

Patterns of internationalisation along time, space and scope

A study on high performing international firms

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at analysing the internationalisation processes of firms along time dimensions (precocity, speed) and spatial ones (scope, mode) which are the main constituents of internationalising organisations' behaviour. More precisely, this contribution confronts and explores the hypotheses of the existence of an archetype (isomorphism), or more archetypes (polymorphism) or no archetype at all (heteromorphism) in the international growth patterns of firms, as observed through the mentioned time/space dimensions..

The internationalization process has been studied in a wide number of theoretical and empirical contributions during the last thirty years and it has for long been regarded as an incremental process. Starting from the '80s, a number of contributions have evidenced exceptions and discontinuities in the international growth of some firms when compared to the stage models predictions . From the '90s the literature provides a clear evidence of early and fast internationalization, which involves simultaneous growth in distant markets and multiple entry modes.

This paper, based on a review of literature and a case study of 21 Italian SMEs explores the existence of different archetypes of firm internationalization processes, identifies the presence of polymorphism in internationalization processes, and analyses the main patterns of international growth which characterize in particular SMEs.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization process has been extensively studied in a number of theoretical and empirical contributions along the last thirty years, in different and complementary research perspectives ranging from international business to international marketing and more recently international entrepreneurship. The features of this process have been originally portrayed by mainstream behavioural models as sequential and incremental, as they involve a gradual commitment building in foreign markets (the so-called stage-model of international growth), in a framework grounded on risk aversion and experiential learning (Johanson&Vahlne, 1977). The studies on internationalization processes contributed to opening a new season in international business research, dominated by behavioural approaches as opposed, or complementary to the formerly prevailing economic ones. It was thus possible to investigate motivations, antecedents and directions of international growth, and to devote increasing attention to managerial and entrepreneurial drivers, opening the way to the development of international entrepreneurship studies. The behavioural approach, to which this paper belongs, needs to build more strongly on the origins of behavioural studies, which derive from psychology and date back to Watson (1913). Constitutive of behaviour are relationship of the individual with space and with time. Similar principles may hold for organisations like firms and for their internationalisation behaviour. In internationalisation studies much attention has been devoted to the space construct as expressed by foreign markets and their distance, since this issue is at the heart of international business. Much less attention has been devoted to the time construct as applied to the internationalisation behaviour. This construct is developed in this paper, in conjunction with the spatial relationships with foreign markets, which include geographic scope and entry modes behaviour. In fact this paper aims at developing a better understanding of internationalisation processes of firms along time and space as expressed by

precocity, speed (time variables), scope and mode, i.e. the main constituents of internationalising organisations' behaviour. More precisely, this contribution confronts and explores the hypotheses of the existence of an archetype (isomorphism), or more archetypes (polymorphism) or no archetype at all (heteromorphism) in the international growth patterns of firms. Behavioural sciences by definition (or by epistemology, we could say) have to ground their studies on the variety of behaviours, and admit polymorphic/heteromorphic structures and patterns of growth.

The emergence in the last decade of a growing body of literature on non-sequential internationalization processes (from leapfrogging to instant internationals, born globals (BG), INVs, etc) led to increasing criticism towards stage models as isomorphic pattern of internationalisation. The appearance of BG firms, that is, firms with international activity almost from inception, has generated a line of research in which the concept of *time* and its dimension (*speed and precocity*) has become a relevant research issue (Humerinta Peltomäki, 2003; Jones&Coviello, 2005; Rialp et al., 2005; Acedo&Jones, 2007). According to this approach, time is a dimension that must be explicitly considered in order to develop a proper understanding of the internationalization process of firms (Sharma&Blomstermo, 2003; Zucchella&Scabini., 2007; Arenius&Sasi, 2005). However, very few contributions have so far explored this perspective in an integrative manner (Ángeles Gallego et al., 2009), spanning from the temporal to the spatial perspective, as illustrated above. We have thus identified a research gap in this area and aim at addressing to this gap providing a study on how the key dimensions of international expansion (time, scope and mode) are inter-related and on the possible presence of archetypes in this process, emerging from the intersections among these elements.

After a literature review, aimed at exploring better the mentioned research gap, this contribution develops a study on 21 firms, which have proved very successful in a

longitudinal perspective in their internationalization effort. This permits to relate possible archetypes of international growth with performance outcomes.

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS

Since the 1960s, the study of the factors that have an impact on a firm's internationalization process has been one of the main research topics in the field of international business. The internationalization process of a firm can be examined according to two main perspectives: the economic or the behavioural one. This paper focuses on behavioural theories and their appropriateness to explain the evolutionary paths of firms in approaching foreign markets. Two main streams of incremental internationalization theories were developed in the last three decades: the Uppsala model (U-model) and the Innovation-Related Internationalization Models (I-Models). Both models involve a gradual approach to international growth. Much of the early literature on internationalization behavior argues that the process involves a series of incremental "stages" whereby firms gradually become involved in exporting and other forms of international business. As they do so, they commit greater resources to the foreign market/s and target countries that are increasingly "psychically distant" (Bilkey&Tesar, 1977; Johanson&Vahlne, 1977; Cavusgil, 1980; Czinkota, 1982). Although the number of stages differs (e.g. Cavusgil's (1980) five-stage model; Bilkey&Tesar's (1977) six-stage model; Leonidou&Katsiekas' (1996) three-stage model) a common underlying assumption of extant "stage-models" is that firms are well established in the domestic market prior to developing international strategies. Although research has provided some empirical support for the Nordic models (Petersen&Pedersen, 1997; Ellis&Pecotich, 1998), since 1980s some criticisms have emerged (Buckley et al., 1979; Cannon&Willis, 1981; Reid, 1983; Rosson, 1984; Turnbull, 1987; Chetty, 1999). The U-model has been criticized as deterministic (Reid,

