2017) document the ways corporations weave environmental and social goals into their global strategies.

Together, these studies reveal how diverse environmental forces —economic, political, legal, cultural, ecological, and technological— interact to shape the practice of international business.

At a finer level of detail, researchers probe how government action and public policy can either spur or stifle cross-border trade. The work ranges from studies of macroeconomic regulation and industrial policy to analyses of legal-rule harmonization. Hartwell et al. (2024), for instance, show how populist movements reshape the policy landscape for multinationals and influence corporate choices. Other scholars zoom in on more specific levers: the initiatives of multinational and regional trade blocs (Davidson, 2003), the tools of commercial diplomacy (Tanganelli & Pou, 2012), and the way political stability, or the lack of it, recolors trade flows and foreign investment patterns.

Together, these contextual factors underscore that institutions, cultures, ecosystems, and politics are not mere backdrops; they actively configure —and often constrain— global strategy. The literature also flags a second cluster of forces: economic variables that steer firm behavior and market dynamics. Some studies, such as Jang (2020), trace how business cycles modulate trade volumes and capital flows in open economies. Others focus on monetary frameworks —fixed versus floating exchange rates— and how they tilt competitiveness and external balances (Kumar et al., 2019).

Research also tracks how accounting systems have evolved, especially in early modern trade, underscoring the value of transparent, standardized reporting (Van Dyke, 2011). Scholars likewise take the pulse of regional and global economies—often in the aftermath of crises such as the "pandenomic" transformation documented by Fomicheva et al. (2023).

Legal frameworks shape international business just as forcefully. Scholars dissect the contractual mechanisms that govern cross-border transactions (Lee, 2023) and examine the intellectual-property safeguards that protect innovation (Ogunmokun, 2017). Others highlight the intercultural skills needed to resolve disputes, as Darling and Heller (2011) demonstrate in the Chinese context. At the opposite extreme, researchers chart the hazards posed by corruption (Mukherjee, 2018), trade-related crime (Bublik et al., 2015), and even transnational terrorism, revealing the darker side of the legal terrain that firms must navigate.

Together, these findings make clear that legal and ethical compliance is not only a statutory obligation but also a strategic concern.

Education is gaining similar attention. Sánchez and Geisler (1994) argue that secondary-school curricula should weave in international-business content, while Christensen et al. (2021) demonstrate how people-centred computing courses at university level broaden participation. Beyond formal programs, specific competencies remain critical: foreign-language fluency smooths negotiations (Schroeder, 2018), and training in international market research equips firms to enter or expand abroad (López-Cadavid et al., 2020).

Having covered the macro-environmental factors, the discussion now turns to the internal structures and functions that equip organizations to compete on the global stage. Figure 3 illustrates the organizational-level variables studied in the literature, which align closely with classical and contemporary perspectives of business administration. At the most general level, some works conceptualize the firm itself, be it national or multinational, as a dynamic unit embedded in the global economy. Examples include analyses of multinational trade forecasting using advanced algorithms (Shen et al., 2021) and evaluations of free trade zones as mechanisms for incentivizing business under favorable conditions (Huang et al., 2010).

