Navigating institutional terrains: home-country institutional agent boundary spanning and brokerage in SME B2B internationalization

Valerie Lindsay
Abu Dhabi School of Management, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
Michel Rod
Faculty of Business, University of New Brunswick, Saint John, Canada
Nicholas Ashill
School of Marketing and International Business, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand, and
Matt Raskovic
Auckland Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

Purpose – Grounded in the theoretical foundations of institutions, boundary spanning and brokerage and SME internationalization, the purpose of this paper is to examine how home-country institutions (HCIs) facilitate the post-entry internationalization of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) through home-country institutional agents (HCIAs) in a business-to-business (B2B) context. The authors seek to explore how HCIs influence post-entry SME internationalization through the boundary spanning and brokerage activities of the agents that represent them.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors present a qualitative study exploring the boundary spanning and brokerage activities of HCIAs located in both the home and host country using 100 in-depth, semi-structured, elite informant interviews. This study explores how HCIAs influence the type and nature of institutional support for post-entry internationalization of SMEs from the home country of New Zealand to the two large emerging host markets, China and India. They offer a novel perspective by investigating the role of HCIAs, representing institutions at the micro level and operating in both home and host country, in supporting the internationalization of SMEs.

Findings – The findings of this study demonstrate that HCIAs, working in both home and host country locations, assume boundary spanning and brokerage roles when connecting SMEs with relevant actors to supply the requisite knowledge for successful post-entry internationalization. Key findings highlight how specific HCIAs, representing a range of HCIs, facilitate institutional support to SMEs in their post-entry development. This study explores the mechanism of boundary spanning and brokerage used by these agents in connecting relevant actors involved in the internationalization of SMEs from New Zealand to China and India. This study demonstrates how specific HCIA types, different boundary spanning activities and the home or host country location of the agents of the HCIs facilitate this process.

Originality/value – The authors offer a novel micro-level examination of institutional support for SME internationalization, focusing on the activities of specific agents representing their respective HCIs. This study shows that these HCIAs use boundary-spanning and brokerage activities to connect and facilitate key interactions between SMEs and relevant actors in the host market. Further, the authors highlight the little explored roles and activities of HCIs located in the host market in the context of SME internationalization. Specifically, they show different contributions by home and host-based institutional agents and differentiate between the types of boundary spanning objects used and the associated outcomes for the SMEs. The originality of the findings of this study is evident in their contributions to the institutional, boundary spanning and brokerage and SME internationalization theoretical domains.

Keywords SME internationalization, Brokerage, Boundary spanning, Institutional agents

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) internationalization (Scuotto *et al.*, 2020) is enabled and constrained by the institutional environment (Dickson *et al.*, 2013). How SMEs navigate the institutional environment of the host country and

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at: **https://www.emerald.com/insight/0885-8624.htm**

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
41/13 (2026) 380–400
Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 0885-8624]
[DOI 10.1108/JBIM-04-2025-0366]

© Valerie Lindsay, Michel Rod, Nicholas Ashill and Matt Raskovic. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/

Funding: Foundation for Science Research and Technology (PROJ-13674-SET-VICLINK).

Received 21 April 2025
Revised 29 May 2025
8 February 2026
18 August 2026
Accepted 24 August 2026

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

associated challenges for post-entry internationalization is not clearly understood (Haase, 2026; Zahoor and Lew, 2021). This study aims to cast light on the role of home-country institutions (HCIs) in supporting SME internationalization in the post-entry stages, with a particular focus on the mechanism by which this is achieved. Specifically, this study explores the role of institutional agents, representing their HCIs, in facilitating post-entry internationalization of their home-country SMEs and the mechanism by which these agents provide institutional support.

Institutions, often understood as "rules of the game" (North, 1990), are a dominant focus of international business research (Aguilera and Grøgaard, 2019), as well as business marketing research (Yang and Su, 2014). While prior studies have focused largely on host-country institutions, more recent work has examined the roles that HCIs (Chan and Pattnaik, 2021) and domestic networks (Solberg and Durrieu, 2023) play in SME internationalization. Existing research also highlights the role of government agencies in supporting SME internationalization (Crick and Lindsay, 2015; Sima *et al.*, 2025). However, exactly how HCIs help facilitate SME internationalization, including from developed to emerging markets, warrants further research. As initially espoused by North (1990, 1994), institutions cannot, in themselves, enact anything; rather, institutional influences and outcomes reflect the activities and beliefs of the human agents representing them. Hence, it is important to examine the institutions and the actors engaging in institutional activities separately (Melo Brito, 2001). In this paper, we refer to the institutional actors as reflecting the micro-level view of institutions, and this is a key context within our study. These institutional agents, providing institutional support and acting on behalf of their respective HCIs, are referred to in this study as home-country institutional agents (HCIAs).

Internationalizing SMEs require knowledge about host markets (Martin *et al.*, 2022; Gabrielsson *et al.*, 2026) and acquire this directly or vicariously through others (Ali *et al.*, 2020; Perera *et al.*, 2026). Knowledge acquisition is a necessary step in SMEs' access to host-country resources (Dickson *et al.*, 2013). To enable the effective management of cross-border relationships in terms of efficient exchanges and legitimacy (Barry *et al.*, 2021), host-country actors must also understand the SME's HCIs. Heeding calls for new empirical insights (Buckley and Casson, 2021; Ghauri *et al.*, 2021) on B2B SME internationalization, we examine the ways that HCIAs enact their respective institutional frameworks to support SME internationalization. Specifically, we explore how already internationalized SMEs acquire the necessary support from their HCIAs in either, or both of, the home and host country through particular boundary spanning activities and brokerage strategies, to continue their international development.

Our study makes three main contributions to the existing literatures on institutions, SME internationalization and boundary spanning and brokerage. First, we contribute to institutional theory by using a micro-level lens to examine how institutional agents (HCIAs) provide institutional support for internationalizing SMEs. To date, literature on institutional research predominantly treats institutions as macro-level structures (Cherchem *et al.*, 2026). Our study shows that the influence of institutions is enacted through individual institutional agents, reflecting a micro-level perspective. This addresses an existing research gap in our understanding of the process by which institutional roles are enacted (Jupille and Caporaso, 2022) and follows North (1990, 1994) emphasis on institutional actors as central to this enactment.

Our second contribution lies in providing insights into how boundary spanning and brokerage activities of the HCIAs facilitate their institutional support for internationalizing SMEs. This reflects a novel theoretical perspective on the mechanism linking institutions and SMEs in the internationalization process. Specifically, our study highlights how micro-level HCIAs work across international boundaries to support B2B SME internationalization by assuming the roles of boundary spanners and brokers. In so doing, HCIAs connect SMEs with relevant host country actors to acquire requisite knowledge for successful post-entry internationalization. Typically, boundary spanning and brokerage research has focused largely on organizational employees, managers and inter-organizational relations. Here, we use boundary spanning and brokerage approaches to examine how institutional representatives (HCIAs) connect key actors in the process of SME internationalization.

Third, we reveal that, in addition to their activities in the home country, HCIAs based in the host country play a crucial role for internationalizing SMEs, particularly in the latter post-entry stages. Existing research on institutions and internationalization largely addresses either home- or host-country institutions and their respective actors (Lu *et al.*, 2014; Mogos Descotes *et al.*, 2011). But seldom does it explore the support provided by HCI actors located in the host country, such as trade development offices and consulates. This highlights an important finding that HCIs continue to be important for SMEs post-entry through their agents being physically located and embedded in the host markets. Extant research suggests that HCIs are important in the pre-entry stage of SME internationalization (Chopra *et al.*, 2024; Tinits and Fey, 2022), and that these SMEs interact primarily with host country institutions post-entry. Seldom does this research consider the role of HCIs located in the host country. Hence, this finding addresses an important gap in the literature. Our contribution significantly extends current understanding of the role of host-country-based HCIs in post-entry internationalization of SMEs.

In addition, our study provides detailed findings relating to the outcomes of the HCIAs' activities experienced by internationalizing SMEs. We show that particular outcomes are associated with specific HCIA types, different boundary spanning and brokerage activities, different boundary objects used and HCIA location in the home or the host country. These elements add a finer-grained perspective on existing research on the outcomes of government support for SME internationalization, such as the provision of market information (Torres *et al.*, 2016).

We next review the relevant literature and present an initial conceptual framework. An analysis of rich qualitative data from SMEs and HCIAs involved in post-entry internationalization in India and China then follows. This leads to an expanded conceptual framework, on which we base a discussion of the contributions of this study and the theoretical and practical implications relevant to B2B marketing and SME internationalization. We conclude this paper by discussing the limitations of our research and some possible future research directions.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Institutions and internationalization

Various disciplinary perspectives attest to the role institutions play in international business (Aguilera and Grøgaard, 2019). The sociological view defines institutions along regulative, normative and cognitive dimensions (Scott, 2013). North (1990) defines them as formal (i.e. laws) and informal (i.e. cultural values and norms). The formal (regulative) institutions include a country's political, legal, economic and financial systems enacted by institutional agents, such as government departments, consulates and legal entities.

Normative institutions include accepted norms, values and legitimacy in doing business. Normative institutions are manifested through organizations like business councils, industry associations, professional support organizations and other organizations that impact a firm's business activities (Ngo *et al.*, 2016). Cognitive institutions correspond to a country's social and cultural environment and its social and cognitive processes (Scott, 2004). They represent the social and cultural knowledge, conceptions, beliefs and schemas shared by a country's people and other actors, creating frames of reference and meaning that govern the nature of social reality (Scott, 2013). The roles of national and business culture and norms have been investigated in the context of B2B marketing (Yang and Su, 2014).

2.2 Home and host-country institutions

The impact of institutions on internationalization has been researched in multinational enterprises (MNEs) (Cavusgil, 2021; Gaur *et al.*, 2014) and, more recently, SMEs (Marano *et al.*, 2016; Sima *et al.*, 2025). However, research on the importance of institutions in both the home and the host country in firm internationalization is limited (Wu and Deng, 2020). Internationalization studies incorporating HCIs largely focus on their influence in the home country. These overlook the fact that many HCIs, such as government agencies, consulates, trade offices, Chambers of Commerce, as well as home-country foreign subsidiaries, may also operate in host countries (Ngo *et al.*, 2016), providing a range of direct and indirect trade and international business support (Kahiya and Delaney, 2022). Hence, exploring the respective roles played by HCIAs in both the home and host countries can provide insights into the micro-level activities of HCIs and the support they provide. Recent research has further demonstrated how changes in formal and informal institutions can alter SMEs' access to international markets (Makhmadshoev *et al.*, 2026). However, considerably less attention has been directed toward the micro-level agents through whom institutional support is enacted.

A key issue for internationalizing firms is how to overcome institutional distance and its influence on market entry and subsequent post-entry performance (Hernandez and Nieto, 2015). Institutional distance is usually greater between developed and emerging markets, with the latter's institutions being considered less open and "weaker" (Peng *et al.*, 2009). Hence, institutional distance represents barriers to SME internationalization, especially between developed and emerging markets, and mechanisms to reduce this distance are paramount.

2.3 Institutions and small and medium-sized enterprises

SMEs typically lack internationalization knowledge and experience, resources and/or legitimacy (Magnani and Zucchella, 2019) and generally rely on external sources to help compensate for these deficiencies (Torres *et al.*, 2016). There is a sizable body of research on government support that focuses on providing assistance for SMEs to facilitate access to market information, financial support and/or incentives and mentorship (Sima *et al.*, 2025; Torres *et al.*, 2016). With notable exceptions (Crick and Lindsay, 2015; Pacheco and Matos, 2022), the impact of government assistance in areas such as trade negotiations, trade missions and diplomatic interactions is less prominent. A likely reason for this is the predominant interest of research on the initial stages of internationalization, rather than the later post-entry stages when more macro-level government assistance may be more beneficial (Tinits and Fey, 2022).