1981) and, if firms were to develop in accordance with the model, individuals would then have no strategic choices (Andersson, 2000). Another bigger challenge is that today many firms simply do not follow the traditional pattern of internationalization proposed by stage theory, but they are international from their birth (Rialp et al. 2005; McDougall et al., 2003; McDougall&Oviatt 2000; Madsen&Servais 1997; Knight&Cavusgil 1996). According to McDougall et al. (1994), these firms are global from inception, or internationalize within two, three (Knight&Cavusgil 1996) or from three to six year (Crick, 2009) from establishment. Such internationalization behavior is commonplace among firms that target small, highly specialized global niches and is particularly prevalent among SMEs located in small, open economies that face the double jeopardy of targeting narrow niches in small domestic markets (Bell et al., 2001). These firms did not slowly build their way into the international trade, which appears to contradict earlier studies on firms' internationalization (Johansson&Vahlne, 1977, 1990). These companies have been indicated in different ways, such as "born global" (Madsen&Servais, 1997; Knight&Cavusgil 1996); "global start-ups" (Oviatt&McDougall, 1994); "international new ventures" (Oviatt&McDougall, 1997, 2005); "instant exporters" (McAuley, 1999) and "committed internationalists" (Bonaccorsi, 1992; Jolly et al., 1992). Typically, their offerings involve substantial value added, often due to a significant breakthrough in processes or technology (Knight&Cavusgil, 1996) and /or highly specialized products and services. A characteristic is that management adopts a global focus from the outset and embarks on rapid and dedicated internationalization (Jolly et al., 1992; McKinsey&Co., 1993; Bloodgood et al., 1995). According to Knight&Cavusgil (1996), the emergence of such firms can be explained by recent trends such as advances in ICT, the increasing role of niche markets and the growth of global networks, which are facilitating the development of mutually beneficial relationships with international partners. There is little doubt that these trends will increasingly exert a strong influence on SMEs

internationalization. What is also clear from these authors' discussion of the BG phenomenon, is that firms with an international vision from inception, or soon thereafter, (Oviatt&McDougall, 1994) present a substantive challenge to internationalization stage theories and the notion of incremental internationalization. Indeed, divergent empirical results have led many authors to seek alternative frameworks to the internationalization process models.

More evidences of non gradual international growth have been reported, apart the BG/INV case. For example the concept of "born-again global" firms has been proposed, i.e. long established firms that used to focus on their domestic markets, but suddenly take to rapid and dedicated internationalization (Bell et al., 2001, 2003). According to Bell et al. (2001), these born-again global firms appear to be influenced by critical incidents or a combination of events that provide them with additional human or financial resources, such as changes in ownership or management, being taken-over by another company with international network or themselves acquiring such a firm.

The appearance of alternative non-sequential internationalization processes does not determine the death of the traditional ones, it widens the perspective of alternative modalities of international expansion and raises the issue of polymorphic internationalisation patterns (a limited number of internationalisation patterns, which can be modelled and described), as well as the issue of heteromorphic patterns, which cannot be reduced to a limited number of archetypes.

The original stage model has been revised progressively also by the Authors (Johansson&Vahlne, 1990; 2009), who have reconciled it with leapfrogging and more generally with non sequential patterns of growth, building primarily on the role of social and inter-organisational relationships as "jump enablers".

The 2009 revision in particular, elaborates a model whereby internationalisation depends on a firm's relationships and business networks. As in the 1977 version, the 2009 business network model consists of two sets of variables, even though the underlying constructs have been partially adapted: the state variables (knowledge opportunities and network position) and the change variables (relationship commitments decisions and learning, creating, trust-building). The variables affect each other, the current state having an impact on change, and vice versa. The model depicts dynamic, cumulative processes of learning, as well as trust and commitment building. According to the authors, internationalization is seen as the outcome of the focal firm embedded in networks. Learning and commitment building take place in relationships and they are strongly related to identifying and exploiting opportunities. The re-focusing of the model on business relationships rather than on market exchange processes and the introduction of the construct of knowledge opportunities provide an important bridge between the two field of international business and international entrepreneurship, as far the internationalisation process is concerned.

In this paper we do not intend to analyse the drivers of the internationalisation process (entrepreneurs, networks, knowledge etc...) but we rather focus on the "overt and demonstrable" behaviour (Obrecht, 2004) as represented by the key features of the internationalisation process along its objective indicators (timing, scope, modes). In our opinion there is still much to work in the direction of identifying typologies of internationalisation, which can accommodate these variables, and in particular the time and space constructs.

