



The Roads Not Taken: Issue Selling and Post-decisional Sensemaking in Multinational Corporations

Konstantinos Poulis¹ · David Collings²

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Abstract

Research in international business has a rich legacy of exploring headquarters-sub-sidiaries relationships. Nevertheless, a focus on mandate allocation by corporate headquarters remains underdeveloped, and has largely ignored critical aspects of issue selling by local subsidiaries. Specifically, understanding those initiatives suggested by local managers but rejected by headquarters remains rather uncharted territory in this literature. Our focus is on these ‘rejected issues’ (RIs) and we contend that these RIs have a far-reaching agency that often violates local actors’ expectations in multinational corporations. We frame RIs as emotional stimuli and, through the lens of emotional contagion, we elucidate post-decisional sensemaking by implicated actors. We develop a conceptual framework and a series of propositions linked to organizational integration and we caution against an asymmetrical focus on “visible” outcomes at the expense of latent aspects that remain influential for integration purposes in multinational corporations.

Keywords Issue selling · Headquarters · Subsidiary · Sensemaking · Emotions · Rejected issues

1 Introduction

How subsidiaries seek attention from corporate headquarters (HQ) is an important question in the literature on the headquarters (HQ)-subsidiary relationship and is linked to core aspects of IB practice such as levels of HQ/subsidiary integration, adaptation to institutional settings, innovative capacity or allocation of scarce

✉ Konstantinos Poulis
poulisk@hotmail.com; k.poulis@mdx.ac.uk
David Collings
david.collings@tcd.ie

¹ Middlesex University, London, UK

² Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland

resources (Andrews, Fainshmidt, Ambos & Haensel, 2022; Nkrumah et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024a, 2024b). “Issue selling” is an influencing technique used by subsidiary managers to propose a locally developed issue or idea, such as an expanded mandate to HQ and is core to the attention process (Conroy & Collings, 2016). It can be a high-stakes process. For example, approval of a new product launch by a subsidiary may elevate the subsidiary’s role, power, and status in the MNC. Conversely, an unsuccessful attempt may undermine the subsidiary, reducing its status relative to peer subsidiaries and lead to negative attention. Hence, HQ decisions (approval/rejection of an issue sold) are important, not least because of potential motivational costs.

This importance is amplified owing to the requirement for coopetition in an internal market system such as the MNC network. Therein, decision-making is contested and debated leading to consensus and reconciliation but also to divergence and potential downgrading of a subsidiary’s status or HQ-based experts (Hensmans & Liu, 2018; Hong et al., 2016). Thus, in what is often a zero-sum game, approval of an issue implies channeling limited resources to one subsidiary following issue selling and, in turn reducing resources that might have been directed elsewhere (Conroy & Collings, 2016). Yet, rejection of an issue may be even more ‘drastic’. This rejected issue (RI) is defined as a possible option out of a choice set that was proposed by a subsidiary but was not selected by HQ. Notwithstanding other possibilities, our focus is on the outright and full rejection of an autonomous idea proposed by a local subsidiary manager with no further prospects for future consideration. Proposing actors are likely to have invested considerable time and effort into building the case for this autonomous idea. Hence, they have high levels of affective commitment, especially in cases where autonomy of the subsidiary is constrained by organizational rigidities and HQ fiat (Zhou et al., 2024a, 2024b) or for those that face strong local institutional pressures for conformity (Song, 2022).

Notwithstanding sporadic exceptions in terms of research on FDI location and discrete choice modelling (Buckley et al., 2007; Lamin & Livanis, 2013), RIs occupy limited space in theories of attention and issue selling in IB, “which focuses almost exclusively on positive HQ attention” (Conroy & Collings, 2016, p 613). A focus on positive attention is logical given that subsidiaries sell issues for important reasons, including gaining access to resources, consolidating autonomy, or ‘selling’ an innovation (Conroy & Collings, 2016). A critical tension however emerges in the context of potential misalignment between a subsidiary’s priorities and HQ’s bounded rationality or preferences. In other words, local managers may conceive and pursue what they consider an important issue, but this issue is not automatically perceived as meaningful or pressing by HQ. Regardless, subsidiary managers may expect an equally positive response by HQ owing to their local priorities and limited perspective on the issue. Thus, rejection of the issue may violate expectations of ‘issue sellers’ who are heavily invested in the focal selling. As such, it is likely to arouse emotions (including disappointment, frustration) among those actors with potentially adverse effects on trust and commitment (Asmussen et al., 2019). For these reasons, issue selling is not a peripheral concern but may have a substantial bearing on levels of integration (or lack thereof) in the MNC.

A focus on success is reflected in the privileging of ‘visible’ decisions in MNCs. For example, in the FDI literature, “[s]amples are based on final location choice only” resulting in a knowledge void concerning discarded options that renders us “unable to examine actual managerial decision-making” (Buckley et al., 2007, pp 1070, 1085). Discarded options are thus key elements of issue selling and local actors may remain committed to these initiatives for two reasons: Local actors consider them important for the subsidiary’s viability, prosperity and growth. Second, these actors consider them important for their personal status, prestige and, overall standing in the organization. As such, the meaning they attach to RI reveals an emotional registration of their experience that may be profound. In summary, RIs are neither petrified non-accomplishments nor distant possibilities but present an agency of their own. It is because of this agency that this ‘unseen’ part of decision-making may constrain, orient, or inspire subsequent action. Nevertheless, scholarly understanding is rudimentary, which brings us to our focus: What happens after an issue sold by a local subsidiary is rejected by corporate headquarters?

Those who experience the outcome of issue selling (subsidiary leaders) are the recipients (Bartunek et al., 2006) or deployers (Balogun & Johnson, 2005) of decisions, not only those who ‘sold’ the rejected issue. As such, they ‘live’ consequences and are called to implement HQ decisions while leaving their own suggestions aside. How these actors perceive the outcome is likely to impact their emotions and, their subsequent engagement with the MNC. These concerns motivated this study and helped us frame our research question: What are the intraorganizational implications of RI? In exploring this question, our paper is structured as follows: We introduce the sensemaking literature and its link with emotions and we frame their nexus as a lens that enables us to contribute to the literature on issue selling. We use this as a guide to orient the reader and advance propositions on how sensemaking is enacted. We conclude by developing a three-stage framework focusing on the effects of sensemaking on integration in MNCs.

2 Rejected Issues in the Context of Headquarters-Subsidiary Relationships

The headquarters-subsidiary relationship is one of the most enduring themes in the IB literature (Kostova et al., 2016). Understandably, the scholarly focus has been on issues such as control, structure, coordination or knowledge transfer, reflecting overall positive terms and orientations that have the purpose of enhancing performance and efficiencies in the MNC. However, as the field matures, the dynamism engendered in the relationship has become better understood, recognizing the conflict, detachment, competitiveness and non-compliance that is often at play. As with every relationship, the discrepancy in observed outcomes captures the headquarters-subsidiary relationship as a process, not a snapshot (Cavanagh et al., 2017; Tippmann et al., 2018). During that process, several critical issues punctuate the course of events including, *inter alia* power games (Mudambi & Navarra, 2004), tensions (Ambos et al., 2020), or disputes (Schotter & Beamish, 2011) with such ‘negative’ instances reconfiguring the relationship on an ongoing basis.

