

Internationalization of SME: A reading in terms of resources and competencies

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Abstract:

The analysis of the literature on the theories of the internationalization of SME enables us to identify three broad approaches: the stage approach, the economic approach and the network approach.

The purpose of this article is to review and assess the range and the limits of each of the three approaches of internationalization by taking into account of its applicability in the particular context of SME. As such, we examine these three approaches and their interrelationships in order to build a new reading of them. That is, we will highlight the existence of various dimensions of the international development which are found, to differing degree, within the three approaches. The concept of resources and competencies represents a dimension which often returns and which plays a federator role compared to other dimensions (organisational training, networks, organisational capacities, *etc.*) by reconciling them.

Key words: Internationalization of SME, stage approach, network approach, economic approach, resources and competencies

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) form an essential source of economic growth, dynamics and flexibility as well for the advanced industrialized countries as in the emergent economies. According to OECD (2007), they constitute the dominant form of organization of the company and represent between 95% and 99% of the population of the companies. They ensure between 60% and 70% of the creation of jobs in the member's states.

In parallel, SME gained an academic recognition conferring to them the right to be essential like a whole object of research. Indeed, SME passed from an assumption of miniature of large company to particular enterprises with their own characteristics (Julien, 1997; Welch and White, 1981). Related to this, Torrès (1999) advances three justifications explaining the interest of a field of research focused on SME: methodological: for their strategic practices; theoretical: for the theories reserved to them (entrepreneurship, interstices, *etc.*) and empirical: for their characteristics (dynamism, flexibility, *etc.*).

On international dimension, several authors proposed varied definitions of internationalization¹. Some of these definitions, simpler, pointed out the nature and the foreign origin of the operations and/or the actors (Beamish, 1990; Hébert, 2002); others, more complex, have established typologies crossing several criteria. Torrès (1999), for example, while distinguishing between space from localization and space from operation from SME, identifies four categories of firms, SME local, glocals, international and global. For the first, the provisioning and the deployment of the resources are done at the local, regional, or national level. The second category gathers SME selling on a domestic market and supplying themselves in all or partially on the international market. In the third group, they are exporting SME which can supply themselves and sell at the national and international level. Lastly, the fourth category relates to SME which carry out part of their productions abroad and develop activities of research and development on an international scale.

Generally, studies on the internationalization of SME has intensified for the three last decades to dissociate more from those of the large firm (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000; Ruzzier *et al.*, 2006). The majority of them describe the internationalization of SME by privileging only one theoretical approach, sometimes by the stages, sometimes by the economy, sometimes by the networks. Matched together, these three theoretical approaches offer a relatively complete comprehension of the process of internationalization of SME.

¹ A selection of definitions is proposed by Ruzzier *et al.* (2006), p. 479.

However, many works (conceptual and empirical), appeal to the need for a general framework allowing to integrate the whole of these contributions taking into account the insufficiency and the weakness of the explanatory capacity of each one of these approaches, if it stands alone. Indeed, it appears that the process of internationalization of SME, known for its even idiosyncratic and multiple natures, cannot be correctly explained by only one theoretical perspective.

In this article, we attempt to integrate the whole of the contributions of these approaches around the concept of resources and competencies. The purpose is twofold: (1) to review the three approaches describing the process of internationalization of SME, and (2) to propose to reformulate the contributions of these three approaches around the federator concept of resources and competencies.

1- Theoretical approaches of internationalization

Many descriptions and analyses of the behaviour of SME's internationalization are proposed in the literature. One can raise three principal types of dominant explanations: by the stages, by the economy and the networks.

1.1- Stages approach

These models converge on idea that internationalization is a linear and sequential process composed of a whole of stages 'chain of establishment' (Coviello and McAuley, 1999). The researchers distinguish two ways from analysis of internationalization in this approach: the Uppsala model (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977) and the innovation-related internationalization model (Bilkey and Tesar, 1977; Cavusgil, 1980; Czinkota, 1982; Reid, 1981). However, many researchers (Boutary, 2006; Etrillard, 2004; Gankema et al., 2000; Pope, 2002; Torrès, 2004) carry to the need of reviewing the general range of these models (Axinn and Metthyssens, 2002).

The Uppsala model was developed initially by the Swedish school of Johanson, Wiedershiem-Paul and Vahlne (1975 & 1977). We can retain two principal concepts of their contributions: learning process and psychological distance.