It is in particular with the emergence of a literature on BG firms that the concepts of time and speed have become an increasingly relevant perspective of study (Humerinta-Peltomäki, 2003; Jones&Coviello, 2005; Rialp et al., 2005; Acedo&Jones, 2007), but only a handful of authors have developed this perspective integrating it into the internationalization process

(Kutschker et al., 1997; Humerinta-Peltomäki, 2003; Sharma&Blomstermo, 2003; Arenius&Sasi, 2005; Ángeles Gallego, 2009). The following table (Table 1) summarizes the role of the time and its dimensions in the internationalization archetypes which past research has identified since 1960s.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS IN ITS DIMENSIONS: TIME, SCOPE AND MODES

Time has been traditionally marginal in international business studies (Ancona et al., 2001), but now new research fields are emerging, which place time at their core. Secondly, the time has different meanings, because it might refer to the early start of international activities (e.g. *precocity*), the speed of international growth (e.g. *rapidity or speed*). The two dimensions do not necessarily go together (early internationalisers are not necessarily fast, and vice versa) as some studies have shown (Zucchella et al., 2007) Other studies focus on the rhythm of the internationalization process over time, the so called pace of internationalization (Eisenhardt&Brown, 1998; Vermeulen&Barkema, 2002;Arenius&Sasi, 2003).

In literature, *internationalisation precocity* has been operationalized as the number of years from firm inception to the beginning of the international sales. Firms which started exporting in the first three years have been classified as precocious (Rialp et al., 2005). Literature on BG firms argues that precocity matters in international competition and that temporal dimensions of internationalization, like *precocity and speed*, support international growth and performance. Precocity and speed influence intensity because both are connected not only with foreign sales growth, but also with the accumulation of experiential learning

(Johanson&Vahlne, 1977; Kolb, 1984), which is crucial to maintain competitive advantage in a global market. The literature reveals considerable differences of opinion on how quickly and how widely a firm must internationalize for it to be recognized as a BG. According to different Authors, a BG is firm which starts internationalizing within two years from inception (McKinsey&Co. 1993), or six years (Zahra et al., 2000), or again seven years (Jolly et al., 1992), and also eight years (McDougall et al., 1994). This diversity suggests that the definitional boundary for BG is a matter of degree more than a generic absolute.

Literature has also considered the *speed* dimension, but more specifically for the BG/INV case, suggesting that 25% foreign sales in the first three years might be an acceptable indicator of fast internationalisation (Rialp et al., 2005; Servais&Rasmussen, 2000).

Together with the speed issue also the scope one was raised, since some authors have claimed that BG firms should have a global scope and not only a generic international scope (Gabrielsson&Gabrielsson, 2004). The *geographic scope* is in fact another important variable in the internationalization process: some authors divide firms in regional and global players (Maccarini et al., 2003; Servais et al., 2005) or make a distinction between international and global players (Loustarinen&Gabrielsson, 2002; Gabrielsson&Gabrielsson, 2004) depending on the choice to operate on a macro-regional area or on the global market. The former are firms competing on a macro-regional market (in our case the UE27) where natural and artificial barriers have weakened, characterised by high proximity both in geographic and (mostly) psychic terms. The global players show a global commitment, based on a strategic search of global customers, they have a broader scope, which means that they have different customers in one or more continents other than Europe. In contrast to the traditional approach, the BG approach minimizes the relevance of psychic distance during a firm's internationalization. The traditional approach assumes that firms enter new international markets as a function of their psychic distance to the firm's prior experience. However, the

BG approach emphasizes that psychic distance may become irrelevant during a firm's internationalization (Jolly et al., 1992; Knight&Cavusgil, 1996). The recent Johansson&Vahlne (2009) revised model accommodates for this issue through the role of networks and introduces the issue of the liability of outsidership (to the relevant network), as a factor which constrains -more than the generic psychic distance between countries- the market entry.

Concerning *entry modes* strategy, Driscoll and Paliwoda's (1997) proposed continuum of five modes of entry, namely exports, licensing, sales office, JV and subsidiary. These five models form part of a continuum as far as the level of resources committed by the firm is concerned. Thus, export requires the smallest commitment as opposed to subsidiary, which requires the greatest commitment, as noted by numerous authors (Johanson&Vahlne, 1977; Shrader et al., 2000; Zahra et al., 2000; Malhotra, 2003; Oviatt et al., 2004). Past research confirmed that BG firms use a wider variety of entry modes strategy than traditional exporter ones. BG companies internationalize early and enter in distant market using different and also committed entry modes. Some authors have stated that the choice of entry modes strategy depends on the geographical and psychical distance of the markets and on the presence of institutional barriers (Brouthers, 2002; Zhao et al., 2004).

Table 2 summarizes the key differences that we have identified between the different views and the attributes that might be used to distinguish a firm's internationalization along alternative paths. The table is based on the literature review of previous section, which has highlighted the evolution from one dominant archetype to two alternative ones (the sequential and the early and fast one). The table also reveals that if we disentangle the two time dimensions (precocity and speed) and incorporate scope and mode we might theoretically obtain other two possible outcomes:

- more than two archetypes (polymorphism);

- no archetype at all (heteromorphism).

Starting from these hypotheses, we aim at exploring these alternative possibilities.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Method of research. The empirical section of this work is based on the case study research (Yin, 1994). According to this methodological approach, we use a qualitative scale to measure all the variables, and we use a matrix positioning approach to summarize the main results. According to Marshall&Rossman (1999), qualitative research is appropriate for understanding phenomena such entrepreneur's and firm's orientation, action and behaviour, and is useful in investigations of interpretations and meanings of events. Case studies appear to be an appropriate methodology in business research (Yin, 1994). The main reasons is that business organizations and their growth paths are complex and can be more thoroughly described by qualitative research methodologies. Only through case studies can researchers capture the individual firm's interpretation of the matter and at the same time work on the commonalities that may crop up in these differentiated responses. Such commonalities allow researchers to outline a general interpretation framework for internationalization processes, while confirming their heteromorphic nature. Case study research appears in fact to suit international business and international entrepreneurship research particularly well (Bell et al., 2004; Andersen, 1993; Johanson&Vahlne, 1993; Cavusgil, 1980).

