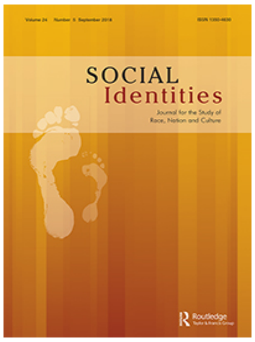

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Leveraging the common and outsourcing the distinct: institutional difference and multinational company identity in emerging economies

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges of outsidership faced by multinational companies (MNCs) accessing emerging economies. The paper departs from popular conceptualisations of culture drawing instead on social identity theory as part of an institutions-based view, to explain how employing a singularities approach can allow the identification of commonalities of Indianness and Australianness that can be leveraged to ameliorate negative socially embedded business norms that pose a challenge to MNC success in emerging economies. This study shows that despite recognised formal (regulatory) and informal (cultural) differences, managers of Australian MNCs operating in India were able to innovatively identify and exploit cultural commonalties/singularities to ease cultural adjustment and mitigate intergroup conflict, allowing them to achieve an innovative institutional fit. The paper discusses how, using this approach, sole-venture MNCs can access many of the benefits provided by collaborative entry modes while preserving MNC identity. We further propose that the singularities approach can provide a valuable starting point to develop culturally appropriate competence training initiatives.

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Introduction

Multinational companies (MNCs) confront numerous challenges in emerging economies including what are termed as 'liabilities of foreignness' (Zaheer, 1995). Key among these is a lack of local identity, or of being 'outsiders' and the lack of local knowledge, which includes knowledge of the market, politics, culture and society. These liabilities make the formulation of successful operational strategies difficult (Eden & Miller, 2004; Mezias, 2002). With reference to strategy implementation, scholars have discussed the importance of identity, relationships and networks in facilitating MNC activity in emerging markets – stressing the need to overcome the 'liability of outsidership' (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). There are several reasons that may explain what gives rise to such challenges. Among several explanations, scholarly interest in national business systems (Pereira, Malik, &

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Froese, forthcoming 2017; Whitley, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Witt & Redding, 2014), which incorporates a nation's institutional and cultural systems influencing MNC practices, explains the differences in coordination and control in different nation states when MNCs engage in cross-border trade. Whitley (1999b) defined a nation's business systems as a set of institutional structures aimed at coordination and control that are socially interlocked and differ in their nature to create distinctive ways of organising business activity. This holistic approach combines the theoretical frameworks from both institutional and cultural perspectives and acknowledges that diversity exists even within one nation state due to cultural and institutional differences. More recently, scholars have applied the concept of national business systems to understand the challenges faced by MNCs in new markets, especially in emerging economies (Peng, Sun, Pinkham, & Chen, 2009; Pereira et al., forthcoming 2017; Witt & Redding, 2014). While the above approach highlights the importance of, and differences between, social interactions among actors in an institutional and cultural system, there is an emerging body of literature, which highlights the differences in understanding culture, for example, in the Indian cultural context (Malik & Pereira, 2016a, 2016b; Pereira & Malik, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2016). This latter stream of research highlights the need to move away from an Hofstedian approach to understanding culture. Relevant to this paper, and in line with the above research on culture, a study by Laleman, Pereira, and Malik (2015) identified 10 cultural and business singularities of Indianness. Laleman et al. (2015) argued that a singularities approach is useful in understanding what constitutes Indianness. This overarching theoretical framework encompasses the challenges found within the international business literature, which notes how both formal and informal institutions, including cultural norms and ethics, can exacerbate the liabilities of foreignness/outsidership. These liabilities can create cultural and ethical challenges for MNCs, especially for firms not cognisant of what Peng et al. (2009) describe as the 'rules of the game'.

The institutions-based view contends that firms require an understanding of both formal and informal institutions and explains why MNCs use strategies such as collaborative entry modes (joint ventures (JVs)) to learn about, and deal with, institutional differences (Hoskisson, Eden, Lau, & Wright, 2000; Meyer & Peng, 2005). Another important function of collaborative entry modes is to gain access to existing business networks in order to overcome major liabilities of foreignness – like being an 'outsider' (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Cognisant that JVs are used to mitigate 'outsidership', MNCs using this mode of entry should, in theory, face fewer challenges than an MNC entering the market independently. By contrast, a sole-venture (SV) entry mode cannot easily mitigate institutional difference when entering the new market but, rationally, still need to adapt to the local 'rules of the game' post-entry. While having a JV partner helps to moderate a lack of local market knowledge, it does not eliminate the need to manage institutional difference post-entry. As a result, others have argued for the role of human agency in creating differentiation in a heavily institutionalised environment to achieve sustained high levels of performance (Boon, Paauwe, Boselie, & Den Hartog, 2009). For example, Boon et al. (2009) note that managers can exercise their individual agency to develop three strategic fits in a given institutional environment: a conformist fit; an innovative fit-using active innovative development; or a deviant fit, using active resistance in an institutional environment. Similarly, studying the impact of people management (HRM) practices in a post-global financial crisis era in Indian, UK and US MNCs operating in India, Malik (2013) found differences in the strategic choices exercised by these MNCs in dealing with cultural and institutional pressures imposed by the crisis.

