

The Mediating Role of Incubators in the Early Internationalisation of Start-ups in Emerging economies: A Qualitative Study of Moroccan Born Global

Le Rôle Médiateur Des Incubateurs Dans L'internationalisation Précoce Des Start-Ups Dans Les Economies Emergentes : Une Etude Qualitative Sur Les Born Global Marocaines

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Abstract

In today's highly competitive and increasingly interconnected markets, start-ups face a large number of challenges when seeking to grow abroad. To meet these challenges, incubators can play an essential role in supporting their expansion and facilitating their international success. The internationalisation process of startups has attracted increasing attention in the literature on international entrepreneurship, however few studies have focused on emerging economies such as Morocco. This study aims to fill a gap in existing research by exploring, from the perspective of start-up founders, the impact and role of incubators in their internationalisation process. To achieve this objective, an exploratory approach was adopted, using a qualitative methodology. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with the founders of incubated start-ups, described as 'Born Global'. The results of the study show that incubators, by offering resources, networks and expertise, help these young companies to overcome the main obstacles associated with internationalisation, such as a lack of knowledge, limited financial resources and the difficulty of creating networks in foreign markets.

Keywords: Born-Global; Incubators; Emerging Economies; Internationalisation.

Résumé

Dans les marchés actuels, caractérisés par une forte compétitivité et une interconnexion croissante, les start-ups sont confrontées à de nombreux défis lorsqu'elles cherchent à se développer à l'étranger. Pour relever ces défis, les incubateurs peuvent jouer un rôle essentiel en soutenant leur expansion et en facilitant leur succès international.

Le processus d'internationalisation des start-ups a suscité un intérêt croissant dans la littérature sur l'entrepreneuriat international. Cependant, peu d'études se sont concentrées sur les économies émergentes telles que le Maroc. Cette étude vise à combler une lacune dans la recherche existante en explorant, du point de vue des fondateurs de start-ups, l'impact et le rôle des incubateurs dans leur processus d'internationalisation.

Pour atteindre cet objectif, une approche exploratoire a été adoptée, utilisant une méthodologie qualitative. Douze entretiens semi-directifs ont été menés auprès des fondateurs de start-ups incubées, qualifiées de "Born Global". Les résultats de l'étude montrent que les incubateurs, en offrant des ressources, des réseaux et une expertise, aident ces jeunes entreprises à surmonter les principaux obstacles associés à l'internationalisation, tels que le manque de connaissances, les ressources financières limitées et la difficulté à créer des réseaux sur les marchés étrangers.

Mots clés : Born-Global ; Incubateurs ; économies émergentes ; Internationalisation.

Introduction

Faced with growing intense international competition and the distinct strengths of Born Global (BG) firms, incubators have expanded their range services to include initiatives aimed at facilitating the process of internationalisation for the startups they are supporting. Such initiatives complement their traditional role of supporting early stages business creation and the development of innovative ventures (Engelman & al. 2015).

This study aims to deepen our comprehension of the strategic role of incubators in facilitating the rapid internationalisation of startups originating from emerging economies. These young companies often struggle to structure and sustain this complex process. However, the support provided by an incubator can prove decisive, due to their major influence within innovation ecosystems, where startups' chances of success are significantly enhanced (Franco & al. 2023). To explore this issue, we adopted a qualitative interview approach, focusing on the insights and experiences of the incubated born global founders.

Business incubators offer start-ups a variety of facilities, such as workspace, coaching, capital as well as networks. They also provide monitoring and support to accelerate growth and maximise the chances of success of entrepreneurial projects. Incubators also help to reduce the costs associated with starting up a business while boosting the confidence of entrepreneurs (Fakhri & al., 2023a; Bandera & Thomas, 2017; Bergek & Norrman, 2008), and play a key role in the creation and development of innovative businesses by providing a back-up infrastructure and covering the shortcomings of even highly qualified entrepreneurs in terms of business management and development (Bøllingtoft & Ulhøi, 2005; Franco & al., 2020). During the incubation period, startups benefit from structured support that facilitates their entry and consolidation on the market, thus increasing their chances of becoming successful businesses (Fakhri & Bahoussa, 2014).