The framework for analyzing the internationalization process is applied to 21 Italian firms, located in Lombardy, Pavia province, all belonging to the manufacturing sector. The group of firms represents well the leading players in Italian internationalization, i.e. predominantly

small and medium companies, operating in the specialized (mostly machinery) and traditional industries (food and beverages, footwear,...).

Data collection. Data were collected through information gathered by Chamber of Commerce of Pavia. The sample (or better, the group) is composed by SMEs which took part on an award as “best exporters” organized in 2009 by the Chamber of Commerce of Pavia for the first time. The purpose was to highlight the contribution to regional development of firms which showed high and growing foreign sales (not only export) intensity and broader geographic scope, as well as differentiated modes of entry. No other export awards have been reported so far in Italy, so this first group of firms represents a unique sample in our country. It is very interesting to notice that the award is based on 2008 data (compared to previous years), that is a period of severe crisis of the export and more generally of the global productive activity. Since 2008, Italian export activity has decreased by 22%, but these 21 have gained excellent success both in international and global markets and have achieved good results also in global recession times.

Methodology and operationalization of the variables (time, scope and mode). The methodology of investigation adopted is a structured but very short questionnaire submitted to firms which asked to be considered for the award. The questionnaire contained questions related to general data about the firms (e.g. number of employees, year of foundation, legal form, etc...) and data concerning their international activity (e.g. export intensity, geographic scope, entry modes, etc...). The firms of the sample are relatively mature, which permits to carry out a longitudinal analysis and to understand better their internationalization paths. On average firms started to export after six years from their foundation and the main markets are located in UE27 (Germany, France and Spain), but in recent years firms have started to

enlarge their international activities in distant markets (India, Russia, China, Middle East). Concerning entry modes, export strategy is the primary foreign-market entry mode, and sometimes it represents the only way adopted for selling their goods in foreign markets. This corresponds to the predominantly small size of the firms (Tesar&Moini, 1998; Westhead et al., 2001; Audretsch, 2002; Kundu&Katz, 2003; Clarke&Wilson, 2009).

Table 3 summarizes the most relevant information about the surveyed group.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Analysis of the case studies and tentative classification of their internationalization process.

Since the objective of this work is to try to identify some archetypes in internationalization process –if any- we start providing a representation combining the constructs of scope, precocity, speed and entry modes.

Variables are operationalized in the following way. *Speed* of internationalization is one of the key defining factors of a fast internationalizing firms (Knight&Cavusgil, 1996; Madsen&Servais, 1997; Morgan-Thomas&Jones, 2009) and together with scope, it is indicative of the entrepreneurial, proactive, innovative and risk-seeking form of internationalization generally associated with BG (Acedo&Jones, 2007; Jones&Coviello, 2005). Yet the dynamics of internationalization, especially its speed, is under-researched (Hurmerinta-Peltomaki, 2003; Kuivalainen et al., 2007). Speed could be measured here in terms of average yearly growth rate of export over the entire period of internationalization of the firm, computed as the ratio between intensity (in 2008) and experience (years) in internationalization. We distinguished between fast internationalizing firms (export average yearly growth rate $\geq 3\%$) and slow internationalizing firms (export average yearly growth rate $< 3\%$). 3% could be considered a good proxy for speed and it also corresponds to the

average speed of the total sample. In addition to this the 3% trigger rate may appear low, but it is calculated over the entire internationalization cycle of the firm and not over the first years as some studies on BG do. This permits to account for a more longitudinal perspective, which also considers possible periods of de-internationalization or periods of stabilization.

In literature, *internationalisation precocity* has been operationalized as the number of years from firm inception to the beginning of the international sales. In our paper, firms which started exporting in the first two years have been classified as early internationalizing (Rialp et al., 2005).

Generally, the number of countries to which a firm exports is a common measure of *internationalization scope*, but it is seldom an indicator of diversification within a specific time-frame (Jones&Coviello, 2005). In this regard and in order to evaluate the “global orientation” of the sample, firms are considered narrow in scope if their countries portfolio is composed mainly by close countries (more than 70% of export derived from UE27), while are broad/global in scope if they have more diversified and distant markets (more than 70% of export derived from extraUE27 markets or from one or more countries).

Finally, concerning entry modes, we consider the number and the variety of entry modes adopted by a firm. Respondents were provided with a list of entry modes options which could be categorized in five groups: export, commercial and productive agreements, licensing & franchising, joint ventures (JV) and own subsidiaries. We consider the ratio between the number of countries selected by the firms and five, the maximum number of entry modes which a firm could select. We considered “simple internationalizers” firms which use one-two entry modes, “multiple modes internationalizers” companies which used several entry mode strategies.

On the basis of these variables, we will label “born global” firms which are fast (export average growth rate >3%), speed (time to export <=2 years), global in scope (more than 75%

of export intensity in global markets) and select between multiple entry modes (more than two different entry modes).

The scatter plot (carried out by SPSS) shows that there is a large cluster of “best performers” in term of internationalization in the area corresponding to high precocity, fast internationalization, broad scope and multiple entry mode (Figure 1). This confirms recent studies (Hagen et al. 2009) which validate the existence of an Italian “entrepreneurial-growth-oriented cluster”. This cluster orientation is reflected in high cluster rankings on all performance and growth-oriented items across all investigated areas.