The IB literature has begun to explore latent themes infused with such ‘negativity’ for the MNC (Blazejewski & Becker-Ritterspach, 2011). However, “it lacks deep insights into the management challenges” that such negativities (conflicts, tensions, power struggles, disputes) generate (Ambos et al., 2020: 909). Specifically, “our understanding of how emotions motivate action within and beyond organizations is incomplete” and “has been overlooked in management theorizing” (Zhang et al., 2024: 2227). Our point of departure is that RIs are one such milestone underlying HQ/subsidiary relations. While approvals of issues sold are perhaps more self-evident (as they turn into implementation), rejections may interrupt flow in more profound ways (Ambos et al., 2010). Approvals ‘confirm’, ‘applaud’, ‘reward’ and ‘reassure’ leading to felicitous intra-organizational acts such as ‘integration’ and ‘embracement’ whereas rejections create ruptures, discomfort and denial and, at times, evoke a stance of trepidation (Ambos et al., 2020; Schotter & Beamish, 2011). Hence, without neglecting approvals, we focus on RIs since they are not only under-represented in IB scholarship but also, often, present more profound challenges for the management of the MNC. To theorize their effect, we use a sensemaking lens.

2.1 Sensemaking

Sensemaking is the process of constructing a plausible account of an unsettling situation to restore order and resolve ambiguity (Kuznetsov & Kuznetsova, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). It is triggered by violation of expectations and, herein, it is useful since possible options such as those emanating from issue selling are iteratively negotiated, contested and, thus, subjected to meaning-making (Andrews et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2016). Meaning-making is a central focus in sensemaking where actors try to understand ‘what is going on’ following ambiguity; they try to make retrospective sense of what this means, e.g. for their status, identity or role (Whittle et al., 2016). Importantly, decision-making elicits strong emotions following rejection of subsidiaries’ suggestions (Conroy & Collings, 2016; Whittle et al., 2016). As such, RIs may fundamentally create ambiguity, frustration, or confusion among local actors such as the subsidiary managers who suggested them (Ling et al., 2005; Orr & Scott, 2008). In other words, subsidiary actors are confronted with RI-induced ambiguity making the emotional registration of their experience “a kind of sense-making process” (Elfenbein, 2023: 492).

Sensemaking of this kind is predicated on a ‘visible’ outcome, i.e. the choice that is selected by an MNC from a pool of decision options. Given those choices, RI remains as a possibility that was left over. Yet, RIs are not archaeological remnants but an inherent part of decisional activity since they illuminate the heuristics, priorities or biases that leave some options discarded (Aharoni et al., 2011; Elia et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this backstage activity remains theoretically obscure. Contrary to this opacity, we contend that decision-making in MNCs neither externally happens nor does it appear as a ready-made product for inquiry (Balogun et al., 2019; Whittle et al., 2016). Rather, it is reconstituted and progressively realized, and ‘decisions’ may appear as the outcome that is subsequently observed, but the background that enacts them includes RIs, too.

Of course, not all issues that are ‘sold’ by subsidiaries have similar potential of acceptance. As such, issue sellers may not all have the same expectations of success. Nevertheless, the acceptance/rejection nexus may condition actor’s expectations but does not nullify them. Namely, following subsidiary actors’ effort to ‘sell’ an issue, there is at least a reasonable expectation that the issue will be favourably considered. This is inherent in every selling effort since “effort” presupposes commitment of resources, opportunity identification, and stretching of skills (Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2016). As such, a RI -that carries an inherent desirability or plausibility for the proposing party- may lead to conflicts and dysfunctional outcomes (e.g. collective moaning and confrontation; Lauche & Erez, 2023).

2.1.1 The Nature of Rejections

Rejection is not a mono-dimensional term (see Piezunka & Dahlander, 2019). For example, some rejections affect an individual (e.g. subsidiary leader) while others may affect entire teams (e.g. local R&D groups). How the decision is communicated also varies, from abruptly and authoritatively through subtler or more constructive ways (e.g. options to revisit the issue in the future). Moreover, decisions may be linked to stand-alone proposals (i.e. based on a single idea) or embedded in a portfolio of issues that are simultaneously sold by multiple subsidiaries (e.g. linked to cost-cutting). Some proposals may be fully rejected while others may be partially approved (e.g. suggestion to enter five markets leads to entering one of them). Additionally, when an issue is sold in tandem with other subsidiaries (e.g. following a HQ request to all local units) then, reactions following a rejection may be moderated by the scope of internal competition. In contrast, when an issue sold is detached from a wider call that includes other subsidiaries (i.e. when it is an autonomous idea), then, the emotional registration of one’s experience may be more profound. Finally, the agentic stance is also important. For example, some individuals may internalise their emotions following a rejection (leading to depressed feelings), while others may ‘externalize’ their anger or disappointment and explicitly blame the HQ. Hence, expectations are not violated with the same magnitude and are dependent on contingent circumstances, which variably impact emotions and, eventually moderate the sensemaking process.

RIIs are therefore not uniform. For example, there are rejections of options *intentionally* not selected by HQ. This may also result from prioritization protocols or accidental circumstances (Hennart, 2014). Moreover, notions of *feasibility* are important, for example when rejection is due to lack of required resources (see liability-related themes; Wąsowska et al., 2024). Additionally, the *desirability* of an issue sold is important, i.e. whether it is assessed as (un)wanted by powerful actors in the MNC (Yang & Zhou, 2023). Thus, some options will not be chosen because others are deemed ‘better’ (e.g. politically aligned with powerful actors; Hillman & Wan, 2005) or could have been taken if other priorities (e.g. personal ideologies of MNC leaders; Chandler et al., 2023), or resource endowments were in place (Tan et al., 2020).

Overall, negative ramifications are more likely when the outcome signposts a perceived managerial incapability at HQ. Otherwise, such reactions are unlikely. Thus,

RIs may be interpreted negatively (e.g. as doubt, blame) by recipients when they make sense of decisions as inabilities or omissions (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Bartunek et al., 2006). Certainly, decisions may also have a positive spin, e.g. eliciting employee support (Zahoor et al., 2022) or consolidating convergence of emotional experiences (Elfenbein, 2023). Moreover, how fair the headquarters' rejection is perceived to be matters. For example, a manager may be disappointed but still perceive the process as fair; a perception that affects sensemaking. So, expectations are violated and sensemaking is triggered when issue sellers make their proposal to HQ based on some baseline rationale. For example, have issue sellers performed their own risk assessment for the proposal? Do they believe in its value and hence, likelihood of acceptance or merely hope for a positive outcome? Therefore, sensemaking is path dependent and the nature of rejection shapes a subsidiary manager's expectations by conditioning emotions. For example, resource-constrained MNCs may consciously discard subsidiary requests for more resources (Barreto & Patient, 2013; Ozcan & Santos, 2015). Consequently, challenging HQ judgement following RIs must be interpreted through the political, organizational, or interpersonal imperatives behind such rejections in the first place. Namely, a RI may be a negative instance but justified by structural rationales (e.g. coercive pressures in host countries) or contingencies (e.g. employee attrition in subsidiaries) that were considered by HQ decision-makers, but they could not do otherwise.

