

# Internationalisation of Born Globals from The Theoretical Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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The paper discusses the evolution of theoretical approaches towards the internationalisation process of firms, especially SMEs. It clarifies the definitions of a born global (BG) firm, presents its characteristics and the specifics of its internationalisation process. The objective of this paper is to present the internationalisation process of a born global firm from a theoretical perspective. The article starts with the presentation of the oldest approaches towards internationalisation and shows how ongoing changes in the global economic environment have influenced international behaviours of firms as well as changed the researchers' perception of BGs and their internationalisation process. The article highlights the role of knowledge in BGs' internationalisation. Due to the magnitude of literature on BGs and their internationalisation, this article does not cover all of them. The article ends with conclusions and points to further opportunities and directions of research. This article came into being within the research project OPUS entitled: Patterns of internationalization of high-tech small and medium-sized enterprises, (UMO-2013/11/B/HS4/02135) 2014-2017.

**Keywords:** internationalisation, SMEs, born globals, international business.

## Teoretyczne koncepcje internacjonalizacji firm born global

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W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono ewolucję podejść teoretycznych do procesu internacjonalizacji przedsiębiorstw, zwłaszcza MŚP. Zaprezentowano definicje i cechy firm wcześniej umiędzynarodowionych (born global) oraz specyfikę ich internacjonalizacji. Celem artykułu jest omówienie procesu internacjonalizacji firm born global z perspektywy teoretycznej. Artykuł rozpoczął od przedstawienia najstarszych podejść do procesu internacjonalizacji, a następnie ukazano zmiany zachodzące w globalnym otoczeniu ekonomicznym wpływające na zachowania międzynarodowe przedsiębiorstw oraz związane z tym zmiany w postrzeganiu born global i ich umiędzynarodowienia. W artykule podkreślono rolę wiedzy w internacjonalizacji born global. Z uwagi na bardzo obszerną literaturę w analizowanym obszarze przedstawiono tylko wybrane pozycje. Artykuł kończą wnioski podsumowujące, obejmujące krótkie przedstawienie dalszych możliwych kierunków badań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** internacjonalizacja, MSP, born global, biznes międzynarodowy.

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, internationalisation is widely defined as “*any economic activity undertaken by a firm abroad*” (Rymarczyk 2004, p. 19). The first internationalisation theories described international behaviours of large firms and transnational corporations (TNC) rather than SMEs. The first theories that concerned the internationalisation process of SMEs appeared in the 1970s and their development continues today. These theories have evolved from quite simple explanations of firm internationalisation (e.g. stage models) to holistic, integrative and sophisticated ones. The concept of born global firms appeared two decades ago and even today there exist many different definitions, which causes the lack of their conceptualisation. However, many authors highlight the role of knowledge in BG firm internationalisation. In this article, BG firms are defined as “*business organizations that, from or near their founding, seek superior international business performance from the application of knowledge-based resources to the sale of outputs in multiple countries*” (Knight & Cavusgil, p. 124). Their ability of accelerated internationalisation results from their ability to sustain innovation and to create new knowledge which facilitates foreign market entry and operations. Moreover, earlier internationalisation and greater knowledge intensity are associated with faster international growth (Autio et al, 2000).

## 2. Internationalisation Theory Background

The theories of internationalisation of businesses have been initially developed within the theories of international trade (e.g. Adam Smith’s *Theory of Absolute Advantage*, 1954) and foreign direct investment (FDI). The most famous FDI theories include Dunning’s Eclectic Theory (OLI Theory) (1993), internalisation theory (Buckley & Casson, 1981) or transaction cost theory (Williamson, 1998; Wach 2012; Daszkiewicz & Wach, 2013). The development of the FDI theories was due to the increasing role of transnational corporations (TNCs) and their expansion into foreign markets in the 1970s. Dunning investigates how multinational enterprises (MNE) exploit ownership (O) and location (L) advantages by internalising (I) markets. The Eclectic Paradigm implies that the MNE will establish production where it can best take benefit from its advantages, as defined by OLI-parameters. However, exploitation is only possible because of market imperfections. The Eclectic Paradigm implies rational behaviour of firms and requires instant, complete and unlimited information which can never be found in reality. Thus, the Eclectic Paradigm is useful for explaining foreign production of large firms rather than for SMEs.