Analyzing internationalization as a process of gradual learning, this model places the experience gained gradually as the key of this internationalization (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). Thus, by integrating knowledge drawn from this experience on the foreign markets, the company feeds its decision-making process. Internationalization then becomes the result of a series of incremental decisions. These authors note, according to their studies of the Swedish firms, that they follow a sequential process made up of four stages:

- activities of irregular and opportunist exports;
- export *via* an independent agent;
- establishment of subsidiaries of sale;
- production in the foreign country.

The second principal contribution of this model relates to the psychological distance. It refers to the whole of the cultural and linguistic differences having an influence on the information flow and the decision-making in the international transactions. Indeed, Johanson and Vahlne (1977) use this concept to explain that as the international experience increases, the psychological distance which separates SME from the new foreign territories, reduces. This reduction in the psychological distance favours a wider progression and a more complete use of the opportunities offered by the various known countries.

The model of innovation (*I-model*) defines internationalization as a process whose stages can be similar with those adoption a product new (Rogers, 1962, cited in Gankema, et al., 2000; Gemser et al., 2004; Li et al., 2004). Indeed, a certain number of authors retained this vision to describe the internationalization of SME. The most known models are those of Bilkey and Tesar (1977), Cavusgil (1980) and Reid (1981). All these models consider that each stage to be crossed constitutes an innovation for the company (Gankema et al., 2000; Gemser et al., 2004; Li et al., 2004). Differences are being located in the choice of the stages, their number and in the initiating mechanism of internationalization of SME.

Leonidou and Katsikeas (1996) suggested that the stages of the various models falling under this approach can be summarized with three phases:

- Pre-engagement: firms interesting only by the national market; firms seriously planning to export; firms having already exported but do not do it any more.
- The initial phase: firms implying in an irregular way in export while having the potential to extend their activities abroad.
- The advanced phase: firms exporting regularly with an experience extended abroad; firms considering of other forms of engagement to the international one.

However, it's important to note that the models related to this vision remain very close to the Uppsala model of which they preserve the two broad principles: gradual implication of the firms and existence of the psychological distance overcome by the experience obtained from the foreign markets.

Coviello and McAuley (1999) report the variety of the results of the thesis of internationalization by stages. So, if certain researches corroborate this thesis, others, conversely, cancel this approach and address several criticisms to its opposition. Research, recently completed, comes to support this critic attitude as for the idea of a given way that SME should follow to internationalize their activities. These critics, being based on the empirical observation, are sometimes interested to describe the deviating behaviours observed, others going until calling to review the general range of the models by stages: Millington and Bayliss (1990, cited in Pope, 2002) affirm as well as the approach by stages would be only one exception and would thus not be generalized on SME.

According to Julien (1995), certain SME attack several markets directly and not necessarily gradually; others are established directly by subsidiary companies. He concludes from it that the process of learning is not the only way of increasing exports or to diversify them.

Fischer and Reuber (1997) observed through their study that the companies which having a team management with an international experience, would be able to avoid certain intermediate stages.

The study of Gankema *et al.* (2000) on the validity of the Cavusgil' model (1980) allowed to conclude that the degree of internationalization of SME increases over time but at very variable intervals. They also observed that certain SME doesn't respect the intermediate stages. Others, by fear to depend too much on the international markets, would stop their process of internationalization before to have attained the last stage. They distinguish two modes from internationalization: one by stages and the other at foundation.

Wolff and Pett (2000) noted that certain firms, even without to have been born already international, can "leapfrog" the stages while passing, for example, from direct export to the creation of a subsidiary company abroad. Others would choose to voluntarily remain at the stage of export.

Another explanation of these differences comes from Zucchella's study (2000, cited in Allali, 2003) which advances that according to the approach of the foreign markets adopted by SME, those will have two major options: to extend their activities in markets culturally and geographically close in a sequential and progressive way supporting the experiential learning

(approach of proximity) or they segment the market horizontally to satisfy restricted groups customers independently of the place where they are (global solution).

In the same idea, Etrillard (2004; 2006) regrets the absence of taking account of entrepreneurship dimension in the models of description of the process of internationalization. He notes that, increasingly, SME are engaged in international markets following processes' which it is not possible any more to apprehend with the traditional models. McDougall and Oviatt (2000) explain that certain individual specific resources, the progress and the reduction of costs in transport and the communications (McDougall and Oviatt, 1994) facilitate the recognition and the control of the international operations.