According to the literature on international entrepreneurship, expansion abroad represents a strategic opportunity for companies wishing to grow and generate value. Firms that successfully penetrate foreign markets generally acquire technological advantages and increase their market experience, which improves their overall performance. This exposure often makes them more innovative and competitive, including their home markets (Engelman & al. 2015).

Finally, incubators play a pivotal role in the internationalisation process by offering Born Globals access to strategic networks—often composed of seasoned investors and entrepreneurs—which significantly facilitate their entry into foreign markets (Alpenidze & Pauceanu, 2019; Bandera & Thomas, 2017; Engelman & al. 2015; Franco & al. 2023).

According to Engelman & al. (2015), the internationalisation of incubated startups is influenced by four main factors. The first pertains to the traits and experiences of entrepreneurs, including their familiarity with foreign markets and their ability to understand and adapt to these environments. The second involves organisational characteristics, referring to companies' internal capabilities, such as their structural and strategic readiness for internationalisation. A third factor is networks, encompassing the social and commercial connections, both domestic and international, to which incubators grant access, including investors and business partners. Lastly, the foreign market itself plays a crucial role, with attention given to the specific features of the global environment within the targeted industry or sector, as well as the distinctive conditions of each host country.

The literature on Born Global (BG) firms and International New Ventures (INV) emphasises that traditional theories of staged internationalisation - which depict international expansion as a slow, incremental process mainly applicable to large firms. While such theories remain relevant, they are insufficient to account for the rapid internationalisation patterns observed among these young ventures (Hennart, 2014; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994, 2005; Øyna & Alon, 2018). These firms often adopt alternative governance structures and pursue cost-effective internationalisation strategies, diverging from more resource-intensive approaches.

Research examining the role of incubators in the internationalisation of startups process remains limited. While studies by Engelman & al. (2015) and Franco & al. (2023) have explored this topic, their work has mostly focused on the perspective of incubator managers. Franco & al. (2023) further emphasise the need for future research to consider the viewpoints of startup managers in order to gain more comprehensive understanding of how entrepreneurs themselves perceive the impact of incubators on their rapid internationalisation.

This article seeks to address this research gap by contributing to a deeper understanding of the role played by incubators in the internationalisation of startups, particularly within an emergent market context such as Morocco, more specifically, it adopts the perspective of Born global founders to explore this dynamic.

To this end, the study aims to evaluate the significance of various services provided by incubators, their social capital and the networks they mobilise, in facilitating rapid internationalisation of startups. The investigation is guided by the following research question:

What role do incubators play in the rapid internationalisation of Born global firms in an emerging market such as Morocco?

To address this research question, the study begins with an exhaustive review of the literature on the internationalisation of Born Global firms, focusing particularly on the role of incubators in this process. It then presents the methodological framework employed to investigate the Moroccan context. The empirical findings illuminate how incubation programmes contribute to shaping the international orientation and growth of Born Globals. These results are then analysed in relation to the theoretical foundations and prior research. The study concludes by summarising the principal insights, discussing their practical implications, and outlining directions for future research.

1. Overview of the Literature on the Internationalisation of Born Global and the Role of Incubators

The internationalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is a multifaceted process that has been the subject of numerous reflections in academic research. Various theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain the motivations and mechanisms underlying the international expansion of these firms. This section first examines the principal perspectives that enhance our understanding of SME internationalisation. It then turns to the critical role played by business incubators in supporting SMEs as they navigate the challenges of entering and expanding in foreign markets.

1.1. Main Theoretical Perspectives of Internationalisation

Several theoretical perspectives have been developed to explain the internationalisation of firms, however a few have emerged as the most prominent in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Our review of the literature identifies the dominant approaches as the so-called incremental or stage-based models, the resource-based view, the network perspective, and the international entrepreneurship perspective, along with the human capital perspective, which emphasises the skills and competencies of the managers. This classification, widely cited in prior research, has gained broad acceptance within the academic community.