Within the cluster, there are several difficulties in identifying, classifying and measuring BG firms (Hurmerinta-Peltomaki, 2003; Bell et al., 2010). From a more fine-grained analysis, not all the firms of the identified cluster could be labeled as “born-global”. In fact there are firms that follow a fast internationalization process but they have a narrow scope (own region), show a lower level of export intensity and are less precocious than other ones.

On the basis of the previous indicators, we could label some firms as BG (namely ID1, ID7, ID8, ID11, ID18, ID19, ID21) because they make their internationalization debut soon after their inception, are fast and global in scope.

There are also other firms which are precocious but slow and their market are located mainly in UE27 countries (namely, ID2, ID3, ID6, ID9, ID10, ID12, ID13, ID16, ID20).

Scatter plot also identifies some “outliers” which show very interesting characters. For example, ID4 shows the characters of a “born-again global firm”, because it is late (time to export=34 years), but fast and broad in scope. Two particular events mainly encourage this firm to focus on foreign markets: the demand from the Middle East countries and the generation turnover. After that the company has decided to invest in a new factory equipped with the highest technology plants in order to enlarge the production and to make it more progressive and today it pursues growth in new markets in Europe, Far East and the USA.

The ID4 internationalization paths confirmed past research which stated that there is also evidence in literature that firm internationalization may be triggered by particular “episodes” that lead to rapid international expansion or de-internationalization (Bell et al. 2010).

Additionally, ID15 and ID17 could be labelled as “traditional exporters”, because they are not precocious (their export activity started after 23 and 22 years respectively), they have a narrow scope (more than 75% of their sales come from UE27 countries) and are internationalising at a slow pace (average yearly export rate growth < 2%). Finally, other firms (namely ID5, ID14) could be labelled as traditional exporters because they are narrow in scope, relatively slow but they are not so late as ID15 and ID17.

In sum, within the identified cluster, there are firms which internationalize few years after their inception, but only seven of them could be labeled as BG and show a simultaneous growth process. This means that there are different internationalization patterns which permit to achieve sooner or later a high performance.

Concerning entry modes, the multiple entry modes strategy seems to be more related with early, fast and broad in scope firms than with late, slow and narrow ones. Scatter plot shows that the cluster of firms which are fast, early and broad in scope are “multiple modes internationalizers”: these firms use several and more committed entry modes. For example, ID7, ID21, ID8 (which have all the features of a BG), beside the most common entry modes (export and distribution agreements) uses franchising&licensing and JV respectively).

ID21 is a very interesting example of BG firms, because it is the fastest, the most precocious, most global in scope and use several and high-committed entry mode (JV, licensing and franchising). Also ID4 (the born-again global firm) could be label as “multiple modes internationalizers”, because it use export and distribution agreements, and this is confirmed by the history of this company: it started with export and then used distribution agreements in order to answer to the needs of the new customers. Our results seems to be in contrast with

Ángeles Gallego et al. (2009), but it could depend on the fact that our sample is composed by firm who are the “best performer in internationalization”, a well-selected group of firms which are proactive in internationalization, are relatively early and fast.

Performance is expressed through the color of the circle identifying the firm and it appears to be fairly different when comparing firms on the basis of the time, scope and mode: BG, born again global firm show medium high level of internationalization intensity, while the traditional exporter are less performing than the former. Our results confirm past research which state that precocity and speed influence internationalization intensity because both are connected not only with foreign sales growth but also with the accumulation of experiential learning (Johanson&Vahlne, 1977). Anyway, our group of firms refers to best internationalizers so the analysis of performance is relatively less relevant since all firms fall in the high performing cluster, even though at differentiated levels of high performance.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The following matrixes (Figure 2, Figure 3) show some typologies in internationalization process on the basis of the two dimensions of the time (e.g. speed and precocity) and the geographic scope and mode.

FIGURE 2 - ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 3 - ABOUT HERE

The two figures permit to highlight better some pattern of international growth and the eventual emergence of archetypes. The first consideration is that there are three main patterns which could represent three distinct archetypes and an additional more rare fourth case

represented by the mentioned born again global pattern. The three main archetypes are as follows:

- early, fast, with broad scope and with multiple entry modes. This category represents rather well the features of the BG firms;
- late, slow, with narrow (regional) scope and focused on export. This typology represents well the traditional internationalization pattern, but there is no evidence of gradual commitment and gradual increase in scope. This is very typical of the small business which is international but cannot cope with the complexity and the need of resources (financial and managerial) for enlarging its scope and diversifying its entry modes
- early, slow, with narrow (regional) scope and focused on export. In this case there is an international vision from the beginning, which might have been determined by the business, by the entrepreneurs experience and network or by unsolicited orders. At some stage this early orientation evolves into a sort of lock in where the constraining factors may be the same as in the case above. Also in this case the firm can achieve a good performance in terms of export intensity over the years, but it doesn't leverage fully on its initial international orientation.