Torrès (2004) argue that the internationalization of the companies is done increasingly early and that very small companies export in many countries the year even of their creation or in foundation period. To indicate them, he takes again the names of International New Venture or global Start-up.

The results of Gemser *et al.* (2004) showed that the trajectory of internationalization followed by the majority of the companies observed is not only determined by the learning as recommends it the theory by the stages but also by factors specific to the company and its sector.

Etemad (2005), in its interpretation of the companies with an early internationalization, noted that companies seem to have capitalized intangible resources in particular technology and relations in networks.

Most recently, Boutary (2006) pointed out that so certain SME develop very gradually abroad, others seem to challenge the laws of the learning and the stages to exchange quickly with the whole world.

The developments above confirm the dominant place of the stages approach in the theories of internationalization (Coviello and McAuley, 1999). However, incapacity of this approach to explain certain international behaviours of SME (Coviello and McAuley, 1999; Gemser *et al.*, 2004; Li *et al.*, 2004) opened the way to others approaches, in particular the economic approach and the networks approach.

1.2- Economic approach

A second approach of explanation of the international development finds its origin in studies of authors whose contributions can be attached to those in economic sciences. Khayat (2004) points out some work of authors whose contributions can be attached to this approach:

Penrose (1959) advanced that the indivisibility of the productive resources explained their chronic under use what could encourage the firms to extend their market abroad. Montgomery and Wernefelt (1991) completed this analysis and noted that certain resources are specific and can be employed only for certain activities.

Conversely, certain resources of firm can be critical and influence its growth and the markets which it can penetrate: the lack of resources financial, physical, the lack of opportunities and the insufficiency of the managerial capabilities can limit the international activity of SME (Penrose, 1959; Madhok, 1997).

Most recently, Ruzzier et al., (2006) summarize the principal theoretical currents advanced in the economic approach. They identify:

- The theory of internalisation according to which the companies can extend their activities to international within operations of vertical integration (Buckley and Casson, 1993; 1995).

- The transactions costs theory: internationalization, in particular its forms, is seen like the result of a choice made by the company between the internalisation and the externalisation of the activities. This theory constitutes a prolongation of the theory of the internalisation and was developed by Williamson (1975).

- The eclectic paradigm (OLI) (Dunning, 1988; 2000) is based on the internalisation theory, it stresses three types of advantages to explain internationalization:

- Ownership advantages which are specific to the company and related to the accumulation of intangible assets (technological capacities, experience, etc.);
- Location advantages referring to the institutional and productive factors in a geographical area;
- Internalisation advantages stemming from capacities of the company to manage and coordinate activities internally.

One of the limits of this current is the difficulty in extrapolating these theoretical contributions conceived for large firms to the context of SME. Moreover, this perspective seems to be unaware of the influential role of the social relations in transactions (Gemser et al., 2004; Johanson and Mattson, 1988).

1.3- Networks approach

This approach was developed from work of the Uppsala's school. Indeed, Johanson and Vahlne (1990) re-examined their previous model (1977) to propose the importance of the position of the firm in its network. They use the concepts used in their original model and try to explain the motivations and behaviours of internationalization while placing the firm within a multilateral framework mobilizing the relations intra and inter organisational.

Consequently, internationalization is defined like a network developing through the commercial operations carried out with other countries *via* the three stages defined by Johanson and Mattson (1988): prolongation, penetration, and integration. Prolongation being the first step started by the firms to integrate the network. It is accompanied by new investments for the firm. The penetration refers to the development of the positions of the company within the network and the increase of its resources of engagement. Integration constitutes an advanced stage where the firm is related to several national networks which it must coordinate.

The establishment of financial, technological and commercial relations with the other actors of the network makes it possible to the firms to extend their connections and to gradually widen their activities apart from their own territory until becoming international. These relations involve the firm in deliberated but not planned international relations (Johanson and Mattson, 1988; Johanson and Vahlne, 1990).

Thus, Johanson and Mattson (1988) conceive internationalization as a cumulative process in which the relations are established, developed and maintained continuously in order to attain the objectives of the firm. For the authors, a company can be considered as international because other companies of its network are international. In their model, the progressive learning and the acquisition of knowledge through the interactions inside the network take a great importance.

Other authors (Gemser et al., 2004; Coviello and Munro, 1997) added that internationalization can emerge following behaviours influenced by a multitude of social relations and networks of contacts in the process of internationalization. Gemser et al. (2004), for example, distinguish between two possible forms from internationalization: "go it alone"

or cooperation. They pointed out the presence and the importance of the networks in the two forms.