The first theories of internationalisation of SMEs developed in the mid-1970s (Daszkiewicz & Wach, 2012; 2013; 2014). Initially, they adapted the general theories of internationalisation; then, their very dynamic development began with the appearance of the so-called stage theories. The stage theories

describe internationalisation of firms as an incremental process (Johanson & Wiedersheim, 1975; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Bilkey & Tesar, 1977; Cavusgil, 1980). They assume that firms start their international expansion in small steps, from neighbouring markets to the most distant markets. The Uppsala Model (U-Model) is the most famous and one of the most cited among stage theories (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Johanson & Wiedersheim, 1975). However, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) as well as Schweizer, Vahlne and Johanson (2010) updated their U-Model four times (Wach, 2014a, p. 17).

In 1990s, numerous new approaches towards internationalisation of SMEs appeared. One of the most popular is the resource-based view (RBV) (Barney, 1991) which assumes that firms possess resources enabling them to achieve competitive advantage. It describes not only the actual condition of firms but also their potential in the internationalisation process. However, the RBV has undergone some important modifications due to changes in the economic environment. As Wach (2014a) noted, especially the perception of strategic planning has changed radically. Traditionally, it was understood as a process of resources and sales planning. Presently, it is rather perceived as the interaction of the firm with competitive forces and the implementation of strategic management elements such as managerial and entrepreneurial skills, capabilities and competences.

Another important mainstream was the network approach (Johanson & Mattsson, 1988; Coviello & McAuley, 1999; Oblój, 2012) which claimed that networks have a significant impact on internationalisation processes – their pace, pattern, market selection and entry mode. Moreover, functioning in networks helps a firm to gain initial credibility, lower costs and minimise risks of internationalisation (Zain & Ng, 2006; Daszkiewicz, 2014a).

The U-Model was criticised as inadequate in explaining the internationalisation particularly of high-techs and high-tech related industries, which resulted in a new approach – international entrepreneurship (Wach & Wehrmann, 2014) that bases on the assumption that the international attempt may be driven by entrepreneurs because of their individual characteristics (Zahra, 2005; Busenitz & Barney, 1997). A business owner, due to his rich industrial and international business experiences, may invest in a foreign market. In this process, the entrepreneur's personal nature plays a significant role.

In 1994, McDougall and Oviatt suggested in their INV theory (*International New Ventures*) that at least some SMEs do not follow the incremental path of internationalisation but they are “international from inception”. This is because entrepreneurs seek growth opportunities in foreign markets. The scholars defined INV SMEs “*as a business organization that, from inception, seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and the scale of outputs in multiple countries*” (Oviatt & McDougall 1994, p. 49). The INV theory concerned particularly high-techs and high-tech related industries which skip or do not have any stages in their internationalisation process. These firms may control assets, especially

unique knowledge, that create value in more than one country (Oviatt & McDougal 1994, p. 60).

Since Oviatt and McDougal (1994) started to differentiate the two ways of firms' internationalisation, i.e. "international at inception" or "international by stage", this classification became frequently used among researchers (Daszkiewicz, 2004; Daszkiewicz, 2014; Wach, 2014c; Dulinić, 2013; Przybylska, 2013; Jarosiński, 2012; Jarosiński, 2013; Freiling & Zimmerman, 2014; Pawęta, 2013). However, Wolff & Pett (2000) questioned this approach. They argued that it represents only the end points of continuum for internationalisation. They noted that there exist firms that are not international-at-founding but are able to skip stages in their internationalisation activities. Later, their observation received increased attention (Daszkiewicz, Wach, 2012, p. 71).

### 3. Phenomenon of Born Globals as Accelerated Pathway of Internationalisation

Gabrielsson et al. indicate the lack of conceptualisation regarding born globals (BGs). Moreover, different definitions have been proposed by different authors and have evolved over time. For instance, the original definition was formulated in the US and specified that BGs must export 25% of their sales within 3 years from inception (e.g. Knight & Cavusgil, 1996, as cited in Gabrielsson et al., 2008). This export ratio is regarded as relatively low for European economies which are smaller than the US economy. According to the scholars, the ratio of exports or range of geographic international activities depend on the size of BG's country, the neighbouring markets or the type of industry. Thus, they defined a BG firm as "*one having products with global market potential. Moreover, it can combine this potential with an entrepreneurial capability to seek methods of accelerated internationalisation. In addition it must have a global vision at inception. It must also carry the risk of a small start-up company; it cannot be a spin-off of a larger firm*" (2008, p. 385). However, they claim that BG firms are a subset of international entrepreneurial SME firms. They also observed that there are many international entrepreneurial SMEs that internationalise steadily, but at a relatively slow pace. In contrast, accelerated internationalisation among some of the smallest and newest SMEs has been observed recently. Thus, the researchers divided the set of internationalising SMEs into the following:

1. BGs – SMEs with the potential for accelerated internationalisation and a global market vision.
2. Born-Again Globals – SMEs which attempt to internationalise, then go back to domestic market, and later return to internationalisation by means of great leaps and a global vision (Bell, McNaughton & Young, 2003, as cited in Gabrielsson et al., 2008, p. 386).