The need to reconcile the host-country's local institutional differences persists irrespective of entry mode. Therefore, and in keeping with the theme of this special issue, the purpose of this paper is to address the call for research to consider MNCs as complex identities capable of dealing with conflicting institutional and cultural pressures (and varying rules of the game) irrespective of entry mode by exploring how MNCs deal with these pressures 'on the ground'. This paper contributes to the literature by focusing on the question of 'how' these conflicting pressures are managed, post-entry, and on an ongoing basis in the context of MNCs operating in India. In further alignment with the theme of this special issue, we suggest that within the institution-based view, there is a clear role for the social identity perspective, particularly social identity theory and self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1999), in explaining how MNCs and their managers reconcile institutional and cultural differences.

Social identity theory posits that groups provide coherence within society by creating a sense of belonging from which people derive identity. Grouping can be based on diverse commonalities that include, for example, religion, politics, social strata and culture. Group members share a common bond, which can lead to prejudiced views against those that do not share their views or values creating an 'us' and 'them' mentality referred to as in-groups (us) and out-groups (them). In-groups, by nature, will discriminate against out-groups to enhance their self-image and there can be a tendency to exaggerate differences and ignore the similarities between groups (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, & Schmid, 2011; Tajfel, 1982). This presents challenges for MNCs to respond appropriately to the different rules of the game, which in emerging economies is central to success. As a result, managers must implement strategies and business practices in a way that preserves the 'identity' of the MNC and its managers (in both SVs and JVs) while, at the same time, ameliorating the differences presented within the local environment. Recognising the potential for conflict, therefore, and guided by insights from extant theory, we pose the research question – *how are formal (regulatory) and informal (culture, norms and ethics) challenges managed and reconciled with MNC identity?*

To answer this research question, we draw on in-depth interviews with senior managers of 14 Australian service MNCs operating in India to explore how those MNCs meet the challenge of institutional difference in a major emerging economy. Both SVs (10) and JVs (4) were purposively included within the sample of case sites, as the experience of these two forms of foreign market operations would be expected to differ for theoretically predictable reasons. The data analysis reveals that despite recognised formal (regulatory) and informal (cultural) distances, managers of Australian MNCs were able to innovatively identify and exploit cultural commonalties, not only in their interactions with Indian stakeholders, but also to ease the cultural adjustment of their own managers on the ground, and achieve an innovative institutional fit (Boon et al., 2009).

The practical and theoretical significance of these findings is discussed in the final section of the paper, which explains what our findings reveal about how MNCs can address institutional and cultural challenges in emerging economies by leveraging commonalities and outsourcing the distinct, thus preserving the MNC's identity. Significantly, we note that common categorisations of social identities can minimise cultural distance, which goes some way towards easing institutional challenges relating to culture differences. We propose avenues for future research based on the potentially controversial findings that MNCs in India protect their ‘identity’ by outsourcing normatively and ethically contentious aspects of doing business under different ‘rules of the game’ in host economies. The next section sets out the theoretical and conceptual context for the study.

Theoretical framework – institutional theory

Major emerging markets such as India and China are transitional in terms of their industrial and institutional environments, which often brings market uncertainties (Peng, 2001). Khanna, Palepu, and Sinha (2005) argue that one of the challenges of emerging markets is the lack of specialised intermediaries, regulatory systems and means of enforcing contracts (known as ‘institutional voids’). Moreover, even where the necessary laws are in place, their implementation and enforcement are frequently weak. Success in emerging markets, therefore, hinges on understanding these institutional voids as well as the ability of the MNC to adapt their strategies to include the local context (Khanna & Palepu, 2010).

Peng et al. (2009) note that formal and informal institutional constraints make it difficult for ‘outsiders’ to do business. Their assertions are based on North’s (1990) seminal work on institutional theory, which provides an explanation for the socially embedded rules that shape business norms at the country level (Hodgson, 2006; North, 1990; Scott, 1995). Scott (1995) explains that these economic institutions include normative and cognitive structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behaviour. Importantly, informal institutional constraints are said to guide and sustain individual identity and ways of behaving (Scott, 1995). MNCs have the challenge then of reconciling socially embedded practices and ways of behaving from their country of origin with those of the new host country. While regulation as a formal regulatory institution can be codified, many aspects of informal institutions are to a degree ambiguous to ‘outsiders’ and must be learnt ‘in situ’. Differences in institutional frameworks necessitate learning about what regulations exist, but also how they are enforced, as well as norms and ethical standards that exist around formal regulations. While there is a considerable body of literature dedicated to the question of how institutional difference might affect market entry choices, less research has focused on how organisations ‘play the game’. That is, operational strategy, post-entry when the ‘new rules are not completely known’ (Peng, Wang, & Jiang, 2008, p. 924) more specifically, as managers are confronted with institutional voids and cultural differences, how do they reconcile this with the norms of their MNC?