The network approach offers a new perspective for interpretation of the process of internationalization of the firm, particularly when they are the small firms whose membership of the networks is a fundamental element to be able to develop taking into count its limited resources.

2- Towards an articulation of the various approaches

The diversity of the theoretical approaches attempting each one to explain the SME's internationalization behaviour, it is important to find a general framework (Coviello and McAuley, 1999; Gemser *et al.*, 2004; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, the need for matching together the contributions of these various approaches and taking into count the SME's specificities becomes more needed. That is, we will briefly review the concept of resources and competencies then we propose a reading of these approaches in terms of this federator concept.

2.1- The concept of resources and competences

Drawn on Penrose's work (1959), the concept of resources and competencies was widely developed by several researchers. Related to this, Koenig (1999) identifies four different but complementary views: Approach based on the resources (Wernefelt, 1984; Barney, 1991), the theory of fundamental competencies (Hamel and Prahalad, 1990), the theory of dynamic competencies (Teece *et al.*, 1997) and the evolutionary approach (Nelson and Winter, 1982).

All these approaches converge to define the firm's resources as its tangible and intangible assets. Their competencies are related to the capacity to combine these resources and to connect them (Hébert, 2002; Julien, 2005; Pantin, 2006).

In addition, not all the resources controlled by a company confer a competing advantage and durable revenues to it (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993). Only, the resources known as strategic which have this potentiality. A significant proportion of work was devoted to identify their attributes. Wernefelt (1984) stresses that the competing advantage is obtained by adapting a

resource before the competitors (*first move advantage*). For Amit and Schoemaker (1993) the strategic resources are rare, durable, idiosyncrasic, difficult to transfer and to imitate. Grant (1991) noted that the literature highlights four principal attributes: durability, imperfect transparency, imperfect transferability and imperfect reproducibility.

The application of this concept in the specific context of SME doesn't raise a difficulty (Marchesnay, 2002). It appears even particularly adapted to this type of firms known for their restricted and limited refers. The leader is with the source of the operated fundamental choices and which generally relate to the resources and competences making it possible the company to develop. It is thus particularly sensitized with this dimension of its company.

2.2- Resources and competencies, a federator concept

Our objective is not to call in question the theoretical approaches advanced to explain the process of internationalization but to develop their contributions by matching them. Indeed, the internationalization of SME seems to be a complex and relatively heterogeneous process (Ageron, 2001; Bourcieu et al., 2006; Boutary and Monnoyer, 2004; Léo, 1995) which will be explained better if we join the contributions of the various theoretical approaches. Of these approaches, we can raise a series of factors (financial, material, relational, etc.) which are mobilised to differing degrees according to different contexts. The concept of resources and competencies finds on this level all its importance. It constitutes a federator element as the process of internationalization requires the mobilization of a whole of resources and competencies (Ahokangras, 1999, cited in Ruzzier et al., 2006; Pantin, 2006) related to the whole of the components of the company, that they internal or are directed towards its environment.

The use of the concept of resources and competencies gets a favourable framework to the analysis of the approaches of the internationalization of SME while explaining in particular how and why they can do. Those which have of sufficient knowledge on international markets or an effectiveness of assimilation and learning of this knowledge can overleap the stages intermediate (Gankema et al., 2000). The entrepreneurial resources (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000), financial and technological (Dhanaraj and Beamish, 2003) appear also particularly significant to find opportunities on the external markets. The relations established in a

network are of great importance to facilitate the acquisition of information and other resources on the international area. They also make it possible to interact with foreign partners leading SME to internationalize their activities.

The central explanatory factor retained by the stages approaches is the learning by the experience (Penrose, 1959) which makes it possible to reduce the psychological distance from the external markets. It is well a resource actually belonging to the company which it must learn how to control and to capitalize. The knowledge obtained by the experiment on the foreign markets makes it possible the company to extend towards new markets and then to decrease psychological distance.

The economic approach privileges the organisational capacities (financial, material, etc.) to explain the internationalization of the companies. They are then the result of the financial capacities (resulting from the arbitration in terms of costs) which would explain internationalization. According to the concept of resources and competencies, these capacities are as many tangible assets controlled by the company (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991; Julien, 2005).