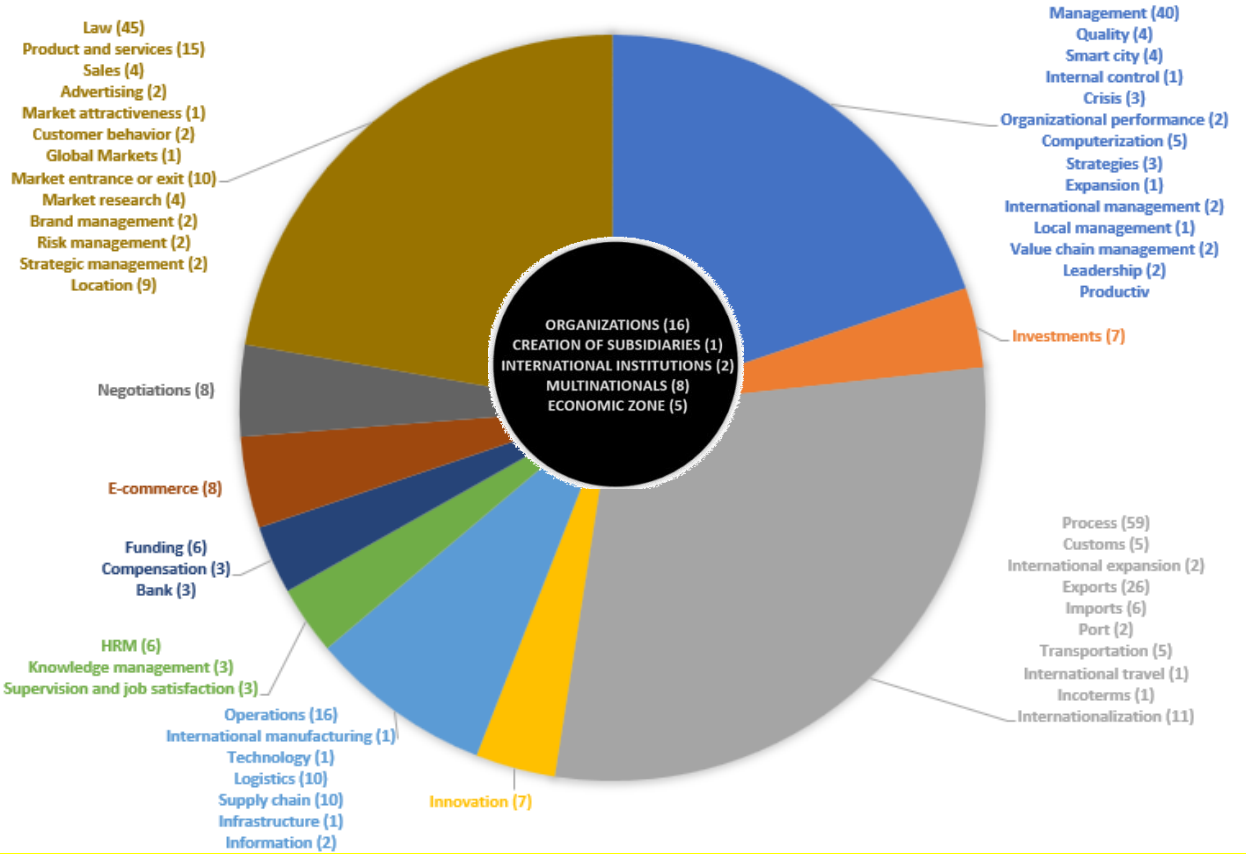
At a second level, the literature addresses specific management functions and performance dimensions. For instance, crisis management and risk management are addressed both as reactive and strategic capacities, the latter emphasized by authors like Carr (2019). The organizational commitment to social responsibility also remains an area of inquiry, especially in contexts where the alignment of profit motives with societal goals is expected of firms (Grosu, 2011). Other studies focus on output indicators such as productivity (Serrano & Myro, 2020) and quality management (Semenets et al., 2022), which serve as proxies for the effectiveness of internal systems and processes.

Finally, numerous studies examine the functional subsystems of management and often emphasize how researchers adapt them to international contexts. In human resources, Liu et al. (1998) show how Taiwanese multinationals manage talent in their overseas subsidiaries.

Innovation-management research by Hervé et al. (2020) demonstrates that digital tools can serve as a springboard for SMEs seeking to scale internationally. Operational studies, whether on infrastructure planning (Nekhoroshkov & Nekhoroshkov, 2018), logistics coordination (Afonichkina et al., 2020), or information-systems design (Aliev et al., 2022), converge on a single insight: sustained global competitiveness hinges on achieving and maintaining operational excellence.

Figure 3.

Structure of the variables specific to the organization



Marketing stands out as the most frequently examined function in the international business literature. A large share of studies probe how marketing choices determine the fortunes of cross-border ventures. Smith (2014) finds that entering international markets often sparks technological innovation. Hietala et al. (2019) add that careful product design is essential for meeting global consumer expectations and respecting cultural norms. Advertising research echoes this theme: Oh et al. (2013) document the challenges of positioning brands amid diverse cultural and regulatory settings.

Other marketing inquiries tackle distribution and sales strategies, critical levers for entering and scaling in foreign markets. Baena-Rojas et al. (2022) demonstrate that information and communication technologies can streamline negotiations in international contracts, while Shen (2022) uses advanced analytics to assess the performance of cross-border e-commerce. Together, these studies reveal how traditional marketing principles are merging with the digital transformation, reshaping global markets.