Other institutions may also offer support for SME internationalization, in addition to that provided by government assistance programs, (Costa *et al.*, 2017). For example, industry-level influences on SME internationalization are receiving more research attention, especially those from industry associations (Ngo *et al.*, 2016), trade promotion organizations (Malca *et al.*, 2020) and industrial business organizations (Costa *et al.*, 2017). With the emergence of digital platforms accessible to SMEs (Zhang *et al.*, 2025), industry associations can play a more important role in their internationalization (Costa *et al.*, 2022).

2.4 Boundary spanning and small and medium-sized enterprise internationalization

Boundary spanning is the process of interfacing between the organization and its external environment (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). Boundary spanners are socio-economic agents at the intersection of two or more organizations performing an "equilibrating" entrepreneurial role (Gurau *et al.*, 2020). As dually embedded agents within their organizations and in other inter-organizational relationships, boundary spanners usually possess unique orientations and motivations otherwise lacking in the organizations or partners they are connecting (Hald, 2012). Learning is a key outcome of boundary spanning, but how learning occurs across boundaries remains ambiguous (Santistevan, 2022).

Boundary spanners "build common ground" between disconnected entities (Levina and Vaast, 2005, p. 294). Such actors have distinct competences and skills for navigating complexity, facilitating linkages and negotiating different demands and perspectives (Levina and Vaast, 2005). They also require an in-depth understanding of the business and socio-political environment and context (Keszey, 2018). Boundary spanning occurs at different levels of an organization or in different areas (Brass *et al.*, 2004). It is enacted via boundary objects that can be adapted to specific local needs, but still maintain their original identity (Star and Griesemer, 1989). These boundary objects are artefacts that carry knowledge and embody specific expertise (Vakkayil, 2014) and include websites, workshops and market reports.

Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2014) classify boundary spanning activities in terms of *scouting* (information and resource access provision), *coordination* (facilitating actor coordination), *buffering* (protection from external environment disruptions and

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

distractions) and *bringing up the borders* (facilitating integration among the important actors). These activities are not sequential; rather the boundary spanner can engage in one or any of the activities, depending on their role and access to relevant actors. Internationalizing SMEs are typically reliant on boundary spanners because of their own limited resources and capabilities. They often lack specific experience, knowledge and/or connections, particularly when the institutions in the target country are considerably different to those in their home country. MNEs are quite different in this regard, as they often possess the resources and capabilities to engage in boundary spanning themselves (Santistevan, 2022).

2.5 Brokerage and small and medium-sized enterprise internationalization

Brokerage is the act and/or process of connecting two or more actors through boundary spanning. However, the act of linking two or more actors is a necessary but insufficient condition for brokerage, as this does not automatically translate into knowledge exchange, learning and other synergies (Kwon *et al.*, 2020). Boundary spanning and brokerage are, therefore, different, but complementary. Brokerage involves an agentic matching process which further supports the resulting relationships beyond the initial match. In this process, brokers may use various boundary objects that support mutual exchanges between involved actors, especially learning, which is the primary brokerage outcome. Thus, while all brokers are boundary spanners, boundary spanning requires brokerage if benefits are to be gained to sustain the relationship over time (Kwon *et al.*, 2020). Effective brokerage is especially important across environments with high institutional difference and/or environment turbulence (Collins-Dogrul, 2012). Brokerage is necessary for SMEs lacking market information, knowledge of international business and social legitimacy (Srivastava, 2021).

Traditional views of brokerage focus on the broker's mediation role (Kwon *et al.*, 2020) where the broker pursues control over the relationship that they have made possible by connecting previously unconnected actors. This perspective is encapsulated in the "tertius gaudens" (competitive, or mediating) brokerage strategy (Burt, 1995). In contrast, in "tertius iungens" (collaborative) brokerage, mutual cooperation and value creation are pursued (Obstfeld, 2005). This win–win perspective generates present gains and future benefits. It encourages learning for all parties (Collins-Dogrul, 2012). As learning is not just a cognitive but also a social process, the use of social, cultural and other forms of brokers' capital becomes important (Gurau *et al.*, 2020). The mixing and matching of relevant boundary objects and specific boundary spanning activities enables learning, exploration and sensemaking, which lead to opportunity recognition, all of which are critical to successful internationalization (Niittymies and Pajunen, 2020).

Quintane and Carnabuci (2016) distinguish between two different brokerage types depending on the broker's network involvement. "Unembedded brokerage" occurs when the brokering (information exchange) takes place between unfamiliar contacts. In this situation, the relationship is short term, and the broker is more likely to adopt a "tertius gaudens" strategy. The broker tends to act as an intermediary in the flow of information between the two actors, rather than directly connecting the actors. Relating this approach to the four different types of boundary-spanning activity noted earlier, it is logical that unembedded brokerage most likely occurs with *scouting* activities, particularly when the relationship between the broker and the actors involved is not expected to be long-lasting.

The second type of brokerage identified by Quintane and Carnabuci (2016) is "embedded brokerage." This involves the broker directly connecting two or more actors and playing a facilitating and nurturing role in the relationship. Quintane and Carnabuci (2016) argue that embedded brokerage is usually driven by a "tertius iungens" strategy. We posit that embedded brokerage is associated with *coordination*, *buffering* and *bringing-up-the-borders* boundary spanning activity types, as these involve direct actor–actor relationships and often involve the broker's long-term connections.

3. Conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework (Figure 1) is developed from the novel synthesis of the reviewed literature across three main domains: SME internationalization, institutional theory and boundary-spanning and brokerage.

The framework depicts boundary spanning as the HCIA-led establishment of links between SMEs and any other actor that supports their internationalization endeavors. We posit that boundary-spanning HCIAs work across different boundaries and, in the process, use various kinds of boundary objects; for government organizations, these might include market information, customer insights, network access, reports and seminars. On a cognitive level, they may also include various symbols and even the use of storytelling, as a sensemaking/sensegiving international business process (Haley and Boje, 2014) or a way of leveraging country equity in support of internationalization (Pappu and Quester, 2010).

The proposed conceptual framework focuses on the brokerage process through which SMEs form connections, aided by boundary spanning (Kwon *et al.*, 2020). Various outcomes for the SME are associated with the brokerage process undertaken by the HCIAs, as indicated in the last part of the framework.

We propose a collaborative brokerage strategy as being appropriate to the provision of institutional support for internationalizing SMEs. HCIAs are, therefore, more likely to use a "tertius iungens" (collaborative) brokerage strategy (Obstfeld, 2005). Benefits of a collaborative brokerage strategy is illustrated in an example of an HCIA (government agency) connecting an SME with a new distributor in a new market. Through such brokerage, the SME gains potential access to a new market, while the intermediary (the distributor) may gain another customer and the government agency fulfils its mandate. The government agency's role becomes embedded if it maintains a relationship with one or both connected actors to continuously provide benefits.

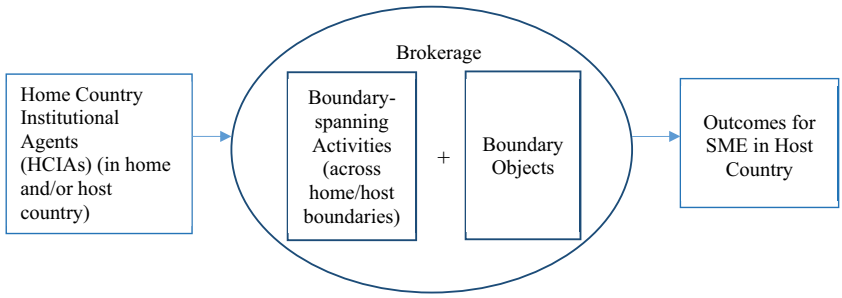
The conceptual framework pays special attention to the location of the HCIA, highlighting a role for host country-located HCIAs in supporting SME internationalization from the home country. We conceptualize that host country-located HCIAs undertake boundary spanning and brokerage activities to link SMEs with relevant host country actors.

4. Methodology

We empirically validate and develop the conceptual framework using a qualitative research design employing interviews with

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Figure 1 Conceptual framework



Source(s): Authors' own work

senior managers or owner-managers of a sample of New Zealand SMEs internationalizing to China and/or India. In addition, we include interviews with various HCIAs representing their respective HCIs. Taking this approach, we gain insights into:

- the involvement of specific types of HCIs and HCIAs in supporting the internationalization of SMEs;
- the brokerage and boundary spanning activities of HCIAs, as well as the specific boundary objects they use in knowledge transfer to SMEs;
- the roles played by HCIAs located in both host and home country; and
- the different benefits and/or outcomes for internationalizing SMEs.

New Zealand represents the home country for our study. The host countries in our study are India and China. New Zealand is a small country, distant geographically from the world's major markets, and following Kahiya (2020), these characteristics would be expected to shape patterns of internationalization of its SMEs. Both China and India are important contexts for advancing international business and business marketing research (Cavusgil, 2021).

As we are examining a phenomenon in depth, an exploratory qualitative approach for the study was considered appropriate (Creswell, 2013). We categorized the firms as SMEs, in line with the OECD (2023) definition, which includes enterprises employing between 10 and 250 people. As SME internationalization into China and India was relatively uncommon at the time of this study, the sample of firms represented approximately 70% of the population, identified predominantly by the New Zealand Government agency, New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (NZTE). While not all SMEs doing business in China and India necessary used support from this organization, NZTE maintained the most comprehensive database of these firms. Participant SMEs were also referred from specific industry associations, such as the India NZ Business Council and the China New Zealand Trade Association.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 100 purposefully selected participants in New Zealand, China and India (Table 1). Of these, 54 were New Zealand SMEs located in New Zealand, with 46 of these conducting business in India and 45 conducting business in China. Many were conducting business in both countries, hence accounting for the larger number reported in the sample. These NZ SMEs represented 19 industry sectors, as shown in Table 1, and all were engaged in B2B marketing with customers in one or both of these markets. Entering China and India was widely considered by government agencies and industry bodies to be more appropriate for New Zealand SMEs that had already gained reasonably substantial experience internationalizing, explaining the relatively small number of such firms overall. All the SMEs in the sample had already entered China and/or India, having experienced varying periods of time in either, or both, of these markets. The SMEs were in various stages of internationalization (exporting, representative offices and joint ventures) in either, or both, markets.

Additional information was obtained from HCIA representatives of several HCIs. These were 18 New Zealand Government officials, 12 representatives of business/industry associations, 11 consultants and 5 New Zealand business founders in China (Table 1). Table 1 shows the breakdown of these categories across locations in New Zealand, India and China. A constraining factor was the limited number of actors from these organizations directly involved with, or having experience of, New Zealand SME's internationalizing into India and China. For example, the HCIAs listed in Table 1 were generally represented by 5–6 individuals for each country. The interviews were conducted in depth, generally lasting 60–90 min or longer. Our analysis suggests that saturation was reached, as, in line with Yin (2004), no new information was obtained from the later interviews for each group. The unit of analysis was the organization, and we interviewed owners, top managers, key officials and employees, depending on the organization (SME or HCIA). As key informants, they were expected to possess exclusive (strategic) information and extensive knowledge of the phenomena examined (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019).