Extant research indicates that one way MNCs manage institutional differences is to work with partner organisations. MNCs try to overcome limitations by looking for partner organisations that can help them fill voids (Khanna & Rivkin, 2001). Prior research has examined how MNCs address institutional uncertainty forming alliances (Hitt, Harrison, Ireland, & Best, 1998), joining networks (Khanna & Rivkin, 2001) and using personal relationships (Peng & Luo, 2000). Peng and Zhou (2005, p. 323) have noted that when formal rules supportive of market economies are not well established, then ‘MNCs’ strategic choices will be network-centred, heavily relying on strong personal ties’. Scholars argue that the importance of cooperative relationships is due to the lack of development of formal institutions (Buckley, 2004; Fukuyama, 1995). Gaining access to business or personal networks can be through a JV partner or in the case of SVs, with supply chain partners or strategic alliances that help break down liabilities of outsidership (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Khanna & Rivkin, 2001). Nonetheless, even in this scenario, MNCs and their managers will still need to adjust to the new institutional environment to some level and/or understand when institutional difference actually requires local partner knowledge and/or be aware of when norms and practices in the host country are not compatible with their own.

As suggested in our introduction, these challenges are not exclusive to one form of market operation, but it is rational to assume that firms in a SV (compared to those in a JV) are going to be disproportionally disadvantaged due to the absence of some means to tap into existing networks in the host country. Cognisant of this, we postulate, that while SVs and JVs will seek out collaborations to ease institutional differences in emerging markets, the latter will mitigate some of the challenges by default through their partner. In contrast, SVs are likely to face a greater challenge in understanding and reconciling formal and informal institutional differences in the absence of a partner with an appreciation of the normative structures that guide and sustain identity and ways of behaving. To help appreciate the scale of the challenge, scholars have also stressed the need to understand national cultural singularities (Laleman et al., 2015). Teschner (2008, p. 32) defines 'Singularities' as 'what makes things unique … Singularities are what give something its identity, albeit an identity that is established by contrast and exclusion'. As noted earlier, social identity theory stresses how social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation (Turner, 1982) lead to categorisation of the self and others into subgroups on the basis of some distinct feature (in this case, nationality) and this highlights differences between groups (Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991). As a result, MNCs and their managers faced with institutional differences can experience a clash of identities that needs to be reconciled. Mitigating these clashes requires active human agency when exercising strategic choices.

Despite the challenges discussed above, MNCs are searching for new strategies to take advantage of the opportunities offered by emerging markets. One especially significant emerging economy context is India which continues to attract close attention by MNCs due to its emergence as an important source of economic strength. Similar to the other BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia and China), India has been instrumental in gradually changing the global business environment through its ability to attract FDI (Javalgi & Talluri, 1996; Kedia, Mukherjee, & Lahiri, 2007; Wilson & Purushothaman, 2003). One important source country for Indian FDI is Australia. Comparing Hofstede's (1983) cultural dimensions, there are palpable cultural differences between Australia and India that are likely to create institutional challenges for Australian MNCs. However, this paper departs from the popular conceptualisations of culture and focuses on cultural singularities of Indianness and Australianness that provide the basis for leveraging the common. Exploring inter-cultural dynamics in a cross-cultural setting at an Indian subsidiary in Belgium, Laleman et al. (2015) identified 10 cultural and business singularities that typify Indianness. These include five cultural singularities: *jan gan man bhav* (emotions towards national anthem), *rishtey* (relationship), *bhojan* (food), *jat-gotra-varna* (ancestral classification based on abilities) and *dharma* (to hold, maintain and keep); and five business singularities: *vyavahar* (communicative expectations), *nyaya* (justice), gurutva (heaviness or authority of the office of the Guru), *karma yoga* (intelligent actions) and *jugaad* (frugal innovation).

In Laleman et al.'s study, in a cross-cultural meeting place, the participants (Indians and Belgians) were first asked what each knew of the 'other's culture'. Based on these interactions, 10 descriptions of cultural singularities of Indianness were developed. Among the key values of Indianness, the first, *jan gan man bhav* (emotions towards national anthem), was evidenced through Indians' leaning towards and attachment with national integration campaigns. For example, maintaining truth and honesty as a national focus to overcome corruption. The second value of *rishtey* (relationship) highlights the importance of family values as the basis for relationships between people. The third value of *bhojan* (food) was viewed as a key connecting social value and it traverses diverse cuisines from India's geographical regions as the common connecting value in social discourses. The fourth value of *jat-gotra-varna* (ancestral classification based on abilities) creates a sense of belongingness and community among peers. It also serves as a mechanism for social control, based on abilities rather than based on the commonly misunderstood hierarchy of the caste system. Finally, the fifth value of *dharma* (to uphold and keep) highlights the primacy of 'established' norms as a framework for guiding one's ethical conduct.

While the above five singularities are basic building blocks of social and cultural interactions, the authors identified a further five *business* singularities that are quite evident in Indian workplaces. Understanding these is invaluable, as it allows 'others' to avoid unnecessary conflict and misunderstanding. The first business singularity of *vyavahar* (communicative expectations) notes the outspokenness, circular talk and rigidity Indians display in their communications that may frustrate non-Indians in a multicultural workplace. Indians are often less assertive compared to Anglo-Saxon employees. The second business singularity of *nyaya* (justice) builds on the above business singularity and relies on logical arguments and reasoning, such as the use of Aristotelian bipolar syllogisms, though not of a nature that the 'other' or non-Indian is normally aware of. The third business singularity of gurutva (heaviness or authority of the office of the Guru) notes that Indians value leadership through loyalty rather than competence. The fourth business singularity of *karma yoga* (intelligent actions) is perhaps the most established and prevalent and focuses on leading a disciplined way of life – at home and at work – such that there is an expectation that the boundaries between these domains are artificial and thus blurred. The final business singularity of *jugaad* (frugal innovation) typifies a way of problem-solving in extreme resource constraints, resulting in usually a temporary and often a non-durable solution. This is also often manifested at work wherein managers rarely say no and come up with alternate and unconventional solutions.