3. Inward internationalisers – SMEs which import intermediates and components from global sources and/or import R&D and internationalise rather rapidly through exports and/or in other ways (Korhonen, Luostarinen, & Welch, 1996, as cited in Gabrielsson et al., 2008, p. 386).
4. The usual more slowly internationalising SMEs, which are a subset that includes small spin-offs from MNEs.

Moreover, the BGs usually offer products that have a unique technology and/or superior design or unique product/service, or know-how, systems or other highly specialised competence including new production methods (Gabrielsson & Kirpalani, 2004; Gabrielsson et al., 2008). Their uniqueness is rooted in a knowledge base and a related learning process. The scholars emphasise that BGs' international behaviours differ greatly from those of a traditional firm. The traditional firm usually conceives foreign markets as places where it can exploit a knowledge base and a competitive advantage that was first developed in the domestic market, whereas a BG firm conceives foreign markets as places where it can explore and create new knowledge (Gabrielsson et al., 2008).

Also, Knight and Cavusgil (2004) explore the role of knowledge and innovation in the process of BGs internationalisation. They defined BG firms as “*business organizations that, from or near their founding, seek superior international business performance from the application of knowledge-based resources to the sale of outputs in multiple countries*” (p. 124). Their ability to internationalise early results from their ability to sustain innovation and, as a result, to create new knowledge which provides particular advantages that facilitate foreign market entry and operations (p. 126).

Autio et al. (2000) observed that earlier internationalisation and greater knowledge intensity are associated with faster international growth. Firms with more imitable technologies also grow faster.

Another very important issue is the fact that the theoretical concepts of born globals are mainly derived from the theory of international entrepreneurship (IE). Within the IE theory, Zahra (2005) identified four research fields explaining the internationalisation of enterprises: (I) international new ventures (INV), (II) models of immediate internationalisation (BG), (III) models of accelerated internationalisation and (IV) general models of international entrepreneurship (IE).

Currently, international entrepreneurship is developing on the border of the entrepreneurship theory and the theory of internationalisation. However, B. Mtigwe (2006, p. 18) believes that entrepreneurship is a common concept in all kinds of international activities. Hence, it can be a single theory (international entrepreneurship may be just such a theory). International entrepreneurship specifically focuses on the role of the entrepreneur as a key factor in the internationalisation process of the firm (Wach, 2014c).

As Wach (2012, pp. 118–120) claims, *born global* models are usually distinguished as a separate group within the conceptual models of immediate

internationalisation (international entrepreneurship), as they focus on *born global* businesses as a special case of international new ventures. In the literature there are many models of stochastic analysis of the phenomenon of born globals (Wach 2012; Wach & Wehrmann, 2014). One of the concepts is an integrative model (Bell et al. 2003).

#### **4. Traditional Versus Accelerated Pathway of Internationalisation: Integrative Approach Towards Internationalisation**

Integrative approach towards internationalisation was first presented in the integrative model of Bell et al. (2004). The model perceives knowledge intensity as a major source of competitive advantage because it may stem from greater proprietary knowledge in terms of product or service offerings, new design, development and production process, technological innovations, adoption of e-business solutions, etc.

The original objective of the study was to explore and explain differences in the pattern, pace and process of internationalisation between three selected groups of firms. Investigated firms were drawn from a variety of industries, including electrical and mechanical engineering, food and beverage, ICTs, printing and textiles. The integrative approach described the main differences in the internationalisation, motivation and behaviour of “traditional”, “born global”, and “born-again” global firms (Table 1).

“Traditional” firms usually follow incremental approach to internationalisation. They are set up in their domestic markets before they start international activities (and often enter markets with increasing “psychic” distance). The “knowledge-based” element of products is usually not high and neither processes nor products are particularly advanced in this group. However, some quite sophisticated processes may be involved.