A wide range of theoretical frameworks has been employed to conceptualise and explain the process of internationalisation, as highlighted by Costa, Soares, and Sousa (2017) and Wach (2014). These scholars categorise the principal approaches into three main perspectives: the incremental, network, and international entrepreneurship perspectives. They emphasised the predominance of these frameworks in explaining internationalisation processes. Specifically, the incremental perspective—often referred to as traditional theories of internationalisation—is commonly associated with the Uppsala and innovation models, which explain the gradual expansion of SMEs. The international entrepreneurship perspective is linked to the Born Global

(BG) and International New Ventures (INV) models, while the network perspective is grounded in the application of network theory (Morais & Ferreira, 2019).

Traditional internationalisation theories, typically aligned with the incremental perspective, conceptualise international expansion as a gradual and sequential process. According to this view, firms tend to begin their internationalisation by entering foreign markets that are culturally and geographically close. Two seminal models within this theoretical stream are the Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975) and the innovation-related model (Bilkey & Tesar, 1977; Cavusgil, 1980), both of which will be discussed in subsequent sections.

In contrast, the international entrepreneurship perspective provides an alternative theoretical lens, encompassing the Born Global (BG) model (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996) and the International New Ventures (INV) model (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). This approach posits that some small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) pursue international opportunities from their early stages, leveraging global resources and markets to build competitive advantage (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). These firms often operate with more flexible and less formal organisational structures than large corporations, allowing for quicker entry into international markets (Romanello & Chiarvesio, 2019). According to this view, internationalisation tends to emerge abruptly, often triggered by specific internal or external events (Bell & al. 2003; Romanello & Chiarvesio, 2019).

Additionally, the network theory (Coviello & Munro, 1997) highlights the importance of existing relationships, networks, and partnerships in facilitating international expansion. This approach suggests that SMEs rely heavily on their social and business networks to identify and seize international opportunities (Ibeh & Kasem, 2011). It has gained considerable traction in the study of SME internationalisation and is seen as a complementary lens to both the incremental and entrepreneurial perspectives (Oehme & Bort, 2015).

Since the early 2000s, the Resource-Based View (RBV) has emerged as a prominent framework for analysing internationalisation. This approach emphasises the strategic role of firm-specific resources and capabilities in driving cross-border expansion (Laghzaoui, 2009; Dhanaraj & Beamish, 2003; Wernerfelt, 2011; Barney, Kitchen & Wright, 2011). The manager-centric view represents another perspective highlighting the mindset, proactive behavior, and vision of the manager regarding risk-taking when establishing relationships abroad (Fletcher, 2000; Harveston & al., 2000).

The final perspective is the knowledge-based view, which underpins sequential models such as the Uppsala model and the innovation-model (I-model). These frameworks emphasise the central role of knowledge accumulation in internationalisation process. According to this perspective, it is the progressive acquisition of experiential and market-specific knowledge that enables firms to initiate, sustain or even retract from international expansion. The knowledge in question may pertain to operational processes, foreign markets, or both, serving as a critical driver of international decision-making and strategic orientation.

In conclusion, all the theoretical perspectives mentioned above supported by substantial empirical evidence in the literature (Morais & Ferreira, 2019). nevertheless, there is no single model that has proven capable of fully explaining and capturing the complexity and multifaced nature of the internationalisation process. Consequently, as Spence and Crick (2006) and Morais & Ferreira (2019) have argued, it is increasingly necessary to adopt a holistic view of the internationalisation process, which would integrate the different aspects of existing models. Accordingly, it is important to recognise the need to combine the proposals of the various existing models.

1.2. The Role of business incubators in Internationalisation Process

The promotion of exports and the need to diversify supply are essential levers for enhancing economic resilience. To this end, it is crucial that public authorities and economic stakeholders actively support the emergence and growth of new exporting firms, thereby fostering a more dynamic and competitive economy in international markets. In this context, the strategic support of early-stage companies is particularly important, as it enables them to overcome the numerous barriers associated with entering and sustaining operations international markets. By offering tailored support, public authorities and economic actors can help stimulate exports, promote economic growth, and strengthen the country's competitiveness on the global stage. Thus, business incubators play a crucial role in the internationalisation of start-ups by providing them with an environment conducive to their growth.