The construction of a semi-structured interview questionnaire was guided by key constructs identified from the literature and represented in the conceptual framework. The questionnaire focused on aspects relevant to SME internationalization into India and China, including specific questions on the role played by HCIAs. In addition, information was gathered on the types of support received, the outcomes achieved, as well as firm characteristics, including prior experience of the SMEs in the host country/ies. In addition, as these were in various stages of post-entry, the period of time doing business in India and/or China was also captured. Two or more researchers conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with participants from the organizations in the study. The interviews were audio and/or video recorded and transcribed, with the participants given the opportunity to authorize the transcripts once prepared.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

Table 1 Characteristics of the interview sample

Sample characteristics	India	China	NZ	Total	Description
SMEs doing business in. . .	46	45	All	54*	Industries: education, IT, tourism, hospitality, film, security, aviation, agriculture, robotics, medical equipment, engineering, bioscience, technology, logistics, software, sport, food, apparel and architecture
NZ government officials	6	6	6	18	Heads of strategy, consulate generals / ambassadors, trade commissioners, education commissioners, export credit office, tourism department officials and immigration department officials
Consultants (India)	2		3	5	One bank, three independent companies (SMEs) dedicated to consulting on India
Consultants (China)		4	2	6	Firms dedicated to consulting on "doing business in" China
Business associations (India)	1		5	6	NZ–India business council; one industry association, one India-based industry association
Business associations (China)		1	5	6	China–NZ trade association; one China interest group; one China-based industry association
NZ firms initiated in China		5		5	NZ firms established in China, with HQ based in NZ
All				100	

Note(s): *54 NZ SMEs were interviewed in total. These firms were conducting business in China, or India or both. In all, 45 were conducting business in China, and 46 were conducting business in India, as shown in the table. These numbers are greater than the total of 54, as 33 of them were conducting business in both China and India and are, therefore, counted for both locations
Source(s): Authors' own work

Open-ended and probing questions were used in the interviews, providing the study with deep insights into the areas being explored (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006).

The transcribed data were analyzed using NVivo 10 software. Following Miles and Huberman (2004), each interview was treated as a "case." Hence, a logical progression of data coding and interpretation ensued (Auld *et al.*, 2007; Yin, 2004). We conducted within-case and cross-case analysis, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the interview data. The themes resulted directly from the data, as well as from a pre-conceptualization of constructs derived from the literature and conceptual framework, following the established approach of Miles and Huberman (2004). Two researchers independently coded a random sample of interviews of SMEs conducting business in India and in China to ensure coding consistency.

Our coding started with open coding of the data, followed by axial coding and system closure. The sequencing of these three coding approaches, recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998), revealed interconnections and patterns between the themes. For example, informants' narratives relating to a specific HCIA, the particular context involved and the type of interaction, were interpreted and coded according to the type of boundary spanning activity/ies and boundary objects they represented, as reflected in the conceptual framework. Axial coding directly from the data allowed these initial interpretations to be further contextualized and interlinked by, for example, reflecting on differences emerging relative to the location of the HCIA and the relative stage of internationalization of the SME. System closure allowed for the full set of interrelationships among the key elements to be revealed. For example, this process allowed us to elucidate the relationships between the SMEs' use of particular HCIAs, their stage of internationalization, their internationalization location, the type and location of the HCIAs used, their boundary spanning and brokerage roles, the boundary objects used and the role of other actors (see Web Appendix for an example of part of the initial Axial coding structure).

5. Findings

Selected quotes from the interviews are shown in Tables 2 and 3 to illustrate the range of activities undertaken by the HCIAs (*scouting, coordination, buffering and bringing up the borders*), with further discussion provided in the following sections.

5.1 Small and medium-sized enterprise internationalization and HCIAs

The data show the HCIAs playing different roles in SME internationalization. Tables 2 and 3 provide illustrative quotes relating to the HCIAs involved, their boundary spanning activities, boundary objects used and type of boundary spanning activity represented. The illustrative quotes in the tables are numbered and aligned with the narrative on the findings below. The narrative is structured to reflect each HCIA listed in the tables (Table 2 for home country HCIAs and Table 3 for host country HCIAs.)

5.1.1 Government agencies

The primary agents providing government support were the New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (NZTE) offices in the home country (New Zealand) (Table 2), as well as the NZ Embassy, Consulate General, High Commissioner (or Ambassador) in the host markets (Table 3).

The SMEs used varying levels of support from these government agents, depending mainly on the experience of the SME in the host market, along with the nature of the support and/or service provided. SMEs new(er) to China and/or India drew mainly on NZTE assistance based in New Zealand (Table 2). NZTE boundary spanning activities included provision of market information, market analysis and prospective customer information (i.e. *scouting #1, 2 and 3*), along with facilitation of

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

Table 2 Boundary spanning by home-country institutional agents (HCIAs) in the home country

Home country institution (HCI) and HCIA	In-home country boundary-spanning activities of the HCIAs representing the HCIs	Boundary objects (examples of methods used)	Type of boundary-spanning activity (after Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2014)	Illustrative quotes [organization code #; industry; country concerned]
Government agencies (regulative)				
NZTE (home)	Market information / advice	Website, reports, offices, etc.	Scouting	1. *(Scouting)* "Yes it was the India education network established through NZTE which brought us into the market" (#46 Education) (India)
	Knowledge on "doing business in. . ."	Seminars on "doing business in India/China", often industry-focused	Scouting	2. *(Scouting)* "I have been in talks with NZTE with the technology sector and also with the medical technology sector with a view to providing advice on our sector; they told us - look I will work with you attempting to get into India" (#2 Agritech) (India)
	Connections with customers	Trade shows	Scouting Coordination	3. *(Coordination)* "We've participated with Tradenz, went with NZTE last year I think it was, they had a combined aviation stall at an exhibition in New Delhi." (#IA-1 Aviation) (India)
Industry associations/ business councils (normative)	Market information / advice	Website, reports, offices, meetings, etc.	Scouting	4. *(Scouting)* "And then we've got a very close working relationship with the Chamber of Commerce here . . ..and so through these layers of connections and relationships and the understanding the Chamber of Commerce have got around our [business], we got together One day and thought well actually this is probably something that we could look at doing with the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce" (#28) (Education) (China)
	Knowledge on "doing business in. . ."	Seminars on "doing business in India/China"	Scouting; *coordination* – industry-level seminars	5. *(Scouting and Coordination)* "So we've done some training around that for the private providers and often we'll go out and say you know what's going on, what do you need, you know what's an issue and we'll put together a workshop around that." (#IA-2) (Education) (India)
	Host country networks	Contacts in host market, databases, personal introductions	Scouting; coordination	6. *(Coordination)* "Right well [our organization] champions the international development of New Zealand's [industry sector] exports. We encourage scale through collaboration and we act as a One stop shop for international companies [in the industry] wanting to do business with New Zealand." (#IA-1) (Aviation) (India)
	Peer-to-peer (industry-to-industry relationships)	Industry ass'n (NZ) to industry ass'n (India) link via industry broker	Coordination; bringing up the borders – *cross-border industry networks*	7. *(Coordination)* "It's a large organization it's our counterpart organization, the Indian version of (India-NZ Business Association) is well the Secretariat is run through XXX Association and we're hoping to take a delegation [to India]" (#IA-7) (India)
Independent consultants (normative)	Host country networks	Contacts in host market, databases, personal introductions	Scouting; coordination	8. *(Scouting and Coordination)* "We've got access to resources, we've got access to the government and so on and so forth that a company in a [town in NZ] may not have" (#C-1) (China)
	Market information / advice	Website, offices, meetings, etc.	Scouting; bringing up the borders	9. *(Scouting and Bringing up the borders)* "We're trying [build]. . . opportunities around sort of agricultural science and things. Some of the work's being done at [NZ agricultural education institution] is fantastic stuff. And, partnered with say a big corporate client you know whereby they're sending out some of their, their you know up and rising stars, send them out here to New Zealand to get some really solid training in agriculture type thing. You know there's potentially benefits for our whole, business education opportunities and things like that." (#C-4) (India)
The SME (own employees) (normative)	Market information useful contacts	Country national working in SME in NZ	Scouting; coordination	10. *(Scouting and coordination)* "So now we've got a Chinese speaking Vista employee who's been with us for Five or Six years here in Auckland and she's going to (oh we have any number of Chinese speaking staff here in Auckland, yeah). . .. but this woman has been with us for quite some time and so she's going up, she was born in [town in China] and she is going up to run our office in Shanghai" (#49) (Technology) (China)

(***continued***)

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Table 2

Home country institution (HCI) and HCIA	In-home country boundary-spanning activities of the HCIAs representing the HCIs	Boundary objects (examples of methods used)	Type of boundary-spanning activity (after Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2014)	Illustrative quotes [organization code #; industry; country concerned]
	Cultural/language resources	Country national working in SME in NZ	Buffering	11. *(Buffering)* "We have I mean there were times when we deliberately aimed to employ Chinese speaking people. Now whether that happened to have been a Kiwi who just spoke fluent Chinese that would have been okay but you know we aim to hire people fluent in the language and the culture." (#13) (Technology) (China)
Socio-cultural factors (cognitive)	Reduction of social and cultural distance	Visits of B2B customers to NZ	Buffering; bringing up the borders	12. *(Buffering)* "We place a great deal of importance on really understanding as much as we can about the culture. . . So we've undertaken over the years that we've been there, a lot of training. We've had Chinese production companies spend time with us in New Zealand. So, we're looking at balancing the relationship." (#27) (Film) (China) 13. *(Bringing up the borders)* "That's right but you know that's the case and the [Chinese regulator authority] too have become very good friends and we are very well known. The minister of [the regulatory authority] has actually visited this building. . .." (#27) (Film) (China)

Note(s): # = NZ firm; #G = Government organization; #IA = industry association; and #C = consultant
Source(s): Authors' own work

contacts with distributors or other intermediaries (i.e. *coordination #3*). Websites, reports, seminars and trade shows exemplify the boundary objects associated with these kinds of activities. SMEs began to acquire host country resources, contacts and sales as a result of such assistance.

As many of the more experienced SMEs had already established relationships and networks in China and/or India and had acquired additional resources, they viewed home-based government agents as being less relevant. Instead, they drew upon boundary spanning activities of government agents like the New Zealand Embassy and/or Consulate based in China and/or India (Table 3). The boundary spanning activities included detailed market and customer information, networking in the host country and trade representation at local events (*scouting #14, 15 and 18*); introductions to local networks and trade groups, facilitating diplomatic relations, industry promotion and facilitating travel for host country actors to New Zealand (*coordination #16, 21, 23 and 25*) and facilitation of interactions with host country ministerial officials and regulatory authorities, invitations to high level trade events, high level state, provincial or national meetings, hosting industry leaders and meetings with regulatory authorities (*buffering and bringing up the borders #17, 19, 20, 22, 24 and 26)*). Boundary objects linked to these activities included customized reports, Web links, workshops and networking events, as well as in-person facilitated introductions and meetings

5.1.2 Business councils, professional bodies and industry associations

HCIAs representative of specific industries were present only in New Zealand – hence, their interaction with the SMEs was only in the home country context (Table 2). The industry sectors represented by these HCIAs included aviation, tourism, education and information technology, while the New Zealand China Business Association and the India New Zealand Business Council represented the respective country interests. Industry-level HCIAs engaged in multiple boundary spanning activities, such as facilitating market information and advice, education and/or training (i.e. *scouting #4 and 5*), as well as access to networks in China and/or India and industry-level seminars and facilitating peer-peer relationships (*coordination #5, 6 and 7*). The boundary objects used included predominantly market reports, workshops, seminars and experience-sharing events.