Laleman et al. further argue that Indianness needs to be viewed as a competency that can be developed by anyone, not just Indians. Doing so will help improve cooperation between different stakeholders in an inter-cultural workplace setting. Cognisant of the institutional distance (both formal and informal) between Australia and India and guided by extant insights from scholarly literature, we seek to answer our research questions by exploring how formal and informal challenges are reconciled with Australian MNC identities operating in India.

Research methodology

Yin (2003) who defines a case study as an investigation into contemporary phenomenon operating in a real-life context highlights important considerations of relevance to this study, especially, seeking the views of the key 'actors'. In light of this, a case-based method is appropriate to explore the experience of MNC managers as 'actors' post-entry. Again, in line with Yin (2003), purposive sampling was employed in accordance with a set of qualitative decision rules which seek to extend the scope of case-based generalisations as widely as possible, but which also allow for the best exploration of the research problem. Punch (2013) states that in order to achieve focus in a study, clarification of the contextual factors of most relevance relative to this unit of analysis should be established (in this study, the unit of analysis is the MNC subsidiary in India). The majority of cases were SVs, which, the literature suggests, will be disproportionally impacted by institutional distance relative to other forms of market entry. This approach involved the selection of multiple SV cases ($n = 10$) guided by the logic of repeated experimentation to enhance the validity of the findings. Four JV cases were also included in the sample, as this type of market entry would be expected to vary for theoretically predictable reasons (Yin, 2003), that is, MNCs in JVs can draw on the local knowledge and networks of their JV partner.

The final sample consisted of 14 Australian MNCs from the service sector, representing medium (21–199 employees) and large (over 200 employees) organisations. These MNCs have operated in India for at least 3 years during which period they would have experienced and responded to institutional challenges. The primary mode of collecting data was by in-depth interviews. However, documentary evidence was also gathered. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with at least one senior manager from each Australian service MNC. The respondents were all senior managers with roles in the strategic management of the business operations in India. The position title of the respondents included Managing Director, CEO, Vice President, Executive Director and General Manager. Most interviewees could be categorised as 'corporate elites' because of their status and experience (Welch, Marscham-Piekkari, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2002). Therefore, from a methodological perspective, all interviewees were key informants capable of providing an overview of the MNCs experience in India as well as their own personal experience. A list of the interviewees suitably anonymised appears in Table 1.

Interviewees were asked to reflect on formal and informal institutional difference and challenges they experienced as managers and to explain how these challenges were

Table 1. Information about interviewees.

Company name	Position title	Industry type	Type	Firm size
HOSPI 1 (JV)	Gen Manager	Hospitality	Face-to-face	Large
MGMTCON 1 (JV)	Chairman	Management Consultancy	Face-to-face	Medium
MGMTCON 2 (SV)	Director India Business Services	Management Consultancy	Face-to-face	Large
TECHCON 1 (SV)	Executive Director	Technical Consultancy	Face-to-face	Large
TECHCON 2 (SV)	Gen Manager-BD	Technical Consultancy	Face-to-face	Large
TECHCON 3 (SV)	Project Director	Technical Consultancy	Phone	Large
TECHCON 4 (SV)	Managing Director	Technical Consultancy	Face-to-face	Large
TECHCON 5 (SV)	Project Director	Technical Consultancy	Face-to-face	Large
TECHCON 6 (SV)	Principal	Technical Consultancy	Face-to-face	Medium
SOFTWARE 1 (SV)	Vice President Sales & Support	Information Technology	Phone	Medium
SOFTWARE 2(SV)	Channel Manager	Information Technology	Face-to-face	Medium
BANK 1 (JV)	Executive Director	Banking	Face-to-face	Large
AIR 1 (JV)	General Manager-Asia	Airlines	Face-to-face	Large
AIR 2 (SV)	Commercial Manager	Airlines	Face-to-face	Large

Note: JV: joint venture; SV: sole venture.

addressed and reconciled with the Australian MNC practices. Analysis involved the reduction of the large quantity of textual data through coding, pattern matching and categorising within themes. Once the categories had emerged, illustrative quotations were collated from the interview transcripts to provide key examples to validate our conclusions and to assess conclusions against prior research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A number of key themes emerged which addressed the research question, which constitute the findings from this study.

Findings

Three key findings emerge from our in-depth analysis of interview data. The first theme apparent across all cases was that despite formal (regulatory) and informal (cultural) distances, Australian MNCs were able to identify and exploit cultural and historical commonalties, both in their interactions with Indian stakeholders, but also to ease the cultural adjustment of their managers on the ground. The interview data reflecting this theme in the data were coded under the label – *Leveraging Commonalities*. This label encompassed quotes that reflect Australian managers' recognitions and celebration of common social identities that they believed help their interactions with Indian stakeholders. By exploiting common cultural, social and historical factors, shared identities were stressed and this had the effect of lessening the potential negative consequences of distinct Indian and Australian identities.