“Born global” firms may be further classified as either “knowledge-intensive” or “knowledge-based”. In both groups, firms have a high added value of scientific knowledge embedded in both product and process. The main difference between these two categories is that the “knowledge-based” firms (e.g. software firms, internet providers) exist because of emergence of new technologies (e.g. ICTs, biotechnology). In contrast, “knowledge-intensive” firms use knowledge to develop their products, improve productivity, introduce new methods of production and/or improve service delivery (the users of computer-aided design (CAD), computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) or high-tech fabrics in the clothing industry). “Knowledge-based” firms usually internationalise very rapidly. However, the pace of their internationalisation depends on whether they are technological “innovators” or “adopters”. The “innovators” usually internationalise at a faster pace than the “adopters”. Nevertheless, in all cases, the knowledge-base can be regarded as a core competence and a source of competitive advantage.

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>“Traditional” firms</b>	<b>“Born global” firms</b>	<b>“Born-again” global firms</b>
<b>Motivation</b>	Reactive Adverse home market Unsolicited enquiries/orders	Proactive Global “niche” markets “Committed” management Active search	Reactive Response to “critical” incidents (MBO, take-over)
<b>Objectives</b>	Firm survival/growth Increasing sales volume Gaining market share Extending product life-cycle	Competitive advantage “First-mover” advantage Rapid penetration of global niches/segments Protecting and exploiting proprietary knowledge	Exploit new networks and resources gained from critical incident
<b>Expansion patterns</b>	Incremental Domestic expansion first Focus on “psychic” markets Low tech/less sophisticated targeted Limited evidence of networks	Concurrent Near-simultaneous domestic and export expansion Focus on “lead” markets Some evidence of client “followership” Strong evidence of networks	“Epoch” on domestic market followed by rapid internationalisation Focus on “parent” company’s networks and overseas markets Strong evidence of client “followership”

<b>Pace</b>	Gradual. Slow internationalisation Small number of markets Single market at a time Adaptation of existing offering	Rapid, internationalisation Large number of markets Many markets at once Global product development	Late/rapid internationalisation No international focus, then rapid internationalisation Several markets at once
<b>Method of distribution/entry modes</b>	Conventional Use of agents/distributors or wholesalers Direct to customers	Flexible and networks Use of agents or distributors Also evidence of integration with client's channels, use of licensing, joint ventures, overseas production etc.	Networks, existing channel/s of new "parent", partner/s or client/s
<b>International strategies</b>	Ad-hoc and opportunistic Evidence of continued reactive behaviour to new opportunities Atomistic expansion, unrelated new customers/markets	Structured Planned approach to international expansion Expansion of global networks	Reactive in response to "critical" incident but more structured thereafter Expansion of newly acquired networks
<b>Financing</b>	"Boost-strap" into new markets	Self-financed via rapid growth Venture capital Initial public offering (IPO)	Capital injection by "parent" Refinancing after MBO

Tab. 1. Differences in Internationalisation Behaviour. Source: adapted from Bell J., McNaughton R., Young S., Crick D. (2003), *Towards an Integrative Model of Small Firm Internationalisation*, *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*, 1(4), pp. 346-347.



“Born-again” global manufacturing firms more often function in traditional industries than in high technology sectors. However, their knowledge intensity may increase with product and/or process development. Sometimes this new knowledge is acquired through a takeover of another firm that in turn may accelerate the internationalisation pace. Thus, the adaptation of product/market innovation or the adoption of new information technologies may also be “drivers” of internationalisation.

Ojala (2009) claims that in many cases knowledge-intensive SMEs are forced to enter psychically distant markets for strategic reasons to reach opportunities for their niche products.

## 5. Conclusions

Although born globals have been investigated since 1990s, there are still many different definitions and conclusions concerning their international expansion. However, as Gabrielsson et al. (2008) claim, the global vision at inception seems to be the key factors of early and accelerated internationalisation of BGs. Much research to date supports the thesis that BGs’ international behaviours differ from those of traditional firms. Their uniqueness is rooted in a knowledge base. They often possess specialised competence, use a unique technology, production methods and know-how.

Theoretical concepts of BGs are mainly developed within the theoretical framework of international entrepreneurship which emphasises the role of the entrepreneur in their international activities. It seems that this research direction will also be intensively developed in the future. However, research results to date raise many additional questions and, thus, open new research opportunities. Further research may focus on the role of innovations in the process of BGs’ internationalisation and on the differences in internationalisation “pathways” among particular groups of BGs. The differences in the internationalisation pathways between traditionally called “low-tech” and “high-tech” SMEs seem to be especially interesting.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This article came into being within the research project OPUS entitled: Patterns of internationalization of high-tech small and medium-sized enterprises, (UMO-2013/11/B/HS4/02135) 2014-2017

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