

**Breaking New Ground in International Management Research
with Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)**

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Background

Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is a set-theoretic analytical approach for applying the rules of logical inference to determine which logical implications the data supports (Fiss, 2011; Ragin, 2008). Originally developed by Charles Ragin in the 1970s, the QCA method has been regarded as one of the major methodological breakthroughs in social science (Gerring, 2011). In contrast to conventional, variance-based methods (e.g., regression techniques), QCA is designed to allow for conjunctural causation, equifinality, and causal asymmetry whereby the researcher is urged not to “specify a single causal model that fits the data best (as one usually does with statistical techniques), but instead to determine the number and character of the different causal models that exist among comparable cases” (Ragin, 1987: 167). Such

an analytical logic can realize the spirit of configurational theories in international management (IM) research, which embraces the notion that IM phenomena are often “multidimensional constellation of conceptually distinct characteristics that commonly occur together” (Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993: 1175; Fiss, 2007).

The past decade has witnessed the burgeoning of IM studies using QCA to rethink and extend some well-established theories by offering new insights, including with regards to typological and taxonomical perspectives. Since Pajunen (2008), one of the scholars who firstly applied fuzzy-set QCA (fsQCA) in an international context, IM researchers have increasingly utilized this method. For example, Crilly (2011) contributes to stakeholder theory by offering a mid-range theory to explain when a foreign subsidiary prioritizes different kinds of stakeholders. Bell *et al* (2014) advances the concept of nested legitimacy through studying valuations of initial public offerings of foreign firms in the U.S. Witt and Jackson (2016) adopt QCA to study the “varieties of capitalism” perspective. Cui *et al.* (2017) reconsider the awareness-motivation-capability framework and generate a taxonomy of emerging market multinational enterprises (EMNEs) engaging in strategic-asset-seeking foreign direct investment (FDI).

However, compared to other social science disciplines, IM research is far from fully embracing configurational theorizing and methods, despite its high potential for breaking new (and old) ground in IM theory and research (Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020). Further, the diffusion process of QCA among IM scholars has been accompanied by a series of debates about best practices, such as the concerns about control variables, case sensitivity, the Black Box problem, the temporality problem, and the sensitivity of robustness analyses (e.g., Paine, 2016, Rihoux & Ragin, 2008; Thiem, Spöhel, & Duşa, 2016). For example, recently, a debate has emerged about the use of non-observed cases (logical remainders) in QCA, which relates to choices about whether to use parsimonious or intermediate solutions (Baumgartner & Thiem, 2020; Duşa, 2019). There are good primers for the general use of QCA (e.g., Greckhamer *et al.*,

2018), but at the same time, there is further room for clarification, consolidation, and illumination of advances in the application of QCA.

Aims and scope of this special issue:

This special issue of *Journal of International Management* aims to advance the application of QCA in the IM field in two important ways. First, because many IM phenomena are inherently complex, QCA, an analytical approach that embraces causal complexity, can enable the IM scholarly community to deepen understanding of IM issues and, thus, make significant improvements to existing IM theories. As Fainshmidt et al. (2020: 455) note, “the mismatch between the nature of the empirical phenomena studied on the one hand, and hypothesis formulation and empirical methods deployed on the other, explains why many quantitative empirical studies in IB are overly reductionist, relying on hypotheses that assume linear (or simple, curvilinear), unifinal, and symmetrical effects.” QCA and configurational thinking are flexible and can accommodate inductive, deductive, and abductive inquiry. Such an approach enables IM scholars to critically evaluate existing IM theories as well as formulate new ones, particularly regarding IM issues for which existing theories do not provide satisfactory explanations. Second, although management scholars increasingly apply QCA to study organizational phenomena (Furnari et al., 2020), there are ongoing methodological debates and advancements that could inform and benefit from the IM community. Accordingly, we see opportunities for IM scholars to engage with the evolution of QCA, including through novel, cutting-edge applications and the process of refining best practices particularly in the context of IM research.

Potential Topics

This special issue welcomes submissions within, but not limited to, the following three tracks.

Track A: Revisiting IM theory/research with QCA.

In 2008, Ragin promoted the QCA methodology (including crisp-set QCA and fuzzy-

set QCA) as a way of “redesigning social inquiry”. Inspired by this call, many IM scholars have been deepening our understanding of some well-established theories. To continue this trajectory, we call for studies leveraging configurational theorizing and the associated application of QCA to revisit established notions, theories, and pertinent issues in IM literature. Some example questions in this track might be:

- How does a shift to configurational theorizing and analysis change our understanding of classical IM theory?
- How does embracing an approach undergirded by causal complexity enable the refinement of existing theoretical explanations of well-known IM issues?
- How can we use QCA to evaluate propositions, frameworks, and theoretical tenets in IM research that other analytical approaches do not permit?

Track B: Breaking new ground in IM research with QCA.

Some IM phenomena are marked by complexity and, thus require an appropriate theoretical and analytical approaches to address them. This can relate to well-known IM issues but also to recent developments in IM reality. For example, a recent study by Patala and colleagues (2021) breaks new ground in our understanding of the energy transition by applying fsQCA to explaining renewable FDI. This is a novel phenomenon that also necessitates configurational apparatus. Without QCA, the insights of that study would have likely been untenable. We, thus, welcome submissions of QCA studies that shed light on novel IM phenomena or that build novel theory for the IM field. Example questions might be:

- How can we embrace a mid-range theory building process to significantly advance IM research?
- How can QCA be applied to explain emerging IM phenomena and issues, including those related to the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in a way that propels new theory development in the IM field?
- How can the utilization of QCA and configurational thinking give rise to novel frameworks and theories, including taxonomies and typologies, that open new

research avenues and lines of inquiry in IM studies?

Track C: QCA practices and novel applications in the IM field.

As Marx, Rihoux and Ragin (2014) suggested, critical reflection and cyclical consolidation are necessary to promote the rigor and usefulness of QCA. Hence, we invite submission that address pertinent debates, provide exemplary applications of various and novel forms of QCA, and further help establish methodological rigor beyond existing primers, all in the context of IM research and phenomena. Example topics in this track might be:

- What are the best practices in conducting QCA, particularly in the IM context and beyond the many existing primers on such practices?
- How can IM scholars incorporate temporality, repeated measures, measurement equivalency, and contextual specificities in QCA studies?
- How can relatively unusual applications of QCA be conducted rigorously to provide valuable insights in the IM field?

Meet the Editors Webinar:

The guest editors will organize a special webinar focusing on developing the ideas and papers intended for submission. We plan to hold the webinar for this special issue in March-April, 2022. The details of the webinar will be announced in due time.

All interested contributors will have an opportunity to present their work (at any stage of development) for discussion. Participation in the webinar is not a guarantee of acceptance of the paper for the special issue; it is neither a requirement for consideration of papers for inclusion in the special issue. A proposal with no more than 10 pages (excluding Tables/Figures, and References) is required for attending the webinar. The deadline for submitting the webinar proposals is planned on **15th February 2022**. Proposals can be submitted to one of four guest editors via email.

Submission Process:

Authors can submit their paper between **1st June -31st July 2022** to JIM for review.

All papers will be subject to a double-blind review process. The special issue is expected to be published in late 2023. Papers for this issue should be prepared as per the Journal's guidelines available at:

https://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/601266?generatepdf=true

Authors should submit an electronic copy of their manuscript via the journal's online submission system via <https://www.editorialmanager.com/intman/default.aspx>

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