Theme (1) Leveraging commonalities: When examining the role of informal institutional or cultural distance, many studies suggest that as the cultural differences between an MNC's home country and a host market increase, there will be a decrease in the MNCs ability to be effective (Gomez-Mejia & Palich, 1997; Hennart & Larimo, 1998). In our theorising in the first half of this paper, we too considered the potential significance of cultural distance between Australia and India envisaging a culture shock for Australian managers in India.

While respondents were conscious of the potential for cultural difference to cause problems, 12 of the 16 managers referred to the commonalities rather than differences that they saw between Australia and India, indicating that positive perceptions might play a part in easing this informal institutional challenge. There was a conscious effort by the respondents to seek out a common identity and to stress this as a source of advantage relative to MNCs from countries other than Australia. For example, a respondent pointed to the '3 Cs' as something shared between Australia and India – *Cricket, Curry & Commonwealth* – and believed that the 3 Cs gave them an advantage in India when compared with MNCs from other countries. This sentiment was common in the data and is reflected in the comments of MGMTCON 1 who summarised:

> We talk about cricket, we talk about Westminster system, about colonial heritage, there is commonality between Australia and India, which is not found between America and India or England and India.

The above depicts some evidence exploring the common ground through the cultural singularities of *bhojan* and *rishtey.* Doing so, improves the chances of collaboration. He also stressed the positives of his Australian identity as something that gave them an advantage over other MNC (from the US or UK) – these comments went beyond noting commonalities with India, rather reflected the belief that these historical identities were important. …

> One thing we always say, which may not be true is that the Australian personality is adaptable. We know we are not a big power, we don't have the arrogance or snobbery of, I am generalising now, of the British or the arrogance and the big power thing about the Americans. … . Australia is a tough country, to make this country what it is; people had to work bloody hard. You know the Digger thing … Australians are pretty good at working in difficult and different environments.

The interview with the General Manager of HOSPI 1 offered similar insights into some of the commonalities perceived by the senior managers of Australian service MNCs. Again, that respondents emphasised historical as well as contemporary commonalities was significant, because informal institutions, culture and identities are deeply rooted and socially embedded. The General Manager of HOSPI 1 was also able to make comparisons based on his other experiences in China.

> There is a commonality because of the British rule. We have the levelling issue, something to talk about and it is always cricket. People laugh when I say that but I tell you, I was with some very senior executives and politicians and the icebreaker was cricket. It's quite easy to deal with Indians. In comparison with China it is definitely much easier to do business in India. Whenever I go to India, I go to China and I can easily compare the difference. … it is much easier for me to make the cultural match-up in India.

Similarly, the emotion of a national spirit is being evoked through the above quotes. The common aspects of national social identity that both nations hold dear are being deployed to seek cooperation. The notion that both countries have a passion, for example, towards self-reliance and cricket, invokes a national emotion that most Indians can identify with.

There was also a strong sub-theme of cultural sensitivity, whereby respondents explained that in addition to celebrating what was common, which helped them to share a common identity with their Indian counterparts, they acknowledged that you had to approach interactions with some caution. The data indicated that the Australian managers displayed cultural sensitivity to the aspirations of the local employees. For example, when asked if cultural distance affects business operations, the General Manager of HOSPI 1 explained:

> No, I don't think it does, provided you have cultural sensitivity and you are able to extract the best from both the cultures and that's the key. You must be culturally sensitive without compromising on the standards you want to achieve.

The Principal of TECHCON 6 shared a similar viewpoint. When asked about cultural differences, he responded in a way that both stressed sensitivity, but also how he believed that this sensitivity was a reflection of his and his colleagues' Australian identity.

> There are people in our Sydney office who are different from each other so we can say that there are no major cultural issues that we faced. … One of the reasons why Australians are successful is that we are very exportable. We have a very multicultural society. We are very easy with people.

Even when 'frustrating' examples of cultural difference were raised, there was a palpable sentiment that is effectively managed not just by being sensitive, but also by finding a shared identity despite differences. While there were some examples of the 'frustrating' Hoftsedian cultural distance dimensions related to 'Power distance' and 'Uncertainty Avoidance' (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001), there was also a small element of *Vyavahar* evident in the day-to-day businesses that enhanced understanding, thereby reducing cultural distances. The Director of TECHCON 6 explained:

> (e.g. Power Distance) – It is quite different from Australia how important the title is. The title on the card is a lot of prestige.
>
> (e.g. Uncertainty Avoidance and Vyavahar) – Most of the engineers are not used to taking any initiatives. … We train people to be proactive and teach them that it's okay to question your boss and try to do things differently.

Notably, this interviewee went on to stress that the prior experience of managers in other emerging markets did assist them to adapt, but also allowed them to appreciate the cultural commonalties with India, relative to other experiences (experiences in China and Indonesia were examples). Throughout the 14 interviews, cultural differences were acknowledged, but so too was the positive perception of *commonalities*. As a result, they did not view culture as a source of conflict. From a social identity perspective, it is clear from the data that this sample of managers actively sought self-categorisations that could be reconciled with their Indian counterparts. That is, a subgroup identity based on common features (e.g. the 3 Cs) built an expectation of meaningful commonalities. This raises questions in relation to the generalisability of this finding – a matter we return to in the final discussion section of the paper.