Negotiation, a skill set tightly intertwined with marketing, receives considerable attention in the literature because it underpins global selling and sourcing. Blagoeva et al. (2020) show that successful bargaining across borders hinges on institutional logic, cultural norms, and communication styles—factors that demand sharp intercultural savvy and strategic agility.

Beyond broad strategic questions, researchers have examined the operational mechanics of cross-border transactions. Export studies (Ali et al., 2021) and import analyses (Smith, 2014) alike stress the need to navigate regulatory frameworks, market-access requirements, and risk-mitigation instruments. Customs compliance has proved equally intricate: D'Angelo et al. (2023) show how customs valuation rules overlap with EU transfer-pricing regulations, highlighting the legal and fiscal complexity that underpins international trade.

A handful of papers delve into more specialized issues: international business travel, cross-border logistics, and the legal or financial wrinkles of global mobility. Collectively, this work fleshes out the transactional infrastructure that links strategic ambition to day-to-day execution.

These themes, and their shifting prominence over time, are laid out in Table 1, which tracks topic-level publication trends across the study period. These data show not only which themes have consistently attracted scholarly attention but also which topics are still emerging—insights that can help shape future research agendas.

Table 1 makes the pattern clear: politics, marketing, economics, management, core international-business processes (exports, customs, negotiations), and education dominate the record year after year. Their steady presence suggests that these clusters form the backbone of international business scholarship in the Scopus database.

Even these leading themes rarely attract more than seven papers in a single year. Such modest numbers suggest a field that, despite its diversity, remains fragmented and only moderately productive compared with other branches of administrative science. Furthermore, the data indicate that no topic maintains an uninterrupted yearly presence, meaning that even highly represented categories experience fluctuations and intermittent gaps in publication frequency. These patterns confirm that international business is still a relatively young field in search of sustained depth and continuity. Key subjects, among them infrastructure, sustainability, financing, talent management, and the cultivation of competitive capabilities, appear only intermittently, leaving noticeable gaps in the literature and clear avenues for future inquiry.

Table 1.

Behavior of publications by year and topic

	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	Total	Continuity factor
Policy	1		2							1	1	4	3	1	3	1	7	6	4	1	4	5		2	6	5	1	2	3	1	64	0,73
Marketing	5	3		2		2			2	4		4	2	2	1	5	2	4	1	4	2		1	3	2	4	2	2		1	61	0,77
Economy	7		1		1	1	2	4		1	1	3	1	1		4		3	2	4	3	4			3	3	2	3	2		56	0,73
Law	1	1		1	2				1	1		1	2	1	2	4	3	1	1	2	3	2	3	5	3		2	5	4	1	52	0,80
Process			2	1			1	1		5	3	2		2	1	1	2	1	2	4	2	1	3	1	5	2	5	4	6	1	56	0,80
Management	1		1	1	1	1		2	3			3	6	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	4	1	2	3	42	0,83
Education				1	1	1					2	1		1	3	1		1	1	1	1			1	2	1	1		2	1	23	0,60
Globalization	3	1		1		1	1				1	1	1	1				1		1	1		3	1	1	1	1			1	22	0,60
Operation				1					1	3				2	1	1	1	2				2	1	1				2	1		19	0,43
Organization									3	2		1		1		1			1				1			2	2	1	1	16	0,37
Culture	1							1			2			1		1	1	2	1					2		1	1	1		15	0,40
International trade										1													1		1		2	2	1	8	0,20
Negotiation															1	1			1		2	1				1	1			8	0,23
Innovation									1			1	1	1	1			1									1			7	0,23
Investment	1															1			2	1			1	1						7	0,20
Competence																		1	2			1	1			1				6	0,17
HRM				1								1	2	1				1												6	0,17
Environment								1	1		1			1									1				1		1	1	8	0,27
Financing																										1		1	1		3	0,10
Sustainability							2			1																					3	0,07
Infrastructure																	1														1	0,03
Total	20	5	6	9	5	6	6	9	12	19	11	22	18	17	15	22	18	25	19	19	19	16	17	18	24	19	23	27	26	12	483	

The temporal analysis shows that scholarship still clusters around a few well-trodden themes, while several emerging or structurally important areas remain thinly explored and lack longitudinal depth. Closing this gap will demand systematic, long-term research that addresses both the established topics and these underexamined frontiers, especially as globalization and digitalization continue to reshape the contours of the world economy.