This raises an important question: Do perceived cues that HQ decision-makers used at *t1* justify actionable sensemaking by issue sellers at *t2*? Those cues essentially relate to the cognitive frames that the HQ team employed to reject an issue. Cognitive frames refer to “cognitive filters that admit certain bits of information into the strategizing process while excluding others” (Porac & Thomas, 2002: 178). Following this selection bias, this information leads decision-makers to particular solutions, which may not be aligned with local sellers' priorities. If not aligned, and RIs are retrospectively seen as negative, unjustifiable or wrong, issue sellers are likely to enact sense through sensebreaking and sensegiving (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Liu & Maitlis, 2014). Sensebreaking refers to “deliberate efforts to invalidate and reject established understandings held by individuals or groups” (Schildt et al., 2020: 243). By contrast, sensegiving is “a process in which individuals attempt to influence the sensemaking of others” and construct new meaning through shared emotional states (Heaphy, 2017: 644; Kuznetsov & Kuznetsova, 2014). Therefore, various exigencies moderate RIs' consequentiality, which allows us to propose:

Proposition 1a (P1a) *RIs perceived as unjustifiable by issue sellers increase sellers' propensity to enact sense against HQ decision-makers in MNCs.*

Proposition 1b (P1b) *RIs perceived as justifiable by issue sellers reduce the issue sellers' propensity to enact sense against HQ decision-makers in MNCs. Thus, the lower the possibility of sensemaking action beyond initial sense creation and interpretation.*

2.1.2 Emotions and Sensemaking

Sensemaking does not happen in a vacuum. MNC actors are already embedded in the professional context in which the decision emerged. They are aware of power dynamics that shaped it (Hinds et al., 2014), participated in the stress and opportunism associated with its implementation (Zaefarian et al., 2023), and felt the disappointment following initial launch (Lebel, 2017). “Were we right in questioning the original decision by the HQ and recommending something else”? “Does the outcome legitimize the judgement of decision-makers”? These are questions that subsidiary actors may ask during post-decisional sensemaking at t_2 , i.e. after the rejection. Elements in the ‘new’ sensemaking (prior decisions, cognitive frames etc.) are already known and reflected upon due to actors’ engrossment in the MNC’s practice world. Thus, they offer a ready-made platform for refined sensemaking enabling functional outcomes such as repairing divisive group dynamics (Hinds et al., 2014) or restoring broken cooperation modes (Ueta & Yasuda, 2025). What this study adds is that part of the fabric in this ‘new’ sensemaking platform may be RIs. They are not a mere residue of decision-making but act as repositories of influence. Namely, at t_2 , they emerge out of a lethargic state and trigger idiosyncratic *emotions*, which assume a sensemaking role in MNCs.

Despite their centrality though, there is lack of consensus on the conceptual boundaries of emotions. Several authors argue that it is more appropriate to define distinct emotions (e.g. joy, sorrow) as opposed to trying to define emotions as a whole (Izard, 2010). Notwithstanding such disagreements, emotions remain a central construct in psychology, organizational psychology and practice-based fields (e.g. management) since they broadly refer to a signalling mechanism that something must be done. This is reflected in early and contemporary understandings that emotion is the experience of *a response to environmental stimuli*, which results in some kind of adaptation that implies readiness for action (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017; Frijda, 2005). This input–output tenet has culminated in definitions such as an emotion being “a set of endogenous and exogenous inputs to particular neural systems, leading to internal and external manifestations” (Ashkanasy, 2003, p 14).

Such reactionary definitions are relevant for MNCs where “things” happen and elicit adaptive responses. MNCs are archetypical settings where such inputs–outputs are observed, which enables us to adopt the following definition: Emotion is “a relatively brief and intense state in reaction to a specific experience or event” (Lench et al., 2011: 838). Our focus is on the experience of an RI, which elicits reaction from the rejected party and, as shown, may lead to actionable sensemaking. This is the line of reasoning we explore, starting from an understanding of emotion as a discrete, intense reaction to an unfolding stimulus (Elfenbein, 2023), up to sensemaking actions that may influence MNC integration levels (Whittle et al., 2016). Emotions then are generative of sensemaking and may derail the MNC or enable integration, e.g. by setting common beliefs (Kuznetsov & Kuznetsova, 2014; Liu & Maitlis, 2014). They act as anchor points because violating expectations triggers visceral jolts, e.g. following power asymmetries (Hinds et al., 2014); occupational downgrading (Fernando & Patriotta, 2020); or subsidiary closure (Ueta & Yasuda, 2025). Nevertheless, despite their role, “the sensemaking perspective is only

beginning to address emotions” (Heaphy, 2017: 643), with “relatively little theory [being] developed that explicitly identifies the roles that emotion plays in sensemaking and its impacts on sensemaking processes” (Maitlis et al., 2013: 223).

To address this gap and unpack the centrality of emotions in MNCs, we contend that emotion-laden sensemaking routinely takes place in organizations (see Hinds et al., 2014; Zahoor et al., 2022). MNC actors are not emotion-free actors who cognitively process environmental cues. Rather, emotions co-shape their actions. This is an important distinction because “the relatively undeveloped status of emotion in sensemaking theory was inconsistent with recent research that has pointed to its importance and with lived experience that shows the deeply interconnected nature of sensemaking and emotion” (Maitlis et al., 2013: 237). Yet, paradoxically, “models of sensemaking tend to ignore the role of emotion or portray it as an impediment” (Maitlis et al., 2013: 222). Thus, by framing RIs as sensemaking cues, we redirect “attention soonest to the most pressing emotional challenges” (Elfenbein, 2007: 322).