Theme (2) Outsourcing institutional distinctions: A second major theme emerging in the data related to tactics used to overcome institutional voids. The data reflecting the tactics used to overcome institutional voids include reports on 'outsourcing' activities that could not be reconciled with Australian norms. These data were coded as – *Outsourcing institutional distinctions*. This label captured both the key challenges presented by specific institutional differences and the intent of tactics used to manage institutional differences (i.e. distinct from the MNC). Data coded under this theme included illustrations of practices that could not be easily reconciled with the Australian managers' identities and/or home country practices.

The data coded under *Outsourcing Institutional Distinctions* included discussions related to dealing with 'ambiguous regulations', 'how regulations were enforced', but the majority of examples related to issues of arcane and time-consuming 'bureaucratic processes' (stressed repeatedly by 11 of 14 respondents). Interviewees reported that some industries were highly regulated by comparison to their previous experiences (banking and finance), while others had comparatively fewer regulations (technical consultancy). It was apparent in the data that the processes of starting and expanding the business were slow and cumbersome. Respondents reported 'too much bureaucracy and red tape', that 'rules lacked clarity' as well as 'ambiguity in the interpretation of rules'. How these challenges were met led to the theme *Outsourcing Institutional Distinction* because they included examples of tactics that were not compatible with the normal practice in the home country. This also involved using collaborative strategies (through a partner in the JVs) and through other collaborators for the SVs case sites.

In relation to ambiguity in the regulations, the experience of the Executive Director of BANK 1 is illustrative of a common theme. Recounting his experience, he pointed out that the process of bidding for major contracts in India was not transparent. He compared the Australian and Indian bidding process to highlight the difference:

> In Australia the bid processes are very very structured. But in India it is different … … that's why we sometimes joint venture with partners because sometimes when we see something and say it doesn't make sense, then they guide us and tell us that on the surface it doesn't make sense but in reality it does and here's why. You could be playing by the rules, and lose, that is where I find operating in India a bit challenging.

The above would suggest the inability of Australian actors to understand the *vyavahar* and this reflects their inability to deal with ambiguity that is typical in some highly regulated industries. The General Manager of HOSPI 1, a hotel chain, also stressed the difficulty of managing red tape and the degree of complexity compared with what he was familiar. He explained that they needed more than 46 licences before they could start their operations in Gurgaon, a city near New Delhi. This MNC overcame the frustrations of getting the licences on time with the help of their JV partner who was well connected to the authorities. He explained:

> The Indian market is difficult and complex. It is good to have a partner who knows the business and bureaucracy, a partner who has the right connections.

This perspective was echoed in a SV example where 'associates' or 'consultants' were hired to help with red tape and to deal with normative institutional differences around regulation. This included more explicit references to practices that MNCs wished to distance themselves from. As noted by a Project Director of a large project development and contracting group:

> We don't get involved in corruption, but there are some situations which you are not sure whether you call them corruption or not, we manage that through our associates. We rely upon our associates to finalise certain deals …

The use of *Jugaad*, although for dealing with the complex and often-convoluted bureaucratic systems, was not something that Australian MNCs could manage by themselves. The Indian JV partners were best suited to handle this challenge, as they had the cultural capabilities of *Jugaad* and *Vyavahar*. What this suggests is that the Australian MNCs recognised their 'liability of foreignness' and where they could benefit from Indian partners.

The use of 'consultants', who interfaced with the government departments, was raised by a number of respondents – used as a means to manage regulatory 'ambiguity', to expedite the process and/or to manage ambiguous administrative process. Not surprisingly, the SV MNCs used consultants (rather than the JVs). It was apparent across the cases that consultants would solve possible problems and then send an invoice for their 'services'. This questionable business practice was effectively outsourced to the external consultancy since the MNC was only buying a 'service' from them. The following response from the Director from MGMTCON 2 was also illustrative of this theme. This response also captures a reoccurring theme in the data that as outsiders, MNCs were aware of practices that they wished to distant themselves from, but were not aware of the scale of such issues more broadly in the economy.

> (MNCs) … turn a blind eye. Rightly or wrongly your conscience is clear. Some use agents and give them consultancy fees well knowing where the money is going but they get comfort in the fact that they are not directly involved. Corruption is there everywhere but the question is how endemic is it? Is it to the point where business freezes?

The need for the services of an agent/consultant to manage the bureaucracy was also very clearly explained by the General Manager of the SV TECHCON 2. The theme of ambiguity in the role of the consultants' payments was also apparent in this quote, something the MNC wished to do at arm's length.

> In the government sector you are better off having an agent. … you need to get all the approvals and you could deal with the government and get frustrated … put a price for the agent to get the approvals. You give the contract to the best person at the best price, cheapest price, whatever and pay them on delivery so every time they deliver an approval they get paid. Make sure your approvals are scheduled, say we will give 30% upfront because they will need that so that if they have to go and pay for those things like facilitation fees, that's part of the business. So you say we give you 30% upfront to get things moving and when this approval comes in we'll pay say 5% to 10% … So you do two things here – first of all, all the dealings are at arm's length, you have followed all your procedures so when you get audited, no problems, secondly you're actually getting performance … … When you get an agent you get someone who knows these people, who has been getting approvals in the past so when they see him they know him and if he has to pay them, our assumption is that that is part of his fees

A final major theme that was apparent in the data and distinct from the *outsourcing of distinctions* theme related to *managing outsidership*.