Table 4 summarizes the relevant information about the surveyed group.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research is to account for the nature of internationalization processes, trying to fill a research gap in the quest for archetypes of international growth. The literature has been dominated for years by the idea of the stage model as the only archetype, then exceptions were admitted to this model (as it is natural for archetypes) and finally from the 90s an alternative archetype emerged, represented by the BG/INV typology. The recent evolution of literature leaves unanswered the question about the existence of one (isomorphism), two or more archetypes (polymorphism) or no archetype at all. Our exploratory study on 21 high performing firms identifies a few different archetypes in the internationalization process, in addition to the two well known models described in literature (“early and fast born global process” and “rings in the water” late and slow process). In sum, in our sample it is possible identify:

- a born-again global firm, which starts to export after 34 years from its foundation but derived a wide percentage of sales from global markets using several entry modes strategies and is high performing;
- “traditional exporters”, which are late and slow, narrow in scope (UE27 countries), “simple internationalizers” concerning entry mode (only export) and are relatively less performing than the other ones;
- born global firms, which are early, fast, global in scope, adopting multiple entry modes and showing high level of performance;
- companies which are precocious but are slow internationalizers: these firms start to export a few years from their inception, but 75% of their sales derives from their

macro-region, the UE27. These companies are mainly export oriented and show average levels of performance, when compared to the others.

The understanding of these archetypes involves that the two dimensions of time are extremely relevant and may be disentangled: being early does not involve being fast and vice versa. Being fast is more crucial to international performance than being early, as the case of BG and born again global firms suggests. Speed better captures the entrepreneurial dimension, the firm orientation and its capacity to leverage on the international opportunities, pooling resources and developing capabilities. Speed also leverages on the adoption of multiple entry modes, where inter-firm collaborations have a crucial role, since they permit to handle better the resources constraints and provide faster access to foreign networks and foreign markets knowledge. As a consequence, a broader scope can be rapidly achieved, even though we hypothesize –given the highly specialized products manufactured by these BG firms- that they mostly reason in terms of global customers , wherever located, rather than foreign markets.

The other two archetypes (early and slow, late and slow) are dominated by their slow pace, which goes with narrow scope and export only mode. These firms can be good performers in terms of export intensity, especially if they started internationalising long ago (anyway our group is formed by firms participating to an export award, so they are performing already better than the Italian exporters' average), but their experience did not generate neither gradual commitment, nor increasing psychic distance. They seem to be locked- in and resources constrained, maybe due to lack of managerial resources or capital, or by the lack of willingness to grow in a collaborative (foreign agreements) or more committed (FDI) way. They have -as we wrote above- a good performance even though relatively lower than the fast growing archetypes (BG and born again global). These firms corresponds –on the internationalization side- to the hypothesis that many Italian firms are small even though they

are relatively old (“dwarf firms”, Onida, 2004), because they have obstacles to growth or because their strategy is not growth oriented, in order to maintain a steady control (normal family-based) over the firm governance and organization. Anyway these firms could achieve satisfactory results through a fit between resources, objectives and environment.

The main limitation of this study is that the findings can not be generalized and they need to be tested through quantitative analysis with a significant number of observations. The value of this qualitative research lies with the possibility it gives to build testable research hypotheses as well as with its capacity to highlight behaviour and strategic issues that are difficult to test quantitatively. The uniqueness of the sample (Italian “best internationalizers firms”) could represent both an opportunity to study internationalization typologies in a relatively uniform institutional frame and a limitation, because we analyze only firms which have gained success both in international markets also in global recession times. For this reason we imagine that other paths or archetypes may emerge enlarging our analysis to a sample representative of the international firms. If the sample included more large firms we could expect to find a clearer evidence of a stage model *à la* Johansson&Vahlne (1977) in all its steps. This study revealed anyway that international performance can be achieved through alternative paths and involves differentiated archetypes. The above mentioned considerations regarding firm growth and speed of international expansion do not necessarily involve a judgement on their behaviour. Different firms have achieved performance adopting different models, which they have considered adequate for their system of values, culture, orientation, resources and objectives. They all seem to have reached a long term fit between endogenous variables and the exogenous environment, as it is demonstrated by their history and actual performance also in a period of deep world economic crisis.

The managerial implications of this study refer to the existence of different models to achieve international performance, where the key issue is the pursue of a long term fit between

entrepreneurial orientation, firms resources and capabilities and the risks and opportunities of foreign markets.

The differentiated international growth paths have relevant policy implications and represent an important challenge to export promotion agencies, regarding the nature of support provided and in terms of providing assistance in a timely manner (Bell&MCNaughton, 2000). Government agencies should emphasize policies and programs that address the different archetypes and the firms' specific needs. The actual policies and services for supporting international sales are mostly conceived for late and slow internationalisers, which leverage on one or a few entry modes and focus on markets (which are supposed to be uniformly attractive for different businesses and models of growth), rather than on global customers.

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Table 1 – Dominant archetypes in internationalization process and the role of the time

YEARS	INTERNATIONALIZATION MODEL	TIME		GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE	DOMINANT ARCHETYPE
		PRECOCITY	SPEED		
1960s-1970s	The "stage model" (Ahroni, 1966; Johanson&Vahlne, 1977); other stage model	Late	Slow	From close to progressively more distant markets, both in terms of psychic and geographic distance	Slow process, where the output of one decision is the input of the next. Scope and modes evolve incrementally
1980s	The stage model. Some exceptions start being reported. Examples of leap-frogging firms (Hedlund&Kverneland, 1985)	Late but with exceptions to the rule	Slow but with exceptions to the rule	Gradual but with exceptions to the rule	Sequential, but with exceptions
1990s	The stage model is challenged by the born global (Rennie, 1993; Knight and Cavusgil, 1996; Madsen and Servais, 1997), Global Start-up (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994), International New Venture (McDougall et al., 1994), Instant International (Fillis, 2001).	Early or late (mainly in traditional industries)	Slow or fast	Sequential or serial entry (multiple markets simultaneously, also distant markets from the beginning)	2 main archetypes: gradual sequential internationalisers and EFIs (early and fast internationalisers). Scope and modes evolve either incrementally or along early and fast simultaneous growth
2000s	Born-again global. Revision to stage model (Johansson and Vahlne, 2009)	Any?	Any?	Any?	Any?