2.2 The Core Affect Model

Our core theorization is represented in Fig. 1, and premised on the core affect model (Russell, 2003) that includes two axes (Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Maitlis et al., 2013): The horizontal axis of *valence*, or a spectrum of positive/negative emotions, which describes one’s affective state and emotions such as pride and delight (positive) or agony and fear (negative). The vertical axis of emotional *intensity*, a spectrum of activation/deactivation that describes one’s energy to act leading to states such as elation and excitement (propensity/mobilization to act) or boredom and apathy (disinclination to act). The model informs three stages (Maitlis et al., 2013):

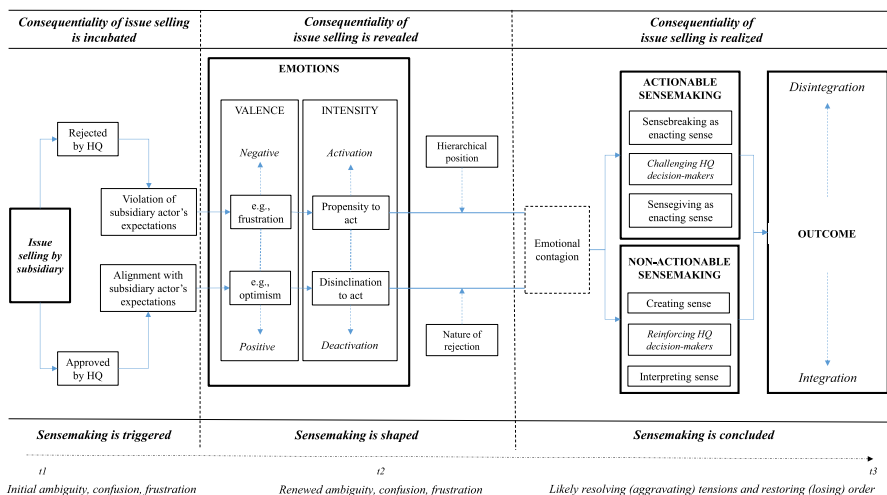


Fig. 1 Rejected issues, emotions and post-decisional sensemaking in MNCs

Sensemaking triggered. Do subsidiary managers detect ambiguity, confusion, or disorder after a RI? Emotions act as signals and alert individuals, with their registration often enabling them to create sense without “effort or even awareness” (Elfenbein, 2007, p 322). During this attunement, negative emotions are even more ‘helpful’ since they impact affective states more than positive ones (Elfenbein, 2023) and “prepare an employee to take either present or future action” by triggering sense and guiding thought (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Lebel, 2017: 191).

Sensemaking shaped. How do subsidiary managers interpret violation of expectations following a RI? What does it mean to them? Several options exist along the positive/negative axis, and sensemakers may occupy a distinct space at any point in time (Russell, 2003). Namely, they may interpret the valence of RIs in constructive or hostile ways depending on, e.g. their goals, social ties or self-efficacy (Hassett et al., 2018; Lebel, 2017). Violation or alignment between issue selling and expectations shapes sensemaking and may lead to (non)action along an activation/deactivation axis while being mediated by emotions (Elfenbein, 2023).

Sensemaking concluded. How ready are subsidiary managers to transform anchor emotions into action? What is the emotional intensity? Enacting new sense consumes energy and comes at a cost (Maitlis et al., 2013). Thus, sensemaking may not lead to actionable outcomes, nor extend beyond interpreting sense. However, RIs may also induce actionable outcomes, which include enacting new meaning (sensegiving) while breaking away from prior norms (sensebreaking). In this stage, negative emotions (e.g. frustration, anger) are more conducive to actionable sensemaking because they trigger problem resolution (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Lebel, 2017). Conversely, positive emotions (e.g. pride, joy) maintain a safety net that does not necessarily call for sensemaking beyond interpreting sense (Elfenbein, 2023; Maitlis et al., 2013). In fact, positive emotions such as excitement “may entirely overlook important cues, or inappropriately interpret the situation as safe and trustworthy,” leading to no action (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010: 568). Thus, through emotional intensity, we have a dual consequentiality: RIs may galvanize actionable sensemaking or consolidate sense with no actionable outcomes. So, we put forward our next propositions:

Proposition 2a (P2a) *When a HQ decision violates (affirms) subsidiary actors’ expectations following issue selling, the negative (positive) valence of emotions increases.*

Proposition 2b (P2b) *When a HQ decision violates (affirms) subsidiary actors’ expectations following issue selling, the emotional intensity makes types of sensebreaking (less) likely among those actors.*

Proposition 2c (P2c) *When a HQ decision violates (affirms) subsidiary actors’ expectations following issue selling, the emotional intensity makes the enactment of sense through sensegiving (less) likely among those actors.*

Essentially, we view emotions as proxy for judgments; heuristics, which signal that something must be done. Therefore, sensemaking is not a post hoc

rationalization during which MNC actors create cognitive-laden accounts of the worlds they inhabit (see Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis, 2005 for a requisite critique). Rather, emotion-laden sensemaking may seem less rational or calculative but is a routinely observed and consequential phenomenon in MNCs. However, making sense of RIs during post-decisional periods is most akin to an emotional roller-coaster during which emotions may be ex-ante suppressed (e.g. passive disappointment at $t1$) but re-emerge as profound (e.g. transformed into actionable frustration at $t2$). Thus, sensemaking is not a static episode; it engenders successive sense-rich events, especially when RIs implicate or downgrade actors' occupational identity, self-image, autonomy, sense of worth, or self-esteem (Fernando & Patriotta, 2020; Furuya et al., 2009). Given their salience and endurance, RIs may enable actors to transform emotions into collective mobilization through post-decisional sensemaking (Kuznetsov & Kuznetsova, 2014; Orr & Scott, 2008). Then, a sensemaker might ask (see Weick et al., 2005): Does rejection interfere with my role or obstruct my goals? Is it consistent with my status or acknowledge my expertise? Is it fair?

Such questions reflect emotional challenges that would not necessarily exist without the stimuli of a RI. By this, we do not imply an "inherent badness of negative emotion" (Elfenbein, 2007: 325)—that an aversive experience leads to negative outcomes. Such experiences may also tend to address disorder, remedy affairs, and repair break-downs; warning signals that may propel subsidiary managers to redirect attention to solving a focal issue and prevent or mitigate its effects (e.g. through heightened motivation; Elfenbein, 2023; reconfiguration of relationships; Furuya et al., 2009; or governance adjustments; Verbeke & Fariborzi, 2019). Nevertheless, a decision may also prove wrong in a subsequent period. Such variance with a 'normal' situation is not a sporadic inconvenience. In such cases, RIs become a violation that lends itself to post-decisional sensemaking. It reconfigures emotional states and enables 'others' to come up with a plausible explanation of what happened, what went wrong, what is at stake, and how it can be repaired or restored (Fernando & Patriotta, 2020; Maitlis et al., 2013). Thus, individuals shift focus from emotions *during* an unfolding event (the traditional focus of sensemaking research) to emotions prompted by the outcome of decision-making. As Maitlis and Ozcelik (2004: 375) note, "[w]e probably know least of all about the dynamics of negative emotion in organizations, often prompted by decisions". Bartunek et al., (2006: 183) similarly criticize the literature on emotions and sensemaking as it "gives short shrift to people who implement and live with organizational changes they did not initiate." In our case, those who live decisions against their liking or proposal are subsidiary actors whose ideas are rejected. Indeed, subsidiary actors do not confront ambiguity as passive observers of unsettling incidents. They *feel* events "because of something specific" and address or respond to stimuli (Elfenbein, 2023: 493).