Theme (3) Managing outsidership – the liability of foreignness found in this sample primarily reflected what authors have labelled 'liabilities of outsidership' (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). We too recorded this theme as managing outsider-ness. Data coded under this theme reflect the use of business network partners to provide access to important interpersonal and business networks that were essential to operating in India. The 10 SVs in particular had to find ways to connect to business networks, in the absence of an equity-based business partner. Unlike the previous theme, which recorded data that were almost explicitly about not understanding ambiguities in the regulatory environment and/or the outsourcing of questionable practices to protect MNC identity, the *managing outsidership* theme related to the creation of networks. It was apparent in the data that tapping into networks could also facilitate the outsourcing of specific practices; however, the data coded under this theme served a broader purpose. The respondents did share the view that in order to overcome bureaucracy and to operate successfully in India, the right networks and relationships are essential. However, beyond specific issues that related to potential corruption, it was emphasised that tapping into personal networks provided access to a better understanding of rules of the game more broadly, and credibility that could not be gained as an outsider. A Manager of TECHCON 4 explained.

> A local relationship is absolutely essential to win a job. For a start, you don't win a job on a level playing field. It's not what you know but who you know and who you know comes first, second and third and whether you know the right amount or not, it doesn't matter.

The Principal of MGMTCON 1 expressed similar sentiments about the rules of the Indian environment, 'it's not what you know but who you know that matters'. Again, as might be predicted, the JV case sites reported having access to networks through their partner. However, the theme of *managing outsidership* was equally apparent in the SV case sites, but this was managed through different means. The service of local consultants was recorded as was the 'strategic recruitment' of Indian nationals to give the MNC an Indian identity. Data recorded under this theme included the employment of highly networked retired professionals (retired bureaucrats or public sector officials) who had access to the 'corridors of power' and who were 'connected' in government departments. It was apparent that a number of SV MNCs in our sample had identified a 'talent pool of retired public servants' to create a close relationship with the 'bureaucracy' because of their extensive local knowledge and relationships within the government and industry. The respondents highlighted that this source of experienced and networked professionals are sought after by most MNCs who need to deal with government departments, as they bring with them a wealth of experience, local knowledge and deep understanding of norms in India. The Managing Director of TECHCON 3 was enthusiastic when he spoke about his managers belonging to this category:

> You have got to have Indian people in your company who can do deals for you, who have the right contacts. You hire retired people from the Ministry of so-and-so, they come and work for you and you keep them as your employees. They can go to meet their friends in the Ministry with whom they worked in the past, have breakfast or lunch with them and get issues sorted out. My technical manager can go and see people that I can't in a million years.

What is evident here again is the acknowledgement of the importance of *rishtey* (relationships) and *vyavahar* (communicative expectations) in gaining cooperation from others. These MNCs recognised the need for such a cultural competence though decided to 'buy' this competence through their strategic recruitment of people with such skills. By employing such professionals who have a strong network, MNCs can circumvent the bureaucratic hurdles and get connected to domestic networks and key decision-makers. There was clearly an overlap between this and the previous theme discussed, as the 'strategic recruitment' of Indian nationals seemed to have the implicit purpose of conducting certain activities at arm's lengths in some of the case sites. However, for the SV case sites in particular, it was clear that being an outsider was a liability that has to be managed, and the means by which this was achieved brings a new insight in our understanding of how SV MNCs overcome outsidership and institutional voids that make networks essential to operating in an emerging economy context.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study provide both formal and informal institutional insights. In relation to formal institutional liabilities, the major findings of our study are in keeping with the literature, particularly Khanna and Palepu (2000), who have concluded that network strategies are more widely employed in emerging markets because of 'institutional voids'.

From an informal perspective, our findings show that managers within the MNCs that participated in this study have been able to tap into a number of *commonalities*, some of which might be considered unexpected, given that Australia is a relatively isolated island continent. The emphasis on curry, noted by the manager of MGMTCON 1, for instance, highlights how Australian society has been radically transformed from its British colonial roots as a direct consequence of the immigration process that began with the post-

Second World War migrant influx (Petersen & Rutherford, 1988) and has been continually supported by subsequent migration policies. As noted by Zournazi (1994, p. 79), ' … food has long been the acceptable face of multiculturalism' and, as a result, Australia's food identity has incorporated an increasing diversity of experiences and tastes (Anderson, 1995; Lester, 1994). This explains the Australian appreciation of food (*bhojan*) which, in our study, emerges as an important commonality.

The notion of the adaptability of the Australian personality, which was evident in the interview data, suggests that multiculturalism has also provided Australian managers with a level of cultural competence that is capitalised upon at the local level. For example, the principal of TECHCON 8 noted that within the MNC's Australian head office, staff were well used to working in a cross-cultural environment. Once again, Australia's multicultural society, which includes engaging with minority cultural groups, appears to have provided these MNC managers with a cultural understanding of diverse communities along with an appreciation of how these communities can contribute significantly to the richness and strength of the group as a whole.