Source: authors personal elaborations

Table 2 – Time dimensions, entry modes and scope in fast and slow internationalization process

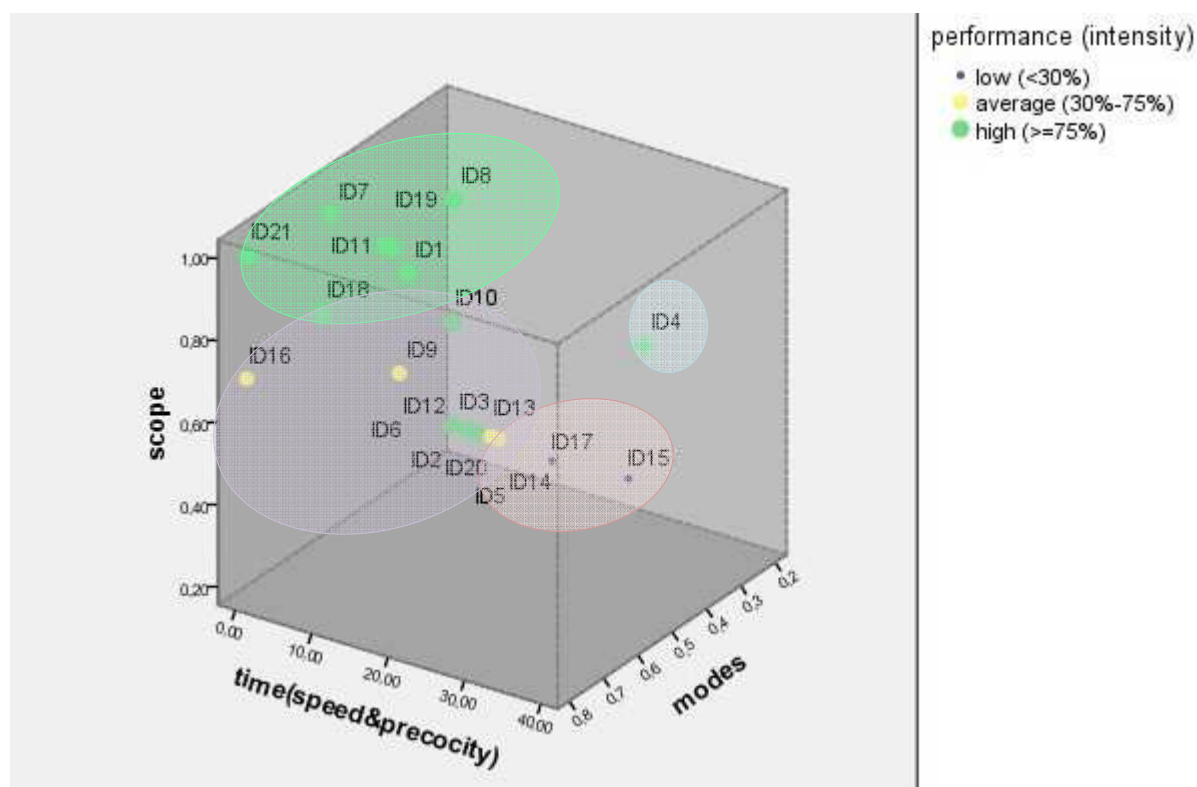
INTERNATIONALIZATION DRIVERS	SLOW-TRADITIONAL PROCESS	EARLY AND FAST PROCESS
TIME DIMENSIONS (SPEED AND PRECOCITY)	Not crucial to firm success; slow	Crucial to firm success within a few years of inception, early and fast processes should lead to high internationalisation intensity
ENTRY MODES STRATEGIES	Gradual commitment along establishment chain	Simultaneous and multiple entry modes internationalizers; commitment disentangles from experiential learning
GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE	Domestic market developed first; internationalization starts in close markets both geographically and psychically and progresses with gradual increase in distance	Domestic market not necessarily relevant; geographic and psychic distance is relatively irrelevant

Source: authors personal elaborations

Table 3 – General characteristics of the sample

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS (21 SMEs firms)		
Micro-firm (0-9 employees)	30%	percentage on the total
Small firms (10-49 employees)	55%	percentage on the total
Medium firms (50-250 employees)	15%	percentage on the total
General characteristics		
Industry		
Agriculture machineries	15%	percentage on the total
Food machineries	5%	percentage on the total
Food and beverages	10%	percentage on the total
Other Industrial machineries	65%	percentage on the total
Footwear	5%	percentage on the total
Age	36	average
Turnover/sales	7.490.000	average
Number of employees	29	average
Internationalization characteristics		
Experience in internationalization (years from first foreign sales)	26	average
Time		
Precocity	6	average
Speed	3%	average
Scope		
Number of markets (2004)	21	average
Number of markets (2008)	30	average
Country portfolio (2004)	Germany, France, Spain	first three important markets (frequencies)
Country portfolio (2008)	India, Russia, China, Middle East	first three important markets (frequencies)
Modes		
Export (export through buyers, trading companies, agents, own employees with commercial function, e-commerce)	96%	percentage on the total
Agreements (distribution,co-marketing agreements)	47%	percentage on the total
Licensing and franchising	10%	percentage on the total
JV	15%	percentage on the total
Subsidiaries (production, commercial)	20%	percentage on the total
Performance		
Intensity (foreign sales/total sales in 2004)	50%	average
Intensity (foreign sales/total sales in 2008)	58%	average

Figure 1 – Pattern of internationalization along time, space and scope and performance



Legend: In this graphs, we have operationalized time as the sum between its two components (precocity and speed), in order to represent the archetype identified in our analysis. The green area shows firms which could be defined “BG”; the purple area groups firms which are early but slow, less broader in scope and simple exporter; the pink area groups the “traditional exporter” and finally the blue one shows a firm which could be labeled as “born again global”.