Then, the consequentiality of RIs may emerge at any subsequent point in time. Hence, we accentuate the potential for renewed sensemaking. For example, in making sense of RIs, actors may redefine meaning or dethrone and repudiate a deciding team's legitimacy. Furthermore, RIs may be instrumentalized as an *ex-post* resource by subsidiaries to achieve another desirable end (for example legitimize other initiatives through repeat issue selling; Conroy & Collings, 2016) or aggravate decay by sabotaging HQ directives (Whittle et al., 2016). This sort of sensemaking then

depicts intra-MNC activity not as an isolated episode that ends but as an ongoing adjustment in which sense “is made and remade” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014: 97).

Hence, agency is appropriated to remedy what is disordered with RIs being characteristic of “long spans of time [that] may pass in which organization actors remain confused by events and actions without developing sensible accounts” (Maitlis, 2005: 23). Consequently, making sense of something unsettling in MNCs is not episodic and an attempt to restore order or rectify affairs may not be attained by ‘taming’ and bracketing the temporality of decisions; retrospective depth and a prospective orientation may be needed. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to post-decisional sensemaking—that is, the timespan after a decision is implemented (e.g. foreign market entry in country X) and when its effects are manifested (e.g. divesting from X due to poor performance) (Dwyer et al., 2021). Hence, decisional activity may rejuvenate sensemaking; a likely scenario in IB settings where uncertainty is omnipresent and may call for a new approximation of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005).

This re-emergence of RIs as even more consequential indicates why RIs are not nebulous leftovers but put to the test again at t_2 , i.e. when re-visiting decisions at t_1 . If decisions are assessed as prudent (e.g., if entry in a foreign country was successful), HQ decision-makers enjoy others’ approval. If deemed detrimental, however, their status, judgement, knowledge, legitimacy or expertise may be challenged (Conroy & Collings, 2016). The ordering of events matters in this regard. For example, decision-makers may pre-announce their concerns and achieve consensus before decisions take shape. In such cases, early challenging or questioning decision-makers may be viewed as premature; as unduly ignoring their hierarchical position and, thus, leading to no action (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Sarabi, 2020). That is, sensemaking is not a value-free act; it has social costs and ‘exposes’ actors to the practice worlds they inhabit (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Therefore, conclusive judgements about “the probable future impact of certain actions, and especially nonactions” may be undue (Gioia et al., 1994: 378).

For example, challenging HQ decisions is not only dependent on one’s competence, knowledge, and skills (likely projecting overconfidence, or arrogance; Brown et al., 2015; Maitlis et al., 2013) but also conditioned by parsimony of MNC resources (Maitlis, 2005). Therefore, certain RIs may seem inevitable and met with consensus and compliance even when judgments diverge. By contrast, a past RI presents an actual (not hypothetical) template for sensemaking. For example, at t_2 , facts may include obviously negative results (e.g. forced divestment from a foreign country). In such cases, sense enactment may be reasonably attempted by issue sellers since it accords with felt emotions (e.g. frustration, disappointment) (Lebel, 2017; Maitlis et al., 2013) and unfolds from lived experience, i.e. the sensemaking template is known, not hypothetical. As such, a plausible account of the situation can be reasonably constructed, because felt emotions are consistent with interpretations (and not a premature judgement), and interpretations are consistent with the outcome (and not a mere speculation). Thus, RIs are likely to enact actionable sensemaking by issue sellers at a subsequent stage.

Before advancing our next propositions, we note an important consideration. The discussion leans towards negative aspects of decision-making due to our focus on rejections. Yet, as noted, HQ decisions may also approve issues sold. This may come about because of the value of the issue itself or the bargaining power of the ‘selling’ subsidiary. In such cases, there is no obvious reason to question the status, judgement, legitimacy, skills etc. of HQ managers nor engage in any actionable type of sensemaking (e.g. invalidate HQ managers’ capacity). Contrarily, when the selling process induces negative outcomes, then, consequences are expected to be profound leading to, e.g. suspicion, enhanced monitoring, disempowerment, or hostility between HQ and subsidiaries (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2010; Conroy & Collings, 2016; Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2010). Hence, our emphasis on RIs is because these tend to be more consequential due to their unsettling and contested nature. Rejections create frustration and disappointment and propel issue sellers to engage into sensebreaking, sensegiving or both.

Proposition 3a (P3a) *RIs that retrospectively reinvigorate emotions of negative valence are likely to lead to ‘sense being enacted’ by challenging HQ decision-makers in the MNC.*

Proposition 3b (P3b) *RIs that prospectively induce emotions of negative valence are likely to remain as ‘sense being interpreted’ by initiating internal deliberations but with no actionable outcomes against HQ decision-makers in the MNC.*

2.3 Emotional Contagion

Emotions in organizational contexts though are not just about an individual, but collective outcomes manifested as defensiveness, resistance or disruption, which “can be infectious under certain circumstances and that they spread by emotional contagion” (Jasper, 2011; Zhang et al., 2024, p 2216). This is not to deny that “[e]motions are meant to move us” and “bring out action tendencies... that attempt to address the pressing concerns that first elicited the emotion”. However, “[e]motions also communicate”; they “become stimuli for others to recognize” and enact sense through linkage of discrete emotions across people (Barsade, 2002; Elfenbein, 2023: 490). This distributed process stems from mimicry, influence or comparison and is facilitated by structural (workplace stimuli) or motivational (personal likings) variables (Backmann et al., 2020; Cornelissen et al., 2014).

Certainly, emotional registration of a frustrating event is an individual experience. Yet, its emotional expression in workplaces—due to exposure to common stimuli—also “creates cues for public consumption” (Elfenbein, 2023: 496). This non-private aspect of emotional processing is channeled via ‘emotional contagion’, i.e. influencing others’ through communication and social interaction (Barsade, 2002). Emotional contagion “represents a type of social influence that influences not only how people feel, but also what they subsequently think and do” (Barsade et al., 2018: 138), with effect on MNC integration (Asmussen et al., 2019; Hinds et al.,

2014). Hence, given emotional contagion appears to run parallel to issue selling, it can also be appropriated by issue sellers as a follow-up strategy to improve the odds of acceptance in subsequent proposals.¹

So, emotional contagion is not simply an aggregation of individual stances, but the result of shared experiences underpinned by common interests or preferences (Wang et al., 2021). It leads to collective effervescence and is often expressed as solidarity, shared morality or enhanced bonds. This is logical since the social bonding that results from contagious emotions not only does it act as a safety net for implicated actors (e.g. against a looming threat of isolation for a subsidiary) but also cements a sense of belonging for those feeling negatively affected (Zhang et al., 2024).

Emotional contagion is also accentuated by “the contrast between different emotions elicited within or from interactions” (Jasper, 2011; Zhang et al., 2024: 2225). For example, RIs are an archetypical instance where the proposing party (a subsidiary director) interacts with a decision-maker (HQ) and “pairs of positive and negative emotions form a “moral battery” that indicate a direction for action, away from the unattractive state and towards the attractive one” (Jasper, 2014, p 211). The tension involves the anger or frustration elicited by rejection (the unattractive present) and the hope for restoration of order following some kind of resolution (the attractive future). This contrast between a negative, frustrating present and a positive, hopeful future fuels action. Specifically, it “can be strategically manipulated to mobilize action” (Zhang et al., 2024, p 2225) by involving others (e.g. local employees) who are also affected by a decision (e.g. by activating pride; Wang et al., 2021 or resistance; Rauch & Ansari, 2022).