The Indian singularity *jugaad* (frugal innovation) is also well embedded within Australian society and dates back to early colonisation. As noted within the interview quotes, 'Australia is a tough country', which was a notable feature of the harsh environment early Australian settlers had to overcome. For example, this required prudent innovation and this type of innovation has continued to permeate Australia's agricultural sector where the world's best practice is recognised in every commodity produced – despite being one of the least subsidised sectors in the world (Mascitelli & O'Mahony, 2014). The emphasis on *nyaya* (justice) in India is also a core feature of Australian society where the notion of fairness or what is termed 'a fair go' permeates society at all levels. This 'fair go' value has been recognised in Australia since its early foundations. The major emphasis on sport in both countries, and specifically in this case cricket, has been found to be another significant commonality where both Australia and India excel and have a healthy, competitive but respectful relationship in sport.

In concluding this paper, then it is worth emphasising that cultural distance is not an objective phenomenon but one that is perceived and socially constructed. Our findings confirm some of the hidden assumptions of cultural distance uncovered by Shenkar (2001) in his seminal article. Notably, in situations where cultural commonalities can be found and when social identities that stress the positive can be shared, the process can engender what James (1983, p. 88) describes as 'a feeling of commonality and belonging, of unity through cultural-historic ties', thus reducing the distinctions between in-groups and out-groups. In essence, these commonalities can erode the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, thereby smoothing relationships and reducing the impact of outsidership which, in turn, can allow the development of a cohesive working environment. In order to access the benefits of this approach, however, there is a need to identify and then leverage commonalties.

At a practical level, once commonalities have been identified, the singularities approach can be employed to provide structural guidelines for cultural competence training. Our study shows, for example, that, of the singularities of Indianness discovered by Laleman et al. (2015), some are relatively unique but many are shared with other cultures. Since culture can be expressed in a variety of ways including art, sport, language, literature, music, food and various social rituals (Hegarty & O'Mahony, 2001), commonalities are likely to be evident between many cultural groups. Our study also suggests that commonalities can be found at two levels – those that are overt and those that might be considered latent. In this study, for example, food, sport, language and potentially frugal innovation (if presented in the workplace) represent overt commonalities. These can be easily discerned, while a shared colonial history, membership of the Commonwealth – which is celebrated in the Commonwealth Games, the legal frameworks in India and Australia and the Westminster Parliamentary system could be termed as latent, yet important commonalities that could be explored and leveraged as depicted in Table 2.

Tapping into these similarities should be the first step in developing cultural competency training for the reduction of intergroup conflict in the pursuit of common superordinate goals, specifically those that are interdependent and require cooperation (Brewer, 1996). Intergroup activities can be structured to reduce the significance of category distinctions and if MNCs in India are managed with intelligent actions (*karma yoga*) and a shared vision, a new, inclusive group identity can be created and the competitive disadvantages associated with notions of outsidership, noted within the literature, can be minimised (Brewer, 1996; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

Our findings are also consistent with the literature relative to the social construction of cultural distance. For example, our study supports the view that by amplifying distinctive commonalities and minimising differences between in-groups and out-groups, cultural distance can be bridged without conflict. While it is recognised that group distinctions, rules and norms have been constructed over time and are thus difficult to erode, the importance of individuals or 'actors' within cultural groups is frequently taken for granted (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Our study suggests that adaptation and acculturation strategies such as those presented in our study have the potential to enhance both individual and intergroup relations though positive contact within the workplace that includes cultural knowledge and competence (Pettigrew, 1998). In this way, sociocultural adaptation can serve to reduce cultural distance between the dominant group's orientation towards the non-dominant group (Freitag & Kijewski, 2017).

We also contend that these strategies can ameliorate the lack of local identity and aid in the formulation of appropriate operational strategies to erode the competitive disadvantages associated with in-group behaviour (Eden & Miller, 2004; Mezias, 2002). We further conclude that leveraging the commonalities and outsourcing the distinct provides a valuable prescription for SV MNCs seeking to retain their identity when accessing the Indian market.

Given this is an exploratory study, there are natural limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn. One limitation is the small sample size. The findings are also based on a sample of Australian service MNCs in India and, therefore, they should not be generalised

Table 2. Overt and latent commonalities between Indians and Australians.

Overt commonalities	*bhojan* (food) *Sport (cricket)* and the Commonwealth games Common Language *jugaad* (frugal innovation).
Latent commonalities	*nyaya* (justice) – Fair go Shared Colonial history Commonwealth membership Legal framework Parliamentary (western) system

without further replication in different contexts and sectors. It is also acknowledged that differences in goals and strategies, as well as in industry-specific factors, may affect the results of this study. Consequently, further research could incorporate these firm and industry differences while adopting the 'issue-specific' and 'domain-specific' approach suggested by Kostova (1996) to examine which institutional dimensions have a larger impact on which types of firms. Further research could also examine the issue of trust and whether specific work environments present opportunities to increase trust between in-groups and out-groups.

In summary, the findings provide further support for the singularities approach which allows the cultural singularities or attributes of a group to be discerned and compared in order to unearth those commonalities that can reduce the impact of distinctions between in-groups and out-groups and, in this case, smooth the relationship between Indians and Australian MNCs. This study provides unique qualitative insights into how formal (regulatory) and informal (culture, norms and ethics) challenges are managed and reconciled with MNC identity in emerging markets.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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