The breadth of topics—from marketing and political economy to education and legal structures—underscores the systemic character of management that Félix (2003) describes. Modern organizations hinge on tightly interwoven specialized functions, and the literature mirrors that interdependence. Seen through the lens of complexity theory, firms emerge as open, adaptive systems that continuously realign their internal subsystems while responding to external forces (Oña-Sinchiguano, 2020).

The literature traces more than a century of management thought, moving from the early days of scientific management and classical administrative theory to socio-technical systems, quantitative modelling, and contingency perspectives. Thanks to this broad lineage, scholars now examine not only the classic functions of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, but also newer domains such as human-resource management, logistics, and innovation. As Paucar-Cáceres and Jerardino-Wiesenborn (2020) point out, the field's strength lies in its ability to absorb fresh ideas while staying grounded in its core principles.

Over the past few decades, scholarly output has risen steadily, especially in politics, marketing, economics, law, operations, management, education, and globalization. Just as striking is the widening geographic spread: international business research is no longer limited to a handful of traditional hubs. Much of the momentum now comes from universities in emerging economies, where targeted policies and capacity-building efforts have expanded research support (Metwally & Nyathi, 2017; Ngulue & Ngulube, 2015).

Nevertheless, despite this growth, several strategically important areas remain underdeveloped. Topics such as International Trade, Negotiation, Innovation, Investment, Competition, Human Resource Management, Environment, Financing, Sustainability, and Infrastructure appear only sporadically in the literature and lack the systematic and longitudinal exploration needed to consolidate them as mature lines of inquiry. The research agenda shows apparent gaps: without sustained attention to these emerging themes, the field struggles to tackle pressing global challenges such as digital transformation, climate change, and inclusive economic growth.

At the same time, international business and foreign trade, though distinct in some respects, still lean heavily on the broader administrative sciences. As Felzensztein et al. (2020) point out, many of the field's core tools—strategic planning, financial analysis, supply-chain coordination, marketing management—are refinements of general-management principles. This overlap suggests that international business is best understood not as an isolated discipline, but as a specialized branch of mainstream business administration.

Taken together, these findings highlight the need for more cohesive, in-depth scholarship in international business. Future research should close current thematic gaps, engage with emerging globally relevant issues, and adopt inclusive practices that capture diverse regional perspectives. By doing so, the field can mature into an integrated, resilient, and context-aware discipline that better informs managerial practice and public policy in an increasingly dynamic global economy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that research on foreign trade and international business is still in its formative stages, even as it gains momentum within the broader administrative science landscape. Although publication numbers have climbed—especially in marketing, political economy, economics, and globalization—the field still shows uneven coverage and depth. Sustainability, finance, infrastructure, and negotiation, for example, appear only sporadically in the literature and have yet to receive the sustained, systematic study they warrant.

Taken together, the evidence positions international business as a specialized branch of mainstream management, not an independent discipline. Its main concerns—marketing, human resources, operations, and strategy—draw directly on the foundations of management science. Recognizing this conceptual and methodological overlap underscores the need for research that integrates general and international perspectives instead of treating them as separate domains.

However, this study is not without limitations. The most significant constraint lies in its descriptive nature, which, while helpful in mapping the thematic landscape, does not allow for causal inference or advanced analytical modeling. Additionally, we excluded 41 publications from the initial dataset because they were irrelevant to the object of study, which raises concerns about the precision and recall of the search strategy employed through the Scopus database. Keyword searches, on their own, can miss key studies—a deeper methodological

blind spot. To paint a fuller picture, future bibliometric reviews should combine several retrieval strategies. Even with this limitation, our findings offer practical guidance: they portray international business as a tightly woven system shaped by many external forces. For entrepreneurs and managers expanding abroad, the thematic map we present works like a compass, pinpointing which organisational functions and environmental conditions researchers have examined thoroughly and where significant gaps still lie. Armed with this insight, practitioners can adapt management models to the realities of each international market.

Future research should deepen the analysis of underrepresented topics, incorporate longitudinal and comparative perspectives, and expand the inclusion of regional voices, particularly from emerging economies. In doing so, the academic field of international business can evolve into a more inclusive, methodologically diverse, and practically relevant discipline, capable of addressing the dynamic challenges of globalization and cross-border management.

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