Given this actionable potential, decisions inflict shared affirmation or communal doubt on whether HQ choices are appropriate, proper or just. Hence, emotions amalgamate into sensemaking through social interaction and expressiveness of affective states. Emotions are contagiously reified as collective sensegiving (following negatively valenced emotions) or as no sensemaking action (following positively valenced emotions) and channeled across MNC actors through, e.g. reciprocity, repetition, signalling, social comparison, or attentiveness (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Elfenbein, 2023; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). In turn, this impacts on MNC integration (e.g. via identification with the MNC and a sense of shared purpose) or disintegration (e.g., via self-interest or demotivation) (Conroy & Collings, 2016; Conroy et al., 2017).

Integration is the “performance” outcome following the sensemaking/emotions nexus. Namely, it is the intra-organizational implication of what happens after an RI. To conceptualise integration, we adopt Barki and Pinsonneault’s (2005) definition, which refers to “the extent to which distinct and interdependent organizational components constitute a unified whole” (p., 165). We build on a direct link between this ‘unified whole’ and the sensemaking/emotions nexus since, the importance lies in interdependencies, which allow “perceptions of oneness or belongingness to an organization” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p 104). As Castañer and Ketokivi (2018)

¹ We are grateful to one of the reviewers for this observation.

note, these interdependencies (or lack thereof) have a range of cultural (our values and beliefs), cognitive (how we think) and behavioural (what we do) facets and are dependent on authority mechanisms, degrees of formalization, range of cross-unit structures, socialization, incentives, communication styles as well as the skills of implicated parties. The more these facets are undermined, the less the integration and the more the negative effects (e.g. frictions, negative trust dynamics, conflict, employee turnover, decaying, sabotaging; Brattström & Faems, 2020; Schlindwein & Geppert, 2021; Whittle et al., 2016). Contrarily, the more these facets are shared, the higher the integration and manifested in, e.g. levels of trust, respect, compliance, commitment, team bonding and resilience, synergies in accomplishing tasks, or enhanced coordination (Barki & Pinsonneault, 2005; Castañer and Ketokivi, 2018; Zahoor et al., 2022). Hence, integration offers many benefits such as identification with the organization or employees' alignment with organizational values (Martin et al., 2026) but is not an automaton. Rather, it is a challenge, especially in MNCs where issues of power and politics may aggravate disintegration due to distance, isolation, or cultural differences (Geppert et al., 2016). Thus, we propose:

Proposition 4a (P4a) *Emotions of positive valence following issue selling, which are shared through emotional contagion induce disinclination to act with concomitant positive impact on MNC's integration.*

Proposition 4b (P4b) *Emotions of negative valence following issue selling, which are shared through emotional contagion enhance the propensity to act against HQ decision-makers' with concomitant negative impact on MNC's integration.*

2.4 Others' Hierarchical Status

In MNCs, subsidiary actors have an *interest* in the broader context of the firm. Accordingly, they may reasonably question the plausibility of HQ decisions. After all, “[s]ensemaking is essentially something actors *do* as they engage in practice” (Schildt et al., 2020: 245). Thus, when local interests are misaligned with those in HQ, it is likely that, activated by an emotional trigger, issue sellers' sensemaking will emerge. For example, subsidiary actors may begin conceiving ways of insulating their existing or forging a new self and as shown, they may mobilize others (e.g. foreign partners, colleagues) while circumventing HQ mandates (Nyberg et al., 2010; Schildt et al., 2020; Vough & Caza, 2017).

Thus, subsidiaries are not passive recipients of orders. They often enjoy power and legitimacy within the MNC and exercise this power via, e.g. knowledge advantages (Choi et al., 2022; Yang & Zhou, 2023); or social skills (Conroy et al., 2017). Of course, given the conflicting priorities that exist throughout the MNC, they may find themselves between a rock and a hard place (Asmussen et al., 2019). Namely, approval of issue selling is not feasible in many cases. For example, due to procedural justice in MNCs or due to business units exercising strict control over

subsidiaries (Dasí et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2016; Verbeke et al., 2013), local initiatives may be promptly foregone.

Yet, MNC actors' *interest* in morally or functionally invalidating HQ decision-makers is not always aligned with their *power* to do so. Therefore, whether sense interpretation is enacted into action is conditional on parties' power. In MNCs—as hierarchically stratified entities—those with formal power are more likely to engage in sensebreaking and sensegiving as actionable outcomes. Local managers can certainly influence the MNC, as power is dictated by those who control not only moral, economic, and symbolic but also cultural or informational resources such as operational know-how, local expertise etc. (Bouquet & Birkinshaw, 2008). Although such resources can empower and lead to challenging the status quo, subsidiary actors are less able to influence others throughout the MNC. This accords with findings that upper echelons are uniquely positioned to guide employee sensemaking, with employees mostly mediating or assisting leaders' sensemaking processes (Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Maitlis, 2005).

Thus, rejections may question HQ wisdom. However, subsidiary actors may less likely spearhead action against HQ since sensebreaking and sensegiving redefine underlying beliefs that define the identity and nature *across* the MNC (Vaara & Tienari, 2011; Whittle et al., 2016). Consequently, they must be orchestrated by someone who enjoys MNC-wide acceptance, such as HQ leaders. For this reason, following a negatively charged RI, hierarchical position matters. The respect and status HQ actors enjoy (for example governments in state-owned MNCs; Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2014) and their ability to inspirationally, or authoritatively imbue new meaning determine not only their ability for sensemaking but also the discursive, material, and narrative strategies they may employ towards concluding it (Balogun et al., 2019; Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

Our focus on hierarchical position though does not preclude power stemming from sources beyond hierarchy. For example, middle managers possess operational power since they are closely linked with the customer base of a firm. Hence, a discussion on the effects of hierarchy must include consideration of the basis of positional power. For example, if power is rooted in resource dependency, it will influence integration outcomes differently compared to power stemming from lobbying efforts. Moreover, the status, respect or legitimacy that those with high positional power enjoy in MNCs typically takes years to build but can be lost in an instant (e.g. upon rejection). Therefore, one cannot ignore how strong the legitimization of headquarters is in relation to the effect of rejection.² In a nutshell, we focus on hierarchy since the formal authority that emanates from it offers an organization-wide possibility to affect outcomes, but this is not to imply that there are no other concerns linked to power. Hence, we propose:

Proposition 5a (P5a) *The higher the sensemakers' hierarchical position and the stronger the basis of their positional power in an MNC, the greater the inclination to invalidate a negatively charged RI through sensebreaking.*

² We are grateful to reviewers for highlighting these nuances linked to propositions below.