Figure 2 - Time dimension (speed and precocity) and scope matrix

		SCOPE	
		BROAD	NARROW
TIME	EARLY-FAST	ID1-ID7-ID8-ID11-ID18-ID19-ID21	
	EARLY-SLOW		ID2-ID3-ID6-ID13-ID16-ID9-ID10-ID12-ID20
	LATE-FAST	ID4	
	LATE-SLOW		ID5-ID14-ID15-ID17

Figure 3 - Time dimension (speed and precocity) and mode matrix

		MODE	
TIME		MULTIPLE INTERNATIONALIZE RS	SIMPLE EXPORTER
	EARLY-FAST	ID1-ID7-ID8-ID11- ID18-ID19-ID21	
	EARLY-SLOW	ID16	ID2-ID3-ID6-ID13- ID9-ID10-ID12-ID20
	LATE-FAST	ID4	
	LATE-SLOW		ID5-ID14-ID15-ID17

Table 4 - The characteristics of the sample

ID	MAIN PRODUCTS	AGE	EXPERIENCE IN INTERNATIONALIZATION	EXPORT INTENSITY	SPEED	PRECOCITY	SCOPE	MODE
EARLY-FAST-GLOBAL IN SCOPE-MULTIPLE MODES ("BORN GLOBAL FIRMS")								
ID1	alimentary industry - rice and derived products-rice and product of organic agriculture	18	13	0,8	0,06	2	100%GL	exp, dist agreem
ID7	shoes machineries	48	44	0,9	0,03	2	100%GL	exp, dist agreem, subs
ID8	agricultural machineries construction	8	6	0,87	0,15	0	50%GL; 30%EXTRA-UE27; 20%UE27	exp, dist agreem, lic
ID11	complete coffee roasting facilities from green coffee to packaging,	10	8	0,75	0,08	0	80%GL; 20%UE27	exp, dist agreem
ID18	fire system	16	13	0,75	0,05	1	75%GL; 25%UE27	exp, dist agreem
ID19	Piping products in steel & special alloy steel materials for the energy, petrochemical, gas, oil, chemical and naval fields	18	15	0,75	0,05	1	80%GL; 20%UE27	exp, dist agreem
ID21	valves (core product), actuators, pipe fittings, flanges and systems for measuring, filtering, and regulating fluids and gases	8	6	0,92	0,16	0	100%GL	exp, dist agreem, lic, subs
LATE- RELATIVELY FAST- BROAD SCOPE-MULTIPLE MODE ("BORN-AGAIN GLOBAL FIRMS")								
ID4	manufacturing industry - high resistance cement tiles for exterior and interior use made of marble/granite for industrial and private construction projects	84	48	0,8	0,02	34	75%GL; 25%UE27	exp, dist agreem
LATE-SLOW-NARROW SCOPE-SIMPLE EXPORTER ("TRADITIONAL EXPORTER")								
ID5	tyre for caterpillar tractor	53	46	0,6	0,01	5	25%GL; 75%UE27	exp
ID14	iron plate manufacturer	18	10	0,3	0,03	6	25%GL; 75%UE28	exp
ID15	Filters and magnetics plugs, Filling and draining plugs, Breather plugs, Visual level indicators	48	23	0,38	0,01	23	25%GL; 75%UE29	exp
ID17	zootechnology equipment	36	12	0,25	0,02	22	40%EXTRA-UE27; 60%UE27	exp, dist agreem
EARLY-SLOW-NARROW SCOPE-SIMPLE EXPORTER								
ID2	alimentary industry - cheese industry	61	38	0,49	0,01	3	25%EXTRAUE27; 15%GL; 60%UE27	exp
ID3	manufacturing industry - monolithic slabs made of acid-proof ceramics.	22	20	0,42	0,02	0	75%UE27; 25%EXTRA-UE27	exp
ID6	special woodworking machines	40	38	0,9	0,02	0	75%UE27; 25%EXTRA-UE28	exp
ID9	sterilising machineries	57	53	0,59	0,02	2	60%UE27; 40%GL	exp, dist agreem
ID10	special woodworking machines	36	34	0,72	0,02	0	60%UE27; 40%EXTRA-UE27	exp
ID12	turn-key handling systems and automated technology dedicated to the worlds of Express Couriers, Logistic operators, as well as Air Cargo and Industrial processes.	23	21	0,36	0,02	0	75%UE27; 25%GL	exp
ID13	production of pressure vessels for compressed air and oil separators, from the smallest capacity to lt. 2000 and more	50	45	0,79	0,02	3	75%UE27; 25%GL	exp
ID16	manufacture of evaporative cooling equipment	38	36	0,46	0,01	0	45%UE27; 25%EXTRA-AUE27; 30%GL	exp, dist agreem, JV, subs
ID20	production and selling of women shoes	35	31	0,7	0,02	2	75%UE27; 25%GL	exp