5.1.3 Independent consultants

This HCIA group comprised both home- and host-country small consulting organizations and individuals focused on specific sets of client needs and performing different generic boundary spanning activities. Many New Zealand-based consultants were either Chinese or Indian nationals residing in New Zealand (Table 2). Home-country consultants provided market information and contacts in the host market (*scouting #8 and 9*) and supported establishing connections with networks in China and/or India (*coordination #8*). In one case, the consultant brokered the relationship between a member of one of their long-standing networks in India and a New Zealand SME, leading to a formal business partnership between the two actors (*bringing up the borders #9)*. Consultants used such boundary objects as websites, databases, customized and generic reports, along with personal introductions.

Consultants in the host countries tended to be host-country nationals with previous experience of studying, working and/or living in New Zealand prior to returning (in the case of India) or New Zealanders who had studied, lived and/or worked in the host country for a long time (in the case of China) (Table 3). Consultants with these backgrounds were ideally positioned as boundary spanners, given their connections in both countries and their knowledge of the relevant institutional environments. Host-country consultants focused their boundary spanning

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

Table 3 Boundary spanning by home-country institutional agents (HCIAs) in the host country

Home country institution (HCI) and HCIA	In-host country boundary-spanning activities of the HCIAs representing the HCIs	Boundary objects (examples of methods used)	Type of boundary-spanning activity (after Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2014)	Illustrative quotes [organization code #; industry; country concerned
Government agencies (regulative)				
NZTE (in host country)	Detailed market and customer information	Meetings, generic or customized reports, website, offices, etc.	Scouting	14. *(Scouting)* "They were fantastic resource in the market where you know you rock up to a market and that was your first port of call and they were able to tell you exactly what was going on in the market, what agents were working for, which weren't very good. You know that whole, just on the ground knowledge I suppose." (#IA-2) (Education) (China)
	Networking in host country. Host country customer/partner contacts	Industry function/events. Facilitated meetings; customized data; reports	Scouting; coordination; buffering	15. *(Scouting)* "There are some [NZ] companies that have come to us and said can you introduce us to [NZ] people who have been here - and being New Zealanders most people are very willing to share their experiences." (#G-7) (China) 16. *(Coordination)* "We have the university Vice Chancellor comes through. There was an alumni function here." (#G-4) (Education) (China) 17. *(Buffering)* "Well, part of New Zealand Central being here, for instance, is to help New Zealand and New Zealand Businesses present a professional face to the market" (#G-7) (China)
	Trade representation at local level (state/province)	Attendance at trade/industry events hosted by host country	Scouting; coordination	18. *(Scouting)* "I believe the New Zealand government is fully aware about this situation. So that is why in the past few years every year they organise the Chinese, the New Zealand universities to join us as a national pavilion to promote that New Zealand as a quality assured destination for Chinese students." (#G-8) (Education) (China)
	Relationships with regulatory authorities	Regular face-to-face meetings; invitations to trade events	Buffering; bringing up the borders	19. *(Buffering)* "We're actually, we're engaging with NZTE right now to help us with some of the payment issues in India which we struggle with." (#2) (Agritech) (India) 20. *(Bringing up the borders)* "Probably its a slightly different situation in any other, just because the role of bureaucracy and officialdom here - there's quite a different sort of transaction role whereas here you sort of run up against the local Chinese red tape. So often we would become involved in a way that, you know, many of our colleagues]. . .working in other countries. . .] wouldn't." (#G-3) (China)
NZ consulate (in host country)	Diplomatic relations	Diplomatic functions; meetings at highest state/provincial national levels	Buffering; coordination; bringing up the borders	21. *(Coordination)* "And they've been extremely helpful to us, extremely helpful. Even to the point of when we officially had our grand opening in Beijing both NZTE and even the ambassador, opened his residence for us to have a grand opening sort of dinner and so on at his residence at the embassy grounds. So we had 100 and some odd guests and dignitaries and so on. So very, very helpful, yes extremely helpful." (#13) (Technology) (China) 22. *(Bringing up the borders)* "I work very closely with New Zealand trade people here and the consulate . . . One of the smartest things that I thought was when they sat down to negotiate the FTA, the first thing they put on the table was (a) we're into your expo, we're in - we were the first country to do that. That's another big tick for New Zealand." (#C-2) (China)
	Industry promotion and coordination	Hosting industry leaders	Coordination	23. *(Coordination)* "My own involvement I've found them to be very supportive and useful and each time we've gone up to Wuhan in China we've invited [the Ambassador] to come along to the events that were hosted in the city." (G-9) (Education) (China)

(***continued***)

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Table 3

Home country institution (HCI) and HCIA	In-host country boundary-spanning activities of the HCIAs representing the HCIs	Boundary objects (examples of methods used)	Type of boundary-spanning activity (after Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2014)	Illustrative quotes [organization code #; industry; country concerned
	Relationships with regulatory authorities	Meetings with regulatory authorities; advocacy for NZ SMEs	Buffering; bringing up the borders	24. *(Bringing up the borders)* "The NZ Prime Minister walked into his first ever meeting with the premiere of China with the CEO of Fonterra and CEO of Glidepath on either side of him. And it went down like an absolute treat." (#C-2) (China)
NZ immigration	Applying Chinese regulatory travel requirements to intending Chinese visitors to NZ; working with NZ tourism organizations	Processing of travel documentation for Chinese visitors to NZ; Meetings with NZ tourism organisations	Coordination bringing up the borders	25. *(Coordination)* "We don't sort of work in isolation - we actually work closely with Tourism New Zealand and Air New Zealand. In fact XXX [CEO, Tourism NZ] was here a couple of weeks back. Just we were giving him some insight in terms of their programme, in terms of their China strategy. We share our information" (#G-6) (China) 26. *(Bringing up the borders)* "In terms of our operation . . . it's more about facilitation, facilitation of . . . people from this country [China] wanting to visit New Zealand. So [it is called] ADS which is 'approved destination service'." (#G-6) (China)
Independent consultants (normative)	Host country networks	Contacts in host market, databases, personal introductions	Scouting; coordination	27. *(Coordination)* "You know we have amongst our clients we have a client that has a very specific piece of equipment and at the moment it's covered by a distribution through a company in China and we've managed to get them to take One province which we are helping them to develop." (#C-1) China)
	Market information / advice	Website, offices, meetings, etc.	Scouting	28. *(Scouting)* "We help everybody from you know manufacturing companies that might be doing acquisitions up here but yeah interestingly more and more New Zealand service companies are trying to get into this market and that ranges from architectural type firms, design firms, education and a lot of interest around sort of the sales training, leadership training, hr organisational development etc. . .. we're interpreting China for people that don't know China." (#C-2) (China)
	Access to resources and capabilities	Connections with providers of resources and capabilities; mentoring	Scouting; coordination	29. *(Coordination)* "What I've found initially, what started [my company] is people coming to me or being referred to me and oh would you go and have lunch with so and so, they've got a bit of a problem." (#C-2) China)
	"Brokering" with government agencies and regulatory authorities	Liaising with govt agencies and regulatory authorities, building on existing links	Buffering	30. *(Buffering)* "We're like the NZTE guys sort of working with clients here in New Zealand representing them and actually going up face to face trying to make the sales and develop the business opportunities with the, with the Indian clients there. We represent New Zealand organisations. We are engaged by them on a contractual basis. We then go up and through the contacts and relationships we've developed over the last few years, be over the last Two years but prior to that as well, we then looked at sort of trying to generate the business and get these guys off the ground." (#C-4) (India)
	Cultural/language resources	Local knowledge and networks accumulated over many years of living / doing business in host country	Buffering; bringing up the borders	31. *(Buffering and bringing up the borders)* "One needs to in the town - we have a business need to stay close to the city government, flatter them, banquet them, you know see them, get to know them. Make friendships. I mean One of the reasons we're probably going to open this office in XXX is that over 20 years we've invested $USXXmillion in the area." (C-1) (China)

(***continued***)

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Table 3

Home country institution (HCI) and HCIA	In-host country boundary-spanning activities of the HCIAs representing the HCIs	Boundary objects (examples of methods used)	Type of boundary-spanning activity (after Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2014)	Illustrative quotes [organization code #; industry; country concerned
NZ SMEs in host countries (normative)	Mentoring (bridging knowledge and practice)	One-on-one meetings; specialized advice; knowledge-sharing	Scouting; coordination	32. *(Scouting)* "But I'm also very much a kiwi so if a New Zealander comes up to me and asks me the same questions and looks for some assistance then I'm unlikely to say no to them either for the same reason. You know so look I think it's important for us to get as many New Zealand companies into this market as possible. . ." (SC-7) (Agriculture) China) 33. *(Coordination)* "I have been asked me to give presentations many a time [about doing business in China] and I just think that person, that would be key." (#13) (Technology) (China)
	Host country networks	Contacts in host market, databases, personal introductions	Scouting; coordination	34. *(Coordination)* "I think if those are the kind of relationships we are trying to form, companies like ours and I'm sure there are many others who can form that first set of you know the first set of welcoming party for New Zealand companies where we can talk to them, make passage easier, talk to them about the environment and it can be done in a more structured manner." (#49) (India)
	Market information	Detailed, customized information provision, via personal meetings, introductions to information sources and relevant individuals	Scouting	35. *(Scouting)* "Well that group [from NZ] that came, that group that came up that you know that was great, there were some Country Calendar [NZ TV agricultural show] guys, they really enjoyed it they said, they can always tell before they start editing whether it's going to be a good programme or not a good programme. And they just said no this is wonderful absolutely wonderful." (SC-3) (Agriculture) China)
	Access to resources and capabilities	Connections with providers of resources and capabilities; mentoring on specific capability requirements	Scouting; coordination	36. *(Scouting and coordination)* "And the other suggestion that I want to make is when New Zealand come here they are suggested to involve the local people instead of the Chinese kiwi because now we have a very rich human resources here in China. They can enrol expert or skilled people in every field I think because we have local people here and we have many people coming backing from Europe or America, they have received very good education. They have very long term working experience." (SC-5) (Agriculture) (China) 37. *(Scouting)* "In fact now I mean it's no secret not an unknown person but David Mahon and his company was advising us in those early days long before he became part of the Beachheads programme. But we engaged with David's company on a number of research projects that he conducted for us relative to the size of the market, uptake, saturation, awareness of brand and such things like that." (#13) (Technology) China)
	'Brokering' with govt. agencies and regulatory authorities; advocacy	Liaising with govt agencies and regulatory authorities, building on existing personal links	Buffering; bringing up the borders	38. *(Buffering) and bringing up the borders)* "Well yes and my relationships too. I mean to say the vice deputy director general of agriculture here from Guangxi is a personal friend of mine now." (SC-3) (Agriculture) (China)
	Breaking cultural barriers	Mentoring and advising, working across the cultures	Buffering	39. *(Buffering)* "[The partnership between NZ and Indian company] has evolved you know in terms of it's helped us understand New Zealand. It's helped [the NZ company] understand India. It's helped, you know they had ten of our staff [Indian partner] at their premises for almost a year working for them. So it really helped them get a feel for how you know people from a different company and culture work." (#12) (Technology) (India)

(***continued***)