The social relations constitute a factor dominating for the explanation of the firm's internationalization within the framework of the approach by the networks. The possession by SME of highly specialized and transferable resources (thus not very strategic) is significant to exist in the network (Versalainen, 1999). However, these resources can fully be exploited only if SME has a great capacity of "networking". SMEs not having this capacity would be brought to internationalize in an incremental and progressive way. From the point of view of the concept of resources and competencies, the relations established in the network can be even regarded as intangible assets like relational resources (Julien, 2005).

These developments show that all these theoretical approaches explaining the dynamic process of internationalization of SMEs are based in, a more or less, implicit way on the concept of resources and competencies. The process of internationalization then seems the result of a combination of various resources and competencies held or controlled by SME (Laghzaoui, 2006; 2007).

These resources, necessarily evolutionary, can be attached to the company and its characteristics (Ahokangras, 1999, cited in Ruzzier et *al.*, 2006; Ortega and Vera, 2005):

capacities to produce, costs, etc; with the characteristics of CEO, its attitudes and its perceptions (Ortega and Vera, 2005): age, formation, experience, etc; with the corporate networks (Ahokangras, 1999, cited in Ruzzier *et al.*, 2006).

These resources can emerge from the interior of the company (characteristics of the CEO) or of its environment (Fourcade and Torrès, 2001). With the international one, the international environment (surrounding) represents the whole of actors and factors facilitating the internationalization of SMEs (Philippe, 1995; Torrès, 1999). It provides to SMEs resources and skills (organisational learning, information, productive resources, communication, public services, etc.) (Fourcade, 2002).

The company, according to its characteristics, can develop this combination in an evolutionary way while being internationalized by successive stages, as it can build it in an instantaneous and specific way while being internationalized as of its foundation, for example (Boutary, 2006). This combination could be used to gain ownership advantages (experience, formation, attitude, etc), location advantages (providing productive resources, information, *etc.*) and/or in internalisation (low costs following arbitration between the internalisation and the externalisation of the activities).

Moreover, it should be noted that these resources and competencies play a central role as well before as after the decision of internationalization. Before the internationalization's decision, these resources and competencies influence the intention and the propensity of internationalization. They may play the role of internal antecedents as factors justifying (stimuli) or like factors slowing down (barriers) the decision of internationalization. After the internationalization's decision, these resources and competencies can also intervene in the form of barriers or stimuli (especially internal) influencing this time the rhythm and the intensity of the process of internationalization even calling in question the decision of engagement to international (choice to increase the internationalization's commitment, to decrease or definitively to stop the international operations). Also, they could be seen as elements determining the various choices to which are confronted international SMEs. Obviously, these choices can as well relate to the strategic level of the process of internationalization of SMEs (choice of the strategies of development to international (Wolff and Pett, 2000), choice of the international's structure (Wolff and Pett, 2003), *etc.*) that the tactical or operational level.

Conclusion

This conceptual work enabled us to realize the complex nature of the process of internationalization of SMEs. This complexity is translated by the diversity of the approaches describing this process, three mainly: approach by stages, the networks and the economy. Each one gives an original lighting but which remains partial on this process. Our ambition in this article was to join together these contributions within a coherent and structured theoretical framework. The concept of resources and competencies, usually used in strategic management, appeared to us as a federator element in the direction where the contributions of the three approaches can there be registered in a rather convincing way.

This concept enabled us to bring elements of explanation not only on why but also on how development abroad of a company, in particular that of small structure (Pantin, 2006). Its use with the concept of coherence (Léo, 1995) would get more lighting on the results, favourable or unfavourable, of engagement to international (Hébert, 2002).

On the theoretical level, the principal contribution of our work relates to the reading of the process of internationalization of SME around the concept of resources and competencies. This reading makes it possible to integrate the whole of the contributions of the approaches in order to better account for the diversity of the processes of internationalization of SME. This article also shows than the strategic management, considered often as reserved for the largest firms, can offer useful concepts for the analysis of SME.

For the experts, leaders of SME, this reading of the internationalization of SME in terms of resources and competencies have for principal advantage of offering a simplification and a clarification of the approaches and precepts which result from this. To better understand these processes and to put in perspective the very diverse experiences which can be observed, facilitate the decision-making to international and relativize the recommendations rising from each approach.

Our proposal places the resources and competencies in the core of the analysis of SMEs. It touches one of the essential characteristics of these firms which are so sensitive to the limits that their modest dimensions impose to them.

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