Lose and Tengeh (2016) point out a pressing concern: while entrepreneurship is often considered as a crucial engine of economic development, the necessary support systems to foster entrepreneurial success remain insufficient. Programs aimed at assisting businesses in their international expansion, though ambitious in scope, frequently fall short in delivering measurable outcomes, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), whose success rates continue to be disappointingly low. This issue is especially pertinent in Morocco,

where nurturing a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem is vital to driving economic progress and addressing unemployment challenges.

Business incubation stands out as a promising pathway to address the hurdles typically faced by born global firms, especially those based in Morocco. By leveraging insights from successful international incubator models, Morocco has the opportunity to craft incubation initiatives that are responsive to its own unique entrepreneurial landscape. These initiatives could provide entrepreneurs with access to a network of seasoned mentors, targeted training in business management, and access to appropriate funding. Moreover, incubators hold the potential to energise the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem by fostering collaboration across various stakeholders ranging from startups and academic institutions to established companies, and government agencies. With resources such as office space, funding avenues, as well as social and business networks, incubators can significantly ease the burdens of global expansion, particularly those tied to inexperience and high entry costs. They facilitate access to information on foreign markets and offer strategic guidance to support international growth efforts (Alpenidze & Pauceanu, 2019; Engelman & al. 2015).

Business incubators are increasingly positioned to offer targeted services, such as the identification of international business opportunities, access to market research databases, product promotion on international platforms, as well as advice on import/export and cross-border technology transfer. While these services remain relatively rare and still in the early stage of development, they represent an important step forward in advancement in efforts to help young firms expand beyond domestic markets.

With the backing of incubators, emerging enterprises are better positioned to navigate the complexities of international growth, gain the essential tools and strategic support needed to compete and thrive on a global scale.

2. Study Methodology

To assess the influence of business incubators on the internationalisation of Moroccan Born Global, we adopted a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews conducted with supported entrepreneurs.

2.1. Study Sample

In this study, we applied the principle of theoretical sampling, selecting respondents according to conceptual relevance rather than statistical representativeness (Miles & Huberman, 2003). The aim of the sample is not to reflect a broader statistical population, but rather to align closely with the core focus of the research.

Likewise, the number of interviews conducted does not seek to support statistical generalisation, overall, we carried out 12 semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs who have received support from various incubation structures located along the Kenitra-Casablanca corridor.

2.2. Study Tool

The primary aim of our interviews is to assess how participants perceive and assess the effectiveness of international support. To guide the structure of the interview protocol, we drew on the methodological recommendations proposed by Miles and Huberman (2003).

The finalised version of the interview guide adopts a deliberate three-part structure designed to facilitate the smooth and effective execution interview. The first phase, presentation, provide a clear and relevant introduction. It begins by highlighting the interviewer, while contextualising the fundamental objective of the research. In addition, this phase encompasses in-depth reflection on the concrete modalities of conducting the interview, in parallel with a conscientious deliberation of ethical implications. The second phase focuses on presenting the interviewer and the organisation they represent. This involves identifying the specific profile of the interviewé, thus clarifying their experience and position within the organisation. The Final phase emphasises active listening, centering on the study's core themes. Its purpose is to help the interviewee reflect on their incubation and internationalisation experience, revisiting key milestones to shape and deepen the interview dialogue.

Finally, this phase concludes with a synthesis of substantial proposals aimed at establishing objective and evaluative criteria for measuring the performance of the internationalisation support provided by the incubator. This structured approach allows for a precise identification of performance indicators and enables a clearer understanding of the perceived impact of the incubator's support.

2.3. Methodology for Analysing Results

In line with the objectives of our qualitative approach, we opted to conduct a thematic content analysis, a method commonly employed in qualitative research that blends content analysis and Grounded Theory (Guillemette, 2006).

The analysis process began with a near-complete transcription of the interviews. Supported by the use of various voice recognition tools including Google's. An initial set of nodes was identified during the interviews, followed by a second list generated throughout the transcription process.

The next stage involved, a "vertical analysis," in which each interview was individually to uncover emerging themes, nodes, and sub-nodes. Then came the "horizontal analysis" step aimed at exploring the entire corpus across interviews by focusing on each of the previously identified themes. Nvivo software proved particularly valuable during these phases. Each theme was organised into categories and sub-categories, the objective being to synthesise, dissociate, or adjust the analysis grid, as well as to identify and describe the relationships between the different themes and nodes.