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Table 3

Home country institution (HCI) and HCIA	In-host country boundary-spanning activities of the HCIAs representing the HCIs	Boundary objects (examples of methods used)	Type of boundary-spanning activity (after Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2014)	Illustrative quotes [organization code #; industry; country concerned
The SME (own employees) (normative)	Market knowledge and connections	"Local" employee in Indian or Chinese operation/ representative office of the SME	Scouting; coordination	40. *(Scouting and coordination)* "we decided we needed to get someone be on the ground and get it running so that we can really attract more customers in China." (#49) (Technology) (China)
	Brokering with government agencies and regulatory authorities	"Local" employee in Indian or Chinese operation/ representative office of the SME; interactions with relevant authorities	Buffering; bringing up the borders	41. *(Buffering and bringing up the borders)* "So they had engaged us and get us to take our software into the China market and then we had to go through some certification with MII. Ministry of Information and Industry. . . And there was another organisation here in China called SAFRT State Administration of Film, Radio and Television. So they were very sort of industry specialised administration organisations." (Vista, China Office(#49) (Technology) (China)
	Cultural/language resources	"Local" employee in Indian or Chinese operation/ representative office of the SME; use of native language when required for communicating with local stakeholders	Buffering	42. *(Buffering)* "It helps [being Chinese] because people know your focus in China is serious and they don't think you are people coming from overseas and just do One or Two and then bug off." (#49) (Technology) (China)
Socio-cultural factors (cognitive)	Reduction of cultural distance	Cricket as an "institution" in India; reverence of Sir Edmond Hilary in India; the "first fours" in China; reverence of Rewi alley in China	Buffering; bringing up the borders	43. *(Buffering)* "Well most of them do like cricket but those that don't of course I think it's just about trying to respect their culture the best you can, understand what they' re trying to do and get onto their wavelength." (#11) (Aviation) (India) 44. *(Bringing up the borders)* "Robert bought a signed t-shirt of, One of the Black Cap's t-shirts, which Shane Bond presented to him [CEO of major Indian corporation]. Oh that's when they signed the deal. They got it framed and put it up in their boardroom because it was a Black Cap's t-shirt. Oh yeah." (#C-4) (Agriculture) (India)
	Perceptions of NZ as a "neutral" and "morally strong" country (India and China)	Maintenance of such perceptions through historical relationships and diplomatic relations	Buffering; bringing up the borders	45. *(Buffering and bringing up the borders)* "New Zealand has got a very high regard in the Indian market." (Indian Education Agent). 46. *(Buffering and bringing up the borders)* "Not all foreigners are equal and New Zealand is very, very highly respected in China. . ." (#48) (Engineering) (China) 47. *(Buffering and bringing up the borders)* "Politically the Chinese have an enormous respect for our non-alignment. We're seen as being good friendly people." (#C-1) (China)

Note(s): # = NZ firm; #G = Government organization; #IA = Industry association; #C = Consultant; and #SC = NZ firm initiated in China
Source(s): Authors' own work

efforts in the host market on adding value to New Zealand SMEs. Their activities included providing market information (*scouting* #28), facilitating access to networks and to market capabilities and resources (*coordination #27 and 29*), along with introductions to relevant regulatory authorities, host government agencies and local networks(*buffering #30 and 31*). Host country-based consultants were also able to provide cultural and language expertise from their extensive experience of the host country (*bringing up the borders* # 31). Like consultants in the home country, host-county consultants used specific boundary spanning objects, such as personal introductions, various kinds of general or customized reports, access to data and databases and access to valuable websites.

5.1.4 New Zealand small and medium-sized enterprises in host countries

China and India differed regarding the presence of established New Zealand firms already in the country. Several New Zealand firms had established operations or offices in China, many for quite some time; some were subsidiaries of firms operating in New Zealand. India did not present the same profile, having much fewer New Zealand firms already operating there. Hence, we focused on the boundary spanning and brokerage activities of the firms established in China and acting as HCIAs supporting New Zealand SMEs internationalizing there. These substantially connected firms were highly trusted and reputable in China, the result of having well-established operations in the country, in some cases, for

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

more than 20 years. As shown in Table 3, the boundary spanning activities benefitting the SMEs included mentoring and providing access to information and resources (e.g. detailed industry or competitor knowledge) (*scouting #32, 35 and 36*), contacts and personal introductions, and introductions to local networks in China (*coordination #34 and 36)*, as well as key links with local and central government officials (*buffering* and *bringing up the borders #38 and 39*).

The New Zealand managers of such China-based firms had profound familiarity with the socio-cultural norms and values of their host country that they readily used to support the New Zealand SMEs. Their ability to advise on important normative and cognitive institutional insights was based on their rare capacity to understand the institutions of both countries. The exemplary reputation (local and national) of a number of these firms and their New Zealand managers enabled them to transfer political and social legitimacy to the SMEs. The objects used in such boundary spanning activities included in-person meetings and introductions, workshops, facilitated site visits and formal and informal discussions.

5.1.5 Small and medium-sized enterprise employees

Because of their ability to cross different institutional environments/boundaries and their connections with important host country actors, Chinese or Indian nationals (host country nationals) were often employed by New Zealand SMEs. Such employees were in the position to address SMEs' specific needs through their boundary spanning and brokerage activities. Spanning cultural boundaries was particularly important in China, because China was perceived to be more culturally challenging for doing business, compared to India.

These employees were located either in New Zealand or, more frequently, in the SME's representative office in China or India. The New Zealand-based SME employees still performed their boundary spanning roles by providing market information (*scouting #10*), cultural expertise and language support (*buffering #11*) and, in some cases, useful contacts (*coordination #10*) – Table 2. Based in the host country (Table 3), the SME employees were able to share market knowledge (*scouting #40)* and local connections *(coordination #40)*, provide cultural and language insights (*buffering #42*) and facilitate introductions to key host country individuals and regulatory authorities (*buffering and bringing up the borders #41*). The objects used in such boundary spanning activities included written reports and informal communications, as well as in-person meetings.

5.2 Home-country institutional agents and socio-cultural factors

SMEs internationalizing to India and China faced substantial barriers in terms of unfamiliarity with host-country social norms and perceived cultural distance. Simultaneously, host country actors in China and India (e.g. the customers) frequently did not share the same perceptions of socio-cultural differences as the SME managers. This made it difficult to achieve common understandings of differences, which are necessary for accommodation or mitigation. Our findings suggest that mutual socio-cultural understanding was improved by the boundary spanning activities of HCIAs (located in both home and host countries).

As illustrated in Table 3, examples of boundary spanning across perceived socio-cultural institutional distances by HCIAs in India included famous New Zealand cricket ambassadors supported by the New Zealand Government. Cricket is an important national sport in India, which has long enjoyed a positive cricketing relationship with New Zealand. In the case of China, many Chinese people still revere the New Zealander, Rewi Alley, because of his extensive efforts supporting Chinese social reform, bridging socio-cultural differences and facilitating mutual understanding of the Chinese and New Zealand cultures. Over several decades, China–New Zealand relations have been enriched by shared events designed to facilitate relationship-building among stakeholders across different social and political levels and to enhance legitimacy-building opportunities. In the case of both India and China, these agents acting as "ambassadors" for New Zealand were able to reduce perceptions of socio-cultural distances and reinforce existing positive perceptions of New Zealand in the respective host market. The main types of boundary spanning activity undertaken were *buffering* (*#43, 45, 46 and 47*) and *bringing up the borders* (*#44, 35, 46 and 47*).

Home-country-based HCIAs also used boundary spanning activities addressing socio-cultural factors, as illustrated in Table 2. In the case of China, our findings show that boundary spanning across the two socio-cultural institutional environments happened through such activities as inviting Chinese business partners and officials to visit New Zealand (*buffering* and *bringing up the borders #12 and 13*). Associated boundary objects used during the Chinese delegation included in-person meetings during site visits to New Zealand, informal social gatherings and various events organized by industry associations and business interest groups. Similar boundary-spanning activities occurred with respect to India. Such activities reduced the perceptions of socio-cultural institutional distance by the SMEs and their Chinese/Indian counterparts.

5.3 Brokerage and small and medium-sized enterprise internationalization

The HCIAs in our study engaged in the four boundary spanning activities noted earlier, and these reflected both unembedded and embedded brokerage types. Unembedded brokerage was seen in the case of *scouting*, with embedded brokerage being associated with *coordination*, *buffering* and *bringing up the borders*. In terms of brokerage strategy, most of the HCIAs chose to nurture a collaborative stance in connecting relevant actors. Hence, while focused on facilitating New Zealand SME internationalization, the HCIAs also paid attention to ensuring benefits to host-country actors in the relationships that they brokered. The HCIAs also gained from this approach by demonstrating their value and securing future involvements.

The HCIAs represented by independent consultants and SME employees adopted a more mediation/competitive brokerage strategy compared to other HCIAs. With a riskier vested interest, they were more dependent on the SMEs continuing to employ their services (as consultant or employee) and require their contributions as boundary spanners and brokers. While having a common overall objective to support the internationalization of the SMEs into either China or India, such HCIAs also sought to make their boundary spanning and brokerage talents indispensable.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

Differences in boundary spanning activities were observed between home and host country-based HCIAs. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, *scouting* and *coordination* were the predominant types of boundary spanning activities undertaken by HCIAs based in New Zealand, while HCIAs based in China and India tended more toward *coordination*, *buffering* and *bringing up the borders*. This was not surprising, as the latter had more direct and active networks with actors in the host country.

5.4 Small and medium-sized enterprise outcomes

The findings from our study suggest numerous positive post-entry internationalization outcomes enjoyed by the SMEs through the boundary spanning and brokerage activities of the HCIAs. We do not imply causation in these relationships, but rather suggest that HCIA brokerage is a contributing factor in the positive post-entry internationalization outcomes observed from our data. Table 4 depicts the key outcomes categorized by the different HCIAs facilitating them. Specific outcomes included access to networks in China and India, acquisition of new customers and buyer contacts, channels to government officials at various levels, access to specific market information, help in building legitimacy, securing of key resources and capabilities and greater cross-cultural understanding.

Table 4 also illustrates the different outcomes associated with home versus host country-based HCIAs – those based in New Zealand (home country-based) or China or India (host country-based). Compared to HCIAs in New Zealand, boundary spanning and brokerage by those based in China or India produced more beneficial SMEs outcomes. The SMEs with more experience in the host country accrued more focused and targeted outcomes, commensurate with their ongoing business development needs. For example, host country-based government HCIAs in India and China facilitated interactions between key government personnel and industry leaders and the NZ SMEs, leading to outcomes like new key client contracts or gaining of a local business license. The support provided by New Zealand owners of firms established in China tended to be more specific to the relevant location, industry and, occasionally, customer. Their boundary-spanning and brokerage activities led to strategically targeted development outcomes for the SMEs concerned.

Those SMEs at an early stage of market entry gravitated toward wider information-seeking and access to more generic actors in the host market, as they were relatively less developed and experienced there. Using mostly home-based HCIA support, the outcomes for these SMEs included knowledge about prospective clients/client groups and preferred geographic locations within the host country for market development.

6. Expanded conceptual framework and discussion

Figure 2 shows an expansion of the original conceptual framework (Figure 1). The expanded framework provides a synthesis of the rich qualitative data discussed in the previous section and enhances the original conceptual framework.