Proposition 5b (P5b) *The higher the sensemakers' hierarchical position and the stronger the basis of their positional power in an MNC, the greater the inclination to restore ambiguity from a negatively charged RI through sensegiving.*

Proposition 5c (P5c) *The lower the sensemakers' hierarchical position and the weaker the basis of their positional power in an MNC, the more likely sensemaking to remain in the stages of creating and interpreting sense after a negatively charged RI, rather than leading to enactment of any actionable type of sense.*

2.5 Summary and Research Model

Figure 1 shows how emotions at the post-issue selling stage enact integration-related implications in the MNC. First, RIs emerge out of a choice set ($t1$) and consequentiality is *incubated* following violation/alignment with subsidiary actors' expectations. Then, initial ambiguity is ensued and sensemaking is *triggered*. Following positive or negative emotional arousal, the consequentiality of issue selling is then *revealed*. At this stage, sensemaking is *shaped* by emotions in a spectrum of positive/negative valence. In turn, issue selling is linked to decision-makers through the mediation of emotional contagion. Actionable/nonactionable inclinations along the activation/deactivation axis are formed and consequentiality of issue selling starts being *realized*. This means that the resultant affirmation/attack to decision-makers' status, skills, legitimacy, knowledge, or expertise aggravates symptoms of disintegration in MNCs or 'successful' issue selling further consolidates integration. For example, negative emotions may escalate misaligned integration practices (Hinds et al., 2014), intensify commitment failures (Verbeke & Fariborzi, 2019) or induce employee demotivation and probability of quitting (Hassett et al., 2018). On the other hand, positive emotions may enhance MNC integration by, e.g. empowering middle managers, enabling citizenship behaviours, reducing contentious strategies, or reinforcing compliance across subsidiaries (Hassett et al., 2018; Zahoor et al., 2022). Then, sensemaking is *concluded*.

Yet, following ambiguity engendered in RIs, sensemaking may not culminate in *actionable* terms. Depending on one's hierarchical position and the nature of rejection, actors may limit sensemaking to interpreting sense, without enacting new one. Thus, post-decisional sensemaking at $t2$ (i.e. upon evident outcomes) is important. Depending on the manifested results, sensemaking may aggravate tensions related to the original decision. Thus, ambiguity may be re-enacted in (non)actionable terms with concomitant effects on integration. Given the potential outcomes, the higher sensemakers' hierarchical position or the more unjustifiable the rejection, the more sensemaking leans towards sensebreaking and sensegiving. Then, how sensemaking influences integration outcomes in MNCs is not a given. For example, performance-enhancing decisions—despite RIs—do not lead to drastic reconfigurations, even if they violate expectations. Rather, such events consolidate integration at $t3$. Conversely, this may be challenged following negative performance, which aggravate symptoms of disintegration and loss of order at $t3$.

Finally, we clarify two important conditions: First the boundaries between the three periods in Fig. 1 are not fixed. New triggers can occur during the shaping and conclusion phases, or one might conclude (and later regret) and begin sensemaking again. Therefore, boundaries between stages do not exclude the possibility of iteration since contingencies reconfiguring the sensemaking landscape are always possible. Second, the time horizons in Fig. 1 do not imply that sensemaking is triggered within a period. In fact, the trigger occurs at the moment when the manager receives the rejection message—a split second—and in the next moment, sensemaking begins to take shape. So, this moment is the trigger that gives shape to a sense-making period, and not vice versa.

3 Discussion and Contribution

Our focus has been on “what’s going on” after an RI, which refers to an attempt to understand how implicated actors (in our case, subsidiary leaders) make sense of a situation that is ambiguous, unpleasant, or frustrating (in our case, RI) and how they rationalize this experience for action-making purposes. Based on the assumption that rejections engender emotions, such as anger or frustration (Fernando & Patriotta, 2020; Schlindwein & Geppert, 2021), we theorized how post-decisional sensemaking induces MNC-wide consequences. In this way, we join the burgeoning literature linking emotions with management in MNCs. For example, negative emotions trigger manifestations of disintegration such as demotivation and alienation, resistance to knowledge sharing, silence, cynicism, inaction and inertia, weakening commitment and identification with the MNC, or employee turnover (Becker-Ritterspach & Dörrenbächer, 2011; Schlindwein & Geppert, 2021; Whittle et al., 2016). In positive cases, emotions enable functional outcomes for the MNC such as community building and trust, psychological attachment and inclusivity, collective creativity, or increased motivation (Hassett et al., 2018; Sarabi, 2020; Zahoor et al., 2022).

In particular, we contended that decisional activity before and consequences after HQ decisions matter. It is through such ‘pre’ and ‘post-understanding’ that we may decode actual decision-making linked to issue selling in MNCs. Thus, we underscore the need to research (i) all options in a choice set, considering an imminent commitment to action (Hennart, 2020) (ii), their controversial consequentiality, which generates variable implications in MNCs (for example legitimacy issues; Balogun et al., 2019). In this way, we can better understand not only *how* decision-making unfolds but also the *implications* associated with its non-manifest albeit consequential content.

It is important to note a primary reason that the IB literature has paid little attention to RIs, i.e. the role of empirics and the lack of data. How can IB researchers document and analyse RIs when these are inherently nebulous and usually inaccessible? So, we may stress a gap in our understanding around the role of RIs for MNCs, but this should not be perceived as a criticism of IB scholarship. Scholars try to model or test management challenges in MNCs but, simply, meaningful data may be unavailable or impossible to attain. Hence, the rationale herein serves the purpose of

stressing a gap while paving the way for a new research stream around RIs; not as a critique against what IB researchers have accomplished.

Having clarified this, we contribute by cautioning that by focusing on HQ decisions in isolation, we equate IB action with a triumphant accomplishment and, thus, we downgrade decision-making into a blind cognitive achievement. Instead, we used the emotions/sensemaking nexus as our analytical arc to underline the importance of background forces at play. The headquarters/subsidiary relationship literature has been overly focused on success and there had been far less consideration for failure cases. This imbalance ought to be restored since RIs are linked with established themes such as conflict (Blazejewski & Becker-Ritterspach, 2011), agency (Hoenen & Kostova, 2015), power (Ambos et al., 2020), self-interest (Kostova et al., 2018) or perception gaps (Birkinshaw et al., 2000). These themes offered something important: they moved IB scholarship beyond a mere description of management structures in the attempt of the MNC to exercise control (the early focus of international management scholars). Instead, they highlighted the important role of subsidiaries, e.g. as autonomous knowledge generators or innovators. In other words, the issue selling literature implies that HQ are not only control-seeking structures but also empowering units that may enable subsidiaries to flourish. This relational lens underscores a key fact: subsidiaries have a voice.

Yet, what happens when this voice is not heard? This liminal stage is the focus of our paper. While drastic external phenomena (e.g. economic crises) or ‘visible’ instances within the MNC (e.g. CEO exit) reconfigure HQ-subsidiary relationships and are well-manifested in the IB literature, the *aftermath* of ‘unheard’ voices; in our case, outright rejections following issue selling remains opaque. While we may nominally recognize and applaud the voice that subsidiaries enjoy leading to for example, reverse knowledge transfer (Nair et al., 2015), it seems that IB scholarship does not pay equal attention to what happens after voices are rejected. We argued that such a focus is important. If we wish to truly understand the complex dynamics engendered in HQ-subsidiary relationships, we need to pay greater attention to RIs. Otherwise, we are restricted to a partial view of the forces that shape decision-making in the MNC. Focusing scholarly attention only on what is readily manifest then becomes especially problematic since we miss how relationships are formed or what latent consequences they bring about.