We examined the roles of HCIs involved in facilitating SME internationalization and the activities of their representative HCIAs through institutional, boundary spanning and brokerage

Table 4 Outcomes of boundary spanning activities of home-country institutional agents

	Outcomes for SMEs						
Home-country institutional agents (HCIAs)	**Access to host govt officials**	**Access to host country networks**	**Access to market information**	**Access to resources and capabilities**	**Legitimacy granting (market, political and social)**	**New contacts (e.g. customers)**	**Cross-cultural knowledge**
Government assistance agents							
In-home		X	X			X	
In-host	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Industry associations/business councils/professional bodies							
In-home	X	X	X			X	X
Consultants							
In-home		X	X			X	
In-host	X	X	X			X	X
NZ SMEs initiated in China							
In-host	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
SME employees							
In home		X	X				X
In host	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Agents representing socio-cultural factors							
In-home							X
In-host	X				X		X

Source(s): Authors' own work

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

and SME internationalization theoretical lenses. Our findings accord with literature on home country-based HCIs involved in cross-border boundary spanning (Yagi and Kleinberg, 2011). They also corroborate research suggesting that HCIs play a vital role in firm internationalization (Sun *et al.*, 2015), while contributing considerably more detailed and fine-grained perspectives and key insights from a micro-level institutional perspective. Our expanded conceptual framework (Figure 2) depicts the types of HCIs supporting SME internationalization and the specific HCIAs involved in boundary spanning and brokerage activities, as well as their location (home or host countries). The framework also shows the proposed association between the HCIA activities and outcomes for the SME. We show that the SME outcomes are associated with particular boundary spanning and brokerage activities of HCIAs and their use of particular boundary objects. These are all influenced by the location of the HCIA in either the home or host country, also shown in the figure.

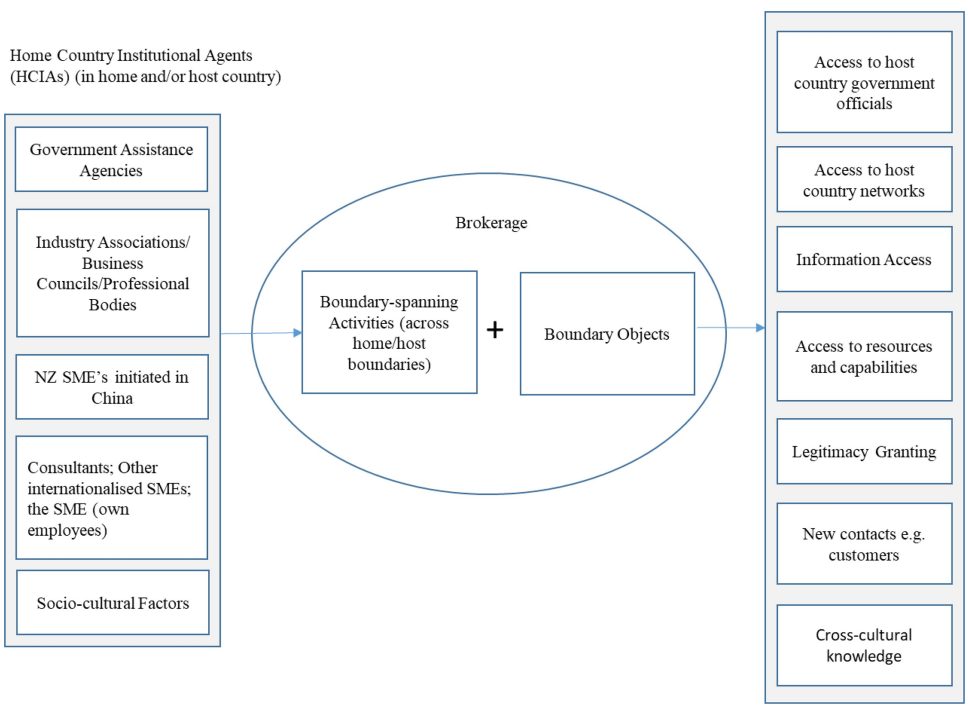
The following discussion addresses the main findings of this study, highlighting three contributions to the studies on SME internationalization, institutions and boundary-spanning and brokerage. Notably, our study highlights the intersection of these theoretical perspectives in the enactment of support for SMEs in B2B relationships across international markets.

First, we investigated an array of HCIs, reflecting regulative, normative and cognitive institutional pillars involved in supporting SME internationalization. We identified the agents (HCIAs) representing these HCIs through their support activities. By focusing on the key institutional actors (HCIAs), as agents of institutions, we provide a micro-level perspective of institutional support. This offers a valuable contribution to institutional theory, which is operationalized mainly through the depiction of institutions as macro-level, static entities (North, 1990, 1994). Specifically, our study highlights the key role of *institutional agents* in enacting the interactions between institutions and SMEs in the process of their internationalization. The SME internationalization literature has tended to focus mainly on institutions at a macro level (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2019), not on their agents. By neglecting to consider the key role of human agents, our understanding of how institutional outcomes arise is limited, as originally posited by North (1990, 1994). Our focus on HCIAs facilitates a better understanding of the process by which institutions support internationalizing SMEs.

Second, we contribute to the management literature by applying boundary spanning and brokerage theoretical lenses to explore institutional support for SME internationalization. To date, these theoretical lenses have been applied mainly in the employee, management and inter-firm relationship literatures. With a few exceptions (Srivastava, 2021; Wilemon, 2014), boundary spanning and brokerage theories have seldom been used in the context of institutions and SME internationalization. Our contribution to this literature is in depicting the mechanism by which HCIAs facilitate institutional support for internationalizing SMEs. Specifically, our study shows that boundary spanning and brokerage lie at the heart of this process.

As noted by Kwon *et al.* (2020), the use of boundary spanning activities and relevant boundary objects constitutes the act of brokerage. We identify the specific types of boundary spanning activities and boundary objects used by the HCIAs as well as their brokerage types and strategies, culminating in a range of outcomes beneficial to post-entry internationalizing SMEs.

Figure 2 Expanded conceptual framework



Source(s): Authors' own work

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Volume 41 · Number 13 · 2026 · 380–400

To elaborate, our findings suggest that the types of brokerages being exercised conformed in part to the classification of Quintane and Carnabuci (2016). *Scouting* reflected the unembedded brokerage type, as it involved short-term connections with actors, usually outside the HCIA's relationship network. Conversely, *coordination*, *buffering* and *bringing up the borders* drew on the HCIAs personal and institutional network connections and involved longer-term relationships between the actors. In all cases, the HCIA tended to remain central to the host country actor–SME relationship. To our knowledge, such depth of analysis of institutional support for SMEs, using boundary spanning and brokerage theoretical lenses, has not been reported in the literature to date. Our study fills this gap and also extends the seminal work by Ruzzier *et al.* (2006) on SME internationalization.

We also identify an apparent orientation toward the use of a collaborative brokerage strategy by HCIAs, as opposed to the more widely recognized competitive brokerage strategy – a finding that warrants further focused research (Srivastava, 2021). While only indicative at this stage of our research, the findings suggest that the majority of HCIAs tended to seek to develop collaborative SME relationships. This corroborates the rarer view of brokerage reported in the literature, that of "tertius iungens" (Obstfeld, 2005). As a collaborative brokerage strategy, this differs from the competitive, or mediation, view of brokerage ("tertius gaudens"), whereby brokers pursue their own interests and become relationship gatekeepers (Burt, 1995). In our study, exceptions to the "tertius iungens" strategy were suggested in the context of independent consultants and SME employees. While maintaining cooperation among the actors with whom they were connected through their brokerage role, they also sought to gain some control in these relationships. These HCIAs seemed somewhat motivated to maintain an enduring brokerage role, to retain employment in their respective organizations. Hence, while our data do not allow a clear distinction, these HCIAs appeared to assume a brokerage strategy somewhere between "tertius gaudens" and "tertius iungens." Hence, although tentative, our findings suggest an interesting differentiation of the brokerage strategies used by different types of HCIA.

Our third contribution arises from the novel finding that host country-based HCIAs had a more substantial involvement in supporting SMEs' post-entry internationalization in China and/or India than their home country-based counterparts. Hence, we show that HCIs, with their agents (HCIAs) based in the host country, remain important to post-entry internationalizing SMEs. These host country-located HCIAs engaged in a range of critical boundary spanning and brokerage activities, either indirectly or directly supporting the SMEs conducting business there (via exporting, representative office or through joint ventures). The agents tended to support higher-level outcomes (e.g. SME relationships with key industry and country level actors) compared to their home-based HCIAs. Host country-based HCIAs helped to promote relationship building with, and knowledge transfer between, relevant actors in that market. The boundary objects used (e.g. meetings with industry leaders and hosting of diplomatic events) could not easily be used by the New Zealand-based HCIAs, requiring an in-market presence, as well as connections with, and deep knowledge of, the relevant host country actors.

Our findings also indicate that the home country- and host country-based HCIAs differed in the types of boundary spanning activities used, even within the same organization (e.g. NZTE). For example, the HCIAs based in New Zealand had a greater focus on *scouting* (information provision) and, in some cases, actor *coordination*. Conversely, HCIAs based in the host countries of China and/or India had a greater focus on *coordination*, *buffering* (protecting from host country impacts) and *bringing up the borders* (integration among key actors, particularly governmental). While Crick and Lindsay (2015) noted the important role of country-level activities of home-based governments, such as diplomatic missions, very few studies have examined the host-country activities of home-based institutions. We suggest that this finding provides a novel contribution to the extant literature on SME internationalization, incorporating the locational nature of institutions and agents in this process.

Beyond these main contributions, a "zooming-in" (Nicolini, 2009) approach to our data provides further definition of our conceptual framework, in particular relating to outcomes for SMEs. As shown in Table 4, the types of SME outcomes tended to be associated with specific HCIAs and the boundary spanning and brokerage activities used. While some studies have identified benefits accruing to SMEs from government support (Crick and Lindsay, 2015), research is yet to link these and other benefits to boundary spanning and brokerage activities of HCIAs or their location (home vs host country). Our findings suggest a level of specificity to the learning and other outcomes arising from such institutional support for SMEs. For example, we observed differences in the types of boundary-spanning activities used and resulting outcomes, depending on the extent of the SMEs' market-specific experience and business development. Notably, more experienced post-entry SMEs tended to seek boundary spanning activities involving *buffering* and *bringing up the borders*, more than *scouting* and *coordination*, resulting in more substantial and sustainable outcomes (Table 4). These findings suggest additional insights to the literature on post-entry development of SMEs, a topic that has, to date, garnered surprisingly little attention in the literature (Lindsay *et al.*, 2017; Zouari *et al.*, 2025).

7. Implications, limitations and future research

7.1 Theoretical implications

In summary, our study provides several theoretical contributions to the institutional, SME internationalization and management (boundary spanning and brokerage) theoretical spheres, within a B2B domain context. The use of a micro-level institutional theoretic lens is novel in this context. By investigating the key HCIAs involved in SMEs internationalization support, we locate our findings in the increasingly important nexus between institutional theory and the SME internationalization and boundary spanning and brokerage studies (Petersen and Rasmussen, 2024). The theoretical contributions outlined below align directly with the contributions discussed in the previous section.

First, our findings provide an important contribution to institutional theory, by bringing to the forefront the role of institutional agents in the enactment of institutional influences and support. As initially highlighted by North (1990, 1994), institutions cannot enact their own outcomes, but require the involvement of human agents. Surprisingly, the majority of research on institutional effects on organizations, including SME internationalization, has focused only on institutions, rather than their agents. By examining the phenomenon of SME internationalization and applying a micro-level institutional

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

(agent – HCIA) perspective, our casts light into the mechanism by which SMEs internationalize. Hence, we are able to present a much greater nuanced perspective on how institutions support SMEs in the internationalization process.

Second, we contribute to the management literature, specifically to boundary spanning and brokerage theories. By applying these lenses to the activities of institutional agents, we contribute to a largely overlooked area (with a few exceptions – Högberg, 2024; Safari, 2025) in the management literature. The application of these theoretical streams to agent roles that operate across organizational, geographic and institutional boundaries also adds to these foundation theories (Shahzad *et al.*, 2025). Our study specifically elucidates how HCIAs across home and host countries provide support for internationalizing SMEs, using different types of boundary spanning and brokerage roles and activities.

Third, we contribute to the relatively sparse literature on post-entry SME internationalization (Puthusserry *et al.*, 2020; Chopra *et al.*, 2024; Yang and Stoian, 2025). Our study shows that later-stage post-entry internationalization of home-country SMEs is strongly facilitated by the boundary-spanning and brokerage activities of HCIAs located in the host country. Further, these activities substantially enhance the learning and relational capital of the SMEs and help to mitigate the impacts of host-country institutions encountered. Post-entry SME internationalization theory assumes that SMEs are reliant on their own resources or host country intermediaries, when seeking to adjust to the institutional conditions of the host country (Chang *et al.*, 2017; Haase, 2026). Our study highlights the important role played by the HCIAs located in the host country in supporting these SMEs.

We also add depth to the SME post-entry internationalization literature by exposing important differences between HCIAs located in the home versus host countries, particularly regarding the types of boundary spanning activities and boundary objects used. SMEs that were more experienced and developed (later post-entry stages) in the host country benefitted more from the advanced boundary spanning activity types proffered by host country-based HCIAs.

7.2 Managerial/practical implications

Practical implications from the findings are relevant to HCIs, including government policymakers, managers of business councils and other industry bodies, consultants and SME managers – all represented in this study. HCIs help to nurture SMEs and support their internationalization efforts (Kahiya and Delaney, 2022) and B2B interactions in host markets (Sima *et al.*, 2025). It is, therefore, important for HCI decision-makers to recognize that it is the *agents* representing their HCIs that provide support to internationalizing SMEs. Further, this is achieved through a range of boundary spanning activities and brokerage. Outcomes for SMEs arise from the interactions of institutional agents with the range of other actors involved in the internationalization process.

The micro-level (agent) perspective of institutional support for SME internationalization provides insights into the different ways that institutional actors can apply their boundary spanning and brokerage activities, use relevant boundary objects and adopt the type of brokerage strategy most appropriate to the needs of the SME. These distinctions have direct implications for resource allocations within the HCIs, as well as international trade strategies used at the government policy level (Crick and Lindsay, 2015). Hence, government funding and other resources can be more appropriately targeted toward the roles that HCIAs play in their home and host countries.

Of particular interest from this study is the importance of HCIAs being located in the host country and providing support for more developed post-entry SMEs in the host market. This was especially evident not only with government-level HCIAs but also for industry- and firm-level HCIAs. The latter included the foreign offices of industry-level HCIs, employees of the New Zealand-based SMEs and established New Zealand firms in the host markets. Therefore, HCIs must recognize the important contributions that can accrue from using personnel and resources in the host market. It is also necessary that HCIs adopt strategies that facilitate the boundary spanning and brokerage activities of their HCIAs, and the use of appropriate boundary objects, to support the post-entry SME internationalization in host markets.

In summary, HCIAs can help to mitigate risks and navigate uncertainty for internationalizing SMEs by connecting them with relevant actors in the home and host countries. This facilitates the development of valuable relational capital and resources for the SMEs. Our findings indicate important policy and managerial implications for each of the HCIs included in the study, with the recognition that it is their HCIAs that provide support for the internationalization of SMEs.

7.3 Limitations and future research

The main goal of this study was to gain a deep understanding of how HCIAs support SME internationalization. Therefore, we adopted an exploratory qualitative approach designed to extend existing theory. However, quantitative validation and testing of our conceptual framework will enable statistical generalizability of the findings, allowing for wider application.

Our study has some limitations in the scope of the participants selected. While the host country-based HCIAs provided important contextual perspectives relating to the host country to which the SMEs had internationalized, the SMEs' B2B partners in the business dyads were not included. Gathering data from these dyadic relationships would provide additional insights into the effectiveness of the HCIAs' interventions.

Future research should also be undertaken to elaborate and unpack differences seen when comparing the India and China contexts as host countries for New Zealand SMEs, as these are institutionally distinct. Finally, the collaborative versus competitive brokerage strategy used in boundary spanning by institutional actors across international borders warrants further research; this has important implications for the SME internationalization literature and, in practical terms, relationship-building approaches adopted and facilitated by HCIAs.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the financial support of the New Zealand Foundation for Science, Research and Technology (FRST). Human ethics approval was granted by the Victoria University of Wellington Research Ethics Board.

References

Aguilera, R.V. and Grøgaard, B. (2019), "The dubious role of institutions in international business: a road forward", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 20-35, doi: 10.1057/s41267-018-0181-5.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Aguinis, H. and Solarino, A.M. (2019), "Transparency and replicability in qualitative research: the case of interviews with elite informants", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 40 No. 8, pp. 1291-1315, doi: 10.1002/smj.3015.

Ali, I., Ali, M., Salam, M.A., Bhatti, Z.A., Arain, G.A. and Burhan, M. (2020), "How international SMEs' vicarious learning may improve their performance? The role of absorptive capacity, strength of ties with local SMEs, and their prior success experience", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 88 No. 4, pp. 87-100, doi: 10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.04.013.

Auld, G.W., Diker, A., Bock, A.M., Boushey, C.M., Bruhn, C.M., Cluskey, M., Edlefsen, M., Goldberg, D.L., Misner, S.L., Olson, B.H., Reicks, M., Wang, C. and Zaghloul, S. (2007), "Development of a decision tree to determine appropriateness of NVivo in analyzing qualitative data sets", *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 37-47, doi: 10.1016/j.jneb.2006.09.006.

Barry, J.M., Graca, S.S., Kharé, V.P. and Yurova, Y.V. (2021), "Examining institutional effects in B2B relationships through the lens of transition economies", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 93, pp. 221-234, doi: 10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.09.006.

Brass, D.J., Galaskiewicz, J., Greve, H.R. and Tsai, W. (2004), "Taking stock of networks and organizations: a multilevel perspective", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 47 No. 6, pp. 795-817, doi: 10.5465/20159624.

Buckley, P.J. and Casson, M. (2021), "Thirty years of international business review and international business research", *International Business Review*, Vol. 30 No. 2, p. 101795, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2021.101795.

Burt, R.S. (1995), *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Cavusgil, S.T. (2021), "Advancing knowledge on emerging markets: past and future research in perspective", *International Business Review*, Vol. 30 No. 2, p. 101796, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2021.101796.

Chan, C.S. and Pattnaik, C. (2021), "Coevolution of home country support and internationalization of emerging market firm", *International Business Review*, Vol. 30 No. 4, p. 101809, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2021.101809.

Chang, F.Y.M., Jack, R. and Webster, C.M. (2017), "Pre and post-entry resource needs for international entrepreneurs: the role of government and industry networks", *Journal of Management & Organization*, Vol. 23No No. 2, pp. 186-205. doi: 10.1017/jmo.2016.52.

Cherchem, N., Clark, D. and Wales, W. (2026), "The path to SME global performance: entrepreneurial self-efficacy, perceived institutional support, and international entrepreneurial orientation", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 61 No. 4, p. 101726.

Chopra, R., Bhardwaj, S., Baber, H. and Idris Sanusi, O. (2024), "Navigating global horizons: a review of export promotion and foreign market entry strategies for small and medium enterprises (SMEs)", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 39 No. 12, pp. 2774-2790, doi: 10.1108/JBIM-10-2023-0610.

Collins-Dogrul, J. (2012), "Tertius iungens brokerage and transnational intersectoral cooperation", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 8, pp. 989-1014, doi: 10.1177/0170840612445118.

Costa, E., Soares, A.L. and de Sousa, J.P. (2017), "Institutional networks for supporting the internationalisation of SMEs: the case of industrial business associations", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 32 No. 8, pp. 1182-1202, doi: 10.1108/JBIM-01-2016-0003.

Costa, E., Soares, A.L. and de Sousa, J.P. (2022), "Industrial business associations improving the internationalisation of SMEs with digital platforms: a design science research approach", *International Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 53, p. 102070, doi: 10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102070.

Creswell, J.W. (2013), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed., Sage Publications, London.

Crick, D. and Lindsay, V.J. (2015), "Service and service-intensive New Zealand internationalising SMEs", *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 366-393, doi: 10.1108/MIP-11-2013-0194.

Crouch, M. and McKenzie, H. (2006), "The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research", *Social Science Information*, Vol. 45 No. 4, pp. 483-499.

Dickson, P.H., Weaver, K.M. and Vozikis, G.S. (2013), "The impact of the institutional environment on SME internationalization: an assessment of the environmental assumptions of emerging integrated models of internationalization", *Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 43-55.

Gabrielsson, M., Seppälä, T., Gabrielsson, P., Rose, E.L. and Chetty, S.K. (2026), "Value chains, knowledge isolation, and performance in internationalizing SMEs", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 134, pp. 106-117, doi: 10.1016/j.indmarman.2026.02.018.

Gaur, A., Kumar, V. and Singh, D. (2014), "Institutions, resources, and internationalization of emerging economy firms", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 49 No. 1, pp. 12-20, doi: 10.1016/j.jwb.2013.04.002.

Ghauri, P., Strange, R. and Cooke, F.L. (2021), "Research on international business: the new realities", *International Business Review*, Vol. 30 No. 2, p. 101794, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2021.101794.

Gurau, C., Dana, L.-P. and Katz-Volovelsky, E. (2020), "Spanning transnational borders in industrial markets: a study of Israeli entrepreneurs in China", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 89, pp. 389-401, doi: 10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.03.003.

Haase, D.R. (2026), "Foreign market entry and Post-Entry strategy: a systematic review", doi: 10.2139/ssrn.6723468, available at: SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=6723468

Hald, K.S. (2012), "The role of boundary spanners in the formation of customer attractiveness", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 41 No. 8, pp. 1228-1240, doi: 10.1016/j.indmarman.2012.04.003.

Haley, U.C.V. and Boje, D.M. (2014), "Storytelling the internationalization of the multinational enterprise", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 45 No. 9, pp. 1115-1132, doi: 10.1057/jibs.2014.31.

Hernandez, V. and Nieto, M.J. (2015), "The effect of the magnitude and direction of institutional distance on the choice of international entry modes", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 122-132, doi: 10.1016/j.jwb.2014.03.001.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Högberg, L. (2024), "Boundary spanning in Cross-Sector collaboration: sensemaking and framing in a civil society public partnership beyond the crossroads", *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 28No No. 1, pp. 60-77, doi: 10.58235/sjpa.2023.16429.

Jupille, J. and Caporaso, J.A. (2022), *Theories of Institutions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Kahiya, E.T. (2020), "Context in international business: entrepreneurial internationalization from a distant small open economy", *International Business Review*, Vol. 29 No. 1, p. 101621, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2019.101621.

Kahiya, E.T. and Delaney, D. (2022), "Exporters under siege: dissecting trade policy response to COVID-19", *Journal of the International Council of Small Business*, doi: 10.1080/26437015.2021.2003167.

Keszey, T. (2018), "Boundary spanners' knowledge sharing for innovation success in turbulent times", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 22 No. 5, pp. 1061-1081, doi: 10.1108/JKM-01-2017-0033.