Thus, while the HQ/subsidiaries relationship may be a bedrock of IB scholarship, there is a justifiable albeit problematic paucity linked to the role of RIs. A relationship is also shaped by visceral jolts of denial following an outright rejection; a sense of marginalization or neglect; a feeling of sabotaging local efforts despite the plausibility of local ideas. RIs are archetypical manifestations that give rise to such affective states since, unwillingly or not; rightly or wrongly; justifiably or not, they undermine local actors and catalyse integration-related events.

This framework also has the potential to contribute to fields adjacent to IB. For example, neglect of non-manifest options is particularly evident in the strategy formulation literature where ‘decisions’ are its *raison d’être*. Therein, discarded options are often seen as fossilized and forgotten and, thus, assume peripheral importance (see Hough & White, 2003). However, such ‘neglects’ give rise to great strategies (Powell, 2018), processual change (Poulis & Poulis, 2018) or new forms

of organizing (Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018). Certainly, as noted, an emphasis of the literature on ‘material’ *outcomes* (e.g. an entry mode choice) is logical. Yet, why should the visible by-products of decision-making dominate at the expense of options that did not ‘make it’? If RIs arouse emotions as “an adaptive response to demands from the environment, directing attention to our most pressing concerns and preparing us to act” (Elfenbein, 2023: 490) then, our literature has something to gain by paying attention to RIs.

3.1 Limitations

The MNC is a culture-laden entity whose own mantras (priorities, commitments, history) shape perceptions of legitimacy and appropriateness. For example, there are cases where perceived legitimacy may already be secured before an issue is sold owing to a history of rejection cases, or instances of approvals in particular HQ-subsidiary dyads. Moreover, whether and how a senior HQ executive perceives a rejection as appropriate is not necessarily the same as how a local subsidiary manager perceives the issue. This has two implications: First, what is perceived as legitimate or appropriate in one MNC or in a subsidiary may not be in another. Hence, rejecting an idea may be simply seen as ‘normal’ by one entity or as a strict control act by another. Second, perceptions of status, legitimacy and expertise do not only emerge at the end of a sensemaking process. They may also be in place early on and a rejection decision may trigger reaction as an inappropriate act. Then, since nuances around RIs are many, we note a limitation: Our framework may be inadequate to capture complexity in an MNC, i.e. without a deeper analysis linked to the idiosyncrasies of each case. Moreover, we may stress the role of RIs, but these do not have an *inherent* far-reaching agency. Some may indeed be profound, but others may not be plausible or costly to execute. This is another limitation to be considered as our framework may create an impression that RIs are consequential by default. This is not always the case and thus, each scenario must be seen with requisite care to avoid falling into a rather tautological trap that rejections are inherently negative.

3.2 Future Research

Our aim was to sensitize IB scholars to what an MNC did *not* do and the *effects* of what is not decided. Exceptions that underscore similar concerns exist (FDI locations not chosen; Greene et al., 2022; Lamin & Livanis, 2013). However, the focus of those studies is on “factors that potentially influence these (multinomial) choices” such as MNCs’ characteristics (Greene et al., 2022: 1) whereas there is dearth of studies on the *consequences* of rejected options. Propelled by this observation, we call for future work on the consequences of options that did not ‘pass through’. In this way, IB scholarship will extend insights whose current focus is on ‘how’ issue selling takes place (e.g. autonomously or collectively; formally or informally; radically or incrementally; Ling et al., 2005). Rather, via consequences, IB scholars will elucidate “outcomes” of attention-seeking in MNCs and shed light on

implications *after* a subsidiary's proposal is made, an area that begs for illumination and understanding.

In turn, this may help us understand mechanisms of how (dis)integration in MNCs ensues and the role of sensemaking in it; not because of a decision (e.g. relocating manufacturing in another country; Becker-Ritterspach & Dörrenbächer, 2011) but rather, because of what was *not* decided. For example, future research may showcase how rejections denote something important about the MNC's priorities; its legitimacy gaps (Li et al., 2022); its conduciveness to novelty (Kumar et al., 2023); or actors' self-serving interests (Chen, 2008). Hence, future researchers can develop a systematic research programme that does not see RIs as ephemeral neglects but as instances that, e.g. denote ill-defined priorities or ones that bring forth an MNC's dysfunctional ethos.

4 Conclusion

The extant literature offers sporadic ideas that resemble RIs. For example, 'unrealized decisions,' refers to a decision as commitment to a course of action that is continuously postponed or delayed (Denis et al., 2011). They also resemble cases in which no decision is made *per se*, but strategists simply 'act' through small, mundane adjustments without due consideration of options (Chia, 1994). Moreover, they relate to consciously sticking with the status quo while disregarding imperatives that signpost alternative decisions (Poulis & Poulis, 2016). Thus, IB scholarship has an opportunity: By spearheading a research program on RIs out of a choice set, our field may stimulate discussions on non-conventional types of decision-making activity. Such a research program promises to contribute to theories of choice, in which rationality, purpose, commitment, discretion, power or politics dictate action (Aharoni et al., 2011; Buckley & Casson, 2019; Elbanna et al., 2020).

However, to contribute to an already 'congested' field, we need to move beyond the crystallized, visible moment called a 'decision.' Those associations (rationality, purpose etc.) are still valid with RIs since a choice set includes options other than the selected ones (Buckley & Casson, 2019; Clark et al., 2018). After all, RIs illuminate commitment to action in the same way as decisions do since both are brought about from the same forces and biases, with the same reasons and purposes, the same preferences and intentions, the same discretion or risk propensity, and so forth (Elia et al., 2019; Whittle et al., 2016). Hence, it is the decision/RI *couplet* that enables a lucid understanding of the front- and back-stage forces that shape commitment to (in)action in international settings.

Herein, we stressed this importance of RIs via the emotions/sensemaking nexus. Central to our argument is that this nexus may be born out of instances that are not immediately evident yet exist as distinct empirical possibilities. While we do not deny that decisions are an analytical priority for IB, RIs may be also impactful for purposes linked to MNC integration. For example, they may drain practitioners' emotional energy, haunt them as a source of regret, or induce MNC leaders to galvanize future capacities. Thus, residual aspects of decision-making such as RIs matter because they engender possibilities, consolidate inaction, breed new realities, or

reproduce existing ones. In a nutshell, RIs remind us that recalibrating our empirical sensitivity to detect unobserved nuances is more than an empirical challenge: it is also a scholarly responsibility, given the goal to elucidate the elusive world of IB practice.

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Authors confirm that there are no financial or non-financial interests that are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication.

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