Kwon, S.-W., Rondi, E., Levin, D.Z., De Massis, A. and Brass, D.J. (2020), "Network brokerage: an integrative review and future research agenda", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 46 No. 6, pp. 1092-1120, doi: 10.1177/0149206320914694.

Levina, N. and Vaast, E. (2005), "The emergence of boundary spanning competence in practice: implications for implementation and use of information systems", *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 335-363, doi: 10.2307/25148682.

Lindsay, V., Rod, M. and Ashill, N. (2017), "Institutional and resource configurations associated with different SME foreign market entry modes", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 66, pp. 130-144, doi: 10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.07.011.

Lu, J., Liu, X., Wright, M. and Filatotchev, I. (2014), "International experience and FDI location choices of Chinese firms: the moderating effects of home country government support and host country institutions", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 45 No. 4, pp. 428-449, doi: 10.1057/jibs.2013.68.

Magnani, G. and Zucchella, A. (2019), "Coping with uncertainty in the internationalisation strategy: an exploratory study on entrepreneurial firms", *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 131-163, doi: 10.1108/IMR-12-2017-0267.

Makhmadshoev, D., Lassalle, P., Gölgeci, I. and Crone, M. (2026), "From barriers to gateways: leveraging institutional change for SMEs' access to international markets", *Management International Review*, Vol. 66 No. 3, pp. 597-637, doi: 10.1007/s11575-026-00616-9.

Malca, G.O., Peña-Vinces, J. and Acedo, F.J. (2020), "Export promotion programmes As export performance catalysts for SMEs: insights from an emerging economy", *Small Business Economics*, Vol. 55 No. 3, pp. 831-851, doi: 10.1007/s11187-019-00185-2.

Marano, V., Arregle, J.-L., Hitt, M.A., Spadafora, E. and Van Essen, M. (2016), "Home country institutions and the internationalization-performance relationship: a meta-analytic review", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 42 No. 5, pp. 1075-1110, doi: 10.1177/0149206315624963.

Martin, O.M., Chetty, S. and Bai, W. (2022), "Foreign market entry knowledge and international performance: the mediating role of international market selection and network capability", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 57 No. 2, p. 101266, doi: 10.1016/j.jwb.2021.101266.

Melo Brito, C. (2001), "Towards an institutional theory of the dynamics of industrial networks", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 150-166, doi: 10.1108/08858620110389777.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (2004), *Qualitative Data Analysis, An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Mogos Descotes, R., Walliser, B., Holzmüller, H. and Guo, X. (2011), "Capturing institutional home country conditions for exporting SMEs", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 64 No. 12, pp. 1303-1310, doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.01.010.

Murphy, W.H., Gölgeci, I. and Johnston, D.A. (2020), "Power-based behaviors between supply chain partners of diverse national and organizational cultures: the crucial role of boundary spanners' cultural intelligence", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 204-218, doi: 10.1108/JBIM-05-2018-0179.

Ngo, V.D., Janssen, F., Leonidou, L.C. and Christodoulides, P. (2016), "Domestic institutional attributes as drivers of export performance in an emerging and transition economy", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 69 No. 8, pp. 2911-2922, doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.02.017.

Nicolini, D. (2009), "Zooming In and out: studying practices by switching theoretical lenses and trailing connections", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 30No No. 12, pp. 1391-1418.

Niittymies, A. and Pajunen, K. (2020), "Cognitive foundations of firm internationalization: a systematic review and agenda for future research", *International Business Review*, Vol. 29 No. 4, p. 101654, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2019.101654.

North, D.C. (1994), "Economic performance through time", *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 84 No. 3, pp. 359-368.

North, D.C. (1990), *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Obstfeld, D. (2005), "Social networks, the tertius iungens orientation, and involvement in innovation", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 100-130, doi: 10.2189/asqu.2005.50.1.100.

OECD (2023), "SME policy index 2023", OECD Publications, available at: www.oecd.org/en/publications/2023/06/oecd-sme-and-entrepreneurship-outlook-2023_c5ac21d0.html

Pacheco, L.M. and Matos, A.P. (2022), "Foreign presence and export performance: the role of Portuguese commercial diplomacy", *The International Trade Journal*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 147-169, doi: 10.1080/08853908.2021.1907262.

Pappu, R. and Quester, P. (2010), "Country equity: conceptualization and empirical evidence", *International Business Review*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 276-291, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2009.12.005.

Peng, M.W., Sun, S.L., Pinkham, B. and Chen, H. (2009), "The institution-based view as a third leg for a strategy tripod", *Academy of Management Perspectives*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 63-82, doi: 10.5465/amp.2009.43479264.

Perera, S.R., Sinha, P., Gilbert-Saad, A. and Gajanayaka, C. (2026), "Vicarious learning in SME internationalization: a systematic review and thematic synthesis", *Journal of*

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Management & Organization, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 524-548, doi: 10.1017/jmo.2026.10087.

Petersen, N.H. and Rasmussen, E. (2024), "Digital entrepreneur's platformication and rapid internationalization through brokering, making and giving sense", *Small Enterprise Research*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 18-38, doi: 10.1080/13215906.2023.2288579.

Puthusserry, P., Khan, Z., Knight, G. and Miller, K. (2020), "How do rapidly internationalizing SMEs learn? Exploring the link between network relationships, learning approaches and post-entry growth of rapidly internationalizing SMEs from emerging markets", *Management International Review*, Vol. 60 No. 4, pp. 515-542.

Quintane, E. and Carnabuci, G. (2016), "How do brokers broker? Tertius gaudens, tertius iungens, and the temporality of structural holes", *Organization Science*, Vol. 27 No. 6, pp. 1343-1360, doi: 10.1287/orsc.2016.1081.

Ruzzier, M., Hisrich, R.D. and Antoncic, B. (2006), "SME internationalization research: past, present, and future", *Journal of Small Business & Enterprise Development*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 476-497, doi: 10.1108/14626000610705705.

Sadeghi, J.V., Nkongolo-Bakenda, J.-M., Anderson, R.B. and Dana, L.-P. (2019), "An institution-based view of international entrepreneurship: a comparison of context-based and universal determinants in developing and economically advanced countries", *International Business Review*, Vol. 28 No. 6, p. 101588, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2019.101588.

Safari, A. (2025), "Interfirm multidimensional trust in firm internationalization", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 40 No. 13, pp. 158-170, doi: 10.1108/JBIM-05-2024-0344.

Santistevan, D. (2022), "Boundary-spanning coordination: insights into lateral collaboration and lateral alignment in multinational enterprises", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 57 No. 3, p. 101291, doi: 10.1016/j.jwb.2021.101291.

Scott, W.R. (2004), "Institutional theory: contributing to a theoretical research program", in Smith, K.G. and Hitt, M.A. (Eds), *Great Minds in Management: The Process of Theory Development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, pp. 460-484.

Scott, W.R. (2013), *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities*, 4th ed., Sage Publishing, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Scuotto, V., Del Giudice, M., Tarba, S., Messeni Petruzzelli, M. and Chang, V. (2020), "International social SMEs in emerging countries: do governments support their international growth?", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 55 No. 5, p. 101113, doi: 10.1016/j.jwb.2020.101113.

Shahzad, K., Hafeez, S., Heimo, T., Mäenpää, A., Mubarak, M.F. and Evans, R. (2025), "Developing the innovation capabilities of SMEs: the role of intermediary firms in knowledge ecosystems", in *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*, Vol. 72, pp. 604-618, doi: 10.1109/TEM.2025.3543779.

Sima, Y., Lawton, T.C., Doran, J. and McCarthy, N. (2025), "State agencies and SME internationalization: a review and research agenda", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 201, p. 115728.

Solberg, C.A. and Durrieu, F. (2023), "Patterns of international marketing strategy", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 38 No. 7, pp. 1532-1544, doi: 10.1108/JBIM-02-2022-0091.

Somech, A. and Drach-Zahavy, A. (2014), "Toward a conceptualization of inter-team boundary activities identifying intra- and inter-team contextual facilitators", in Langan-Fox, J. and Cooper, C.L. (Eds), *Boundary-Spanning in Organizations: Network, Influence, and Conflict*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 99-115.

Srivastava, M. (2021), "The influence of brokers on networking behaviour during internationalization: a study of Czech SMEs", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 436-453, doi: 10.1108/JBIM-01-2020-0033.

Star, S.L. and Griesemer, J.R. (1989), "Institutional ecology, 'translations' and boundary objects: amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's museum of vertebrate zoology, 1907–39", *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 387-420, doi: 10.1177/030631289019003001.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed., Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

Sun, S.L., Peng, M.W., Lee, R.P. and Tan, W. (2015), "Institutional open access at home and outward internationalization", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 234-246, doi: 10.1016/j.jwb.2014.04.003.

Tinits, P. and Fey, C.F. (2022), "The effects of timing and order of government support mechanisms for SME exports", *Management International Review*, Vol. 62 No. 2, pp. 285-323, doi: 10.1007/s11575-022-00465-2.

Torres, M.M., Clegg, L.J. and Varum, C.A. (2016), "The missing link between awareness and use in the uptake of pro-internationalization incentives", *International Business Review*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 495-510, doi: 10.1016/j.ibusrev.2015.09.002.

Vakkayil, J. (2014), "Boundary objects in boundary-spanning", in Langan-Fox, J. and Cooper, C.L. (Eds), *Boundary-Spanning in Organizations: Network, Influence, and Conflict*, Routledge, New York, pp. 29-43.

Wilemon, D. (2014), "Boundary-spanning as enacted in three organizational functions: new venture management, project management, and product management", in Langan-Fox, J. and Cooper, C.L. (Eds), *Boundary-Spanning in Organizations: Network, Influence, and Conflict*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 230-250.

Wu, B. and Deng, P. (2020), "Internationalization of SMEs from emerging markets: an institutional escape perspective", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 108, pp. 337-350, doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.10.037.

Yagi, N. and Kleinberg, J. (2011), "Boundary work: an interpretive ethnographic perspective on negotiating and leveraging cross-cultural identity", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 5, pp. 629-653, doi: 10.1057/jibs.2011.1.

Yang, H. and Stoian, M.C. (2025), "Post-entry internationalization of born globals: the role of dynamic capabilities in accelerating growth", *International Business Review*, Vol. 34 No. 2, p. 102299.

Yang, Z. and Su, C. (2014), "Institutional theory in business marketing: a conceptual framework and future directions", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 43 No. 5, pp. 721-725, doi: 10.1016/j.indmarman.2014.04.009.

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026

Yin, R.K. (2004), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, (2nd ed.), Sage, Newbury Park, CA.

Zahoor, N. and Lew, Y.K. (2021), "The drivers of the post-entry internationalisation commitment of small and medium-sized enterprises", *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 40 No. 4, pp. 477-506, doi: 10.1177/02662426211042775.

Zhang, C., Bai, T., Zhou, A.J. and Zhou, S.S. (2025), "Digital platforms, internal digitalization, and internationalization of SMEs", *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 58 No. 6, p. 102588.

Zouari, A., Chaney, D. and Khemakhem, R. (2025), "Institutional orientation–export performance relationship in B2B contexts: examination of its facilitating and boundary conditions", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 40 No. 3, pp. 669-680, doi: 10.1108/JBIM-01-2024-0010.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

Corresponding author

Nicholas Ashill can be contacted at: nick.ashill@vuw.ac.nz

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: **permissions@emeraldinsight.com**

Downloaded from www.emerald.com/jbim/article-pdf/41/13/380/11916604/jbim-04-2025-0366en.pdf by Auckland University of Technology user on 19 October 2026