The final list of nodes and sub-nodes reflects the outcome of our analysis and is summarised below in Table 3:

Table N°1: Thematic Analysis of Incubator Impact on Internationalisation

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Number of Citations	Examples of Verbatims
Influence on Internationalisation Motivation	Initial motivation for internationalisation	7	<i>“Even before joining the incubator, we already had an international vision — our product documentation was always in English.”</i>
	Trigger role of the incubator	5	<i>“Our coach encouraged us to participate in the GITEX Africa forum, and that’s when everything clicked.”</i>
	Direct influence	6	<i>“We followed a structured support programme, and internationalisation then seemed like a natural step.”</i>
	Indirect influence	8	<i>“We met foreign companies with similar concepts and realised the potential of our product in other markets.”</i>
Influence on Internationalisation Strategies	Target market selection	5	<i>“We put our product online, and that’s how it gained international visibility.”</i>
	Entry modes	6	<i>“One of our foreign clients is Yamaha, a Japanese company with offices all over the world.”</i>
	Role of incubators	7	<i>“The incubator helped us manage administrative procedures and informed us about the benefits of the free trade agreement with the US.”</i>
rate of International Expansion	Natural and rapid internationalisation	4	<i>“The internationalisation process was natural given the nature of our product [...] This global expansion was therefore born through the Internet.”</i>
	Role of the incubator in acceleration	5	<i>“We created a holding in France to have better access to venture capital and public funding.”</i>

	Role of the incubator in regulation	6	<i>"We push them to stay cautious and say: we think you should maybe try to succeed locally first."</i>
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Source : author's elaboration

3. Results: Impact of business Incubation Programs on the Internationalisation of Born Global

In this section, we examine the role that support structures have on the internationalisation of Born Global (BG) companies. Our analyse will consider the influence of incubators on several core dimensions, including the initial motivation and decision-making behind international expansion, the strategies and entry modes adopted for accessing foreign markets, as well as the development of essential international business skills. Furthermore, we will explore how incubators facilitate integration into international networks and improve access to funding. Other added values or benefits perceived by the incubated firms will also be presented.

3.1. Influence of the Incubator on the Motivation for Internationalisation

Although the majority of the companies participating in this study joined the incubator with a clear intention to internationalise, or precisely to gain support in doing so, the analysis reveals that, for others, joining an incubator acted as a trigger in their decision to internationalise.

[...] "Even before we joined the incubator, we already had an internationally oriented vision, to the point that the product documentation was always in English. Moreover, the product was already accessible on our website. It's a sector that's inherently global." (Founder, D)).

The influence on the decision to internationalise can manifest in two ways:

- Directly, when the incubator offers programs specifically dedicated to facilitating internationalisation, such as export support initiatives or structured partnerships:

We followed a graduated support program that made internationalisation seem like a completely normal process or a natural step in the development of our company. (Founder A)

- Indirectly, by offering networking opportunities with foreign partners, or by organising training focused on internationalisation strategies and practices:

« Our mentor pushed us to take part in the GITEX forum in Marrakech, and that's where it clicked. We met foreign companies with somewhat similar concepts, and we had exchanges that made us realise the potential of our product in other markets... » (Founder, F)

Thus, the incubator plays a key role, not only in supporting companies that already possess an international outlook but also in encouraging others to consider expansion beyond borders through access to resources, knowledge, and strategic networks.

Furthermore, the analysis of the motivations behind the initial internationalisation efforts of the studied companies reveals two distinct dynamics. On one side, some firms adopt a reactive stance, where expansion abroad occurs in response to external opportunities or specific market demands, often without prior strategic planning. These companies tend to adjust their paths based on evolving circumstances such as unexpected partnerships or market shifts. On the other side, many cases, reflect proactive approach, in which entrepreneurs actively seeks to initiate an internationalisation process for their business, mobilising the incubator's resources to identify and seize available opportunities.

The scientific literature includes numerous studies aimed at understanding the motivations behind companies' internationalisation. Cavusgil and Knight (2015) highlight the distinction between proactive and reactive approaches to accessing foreign markets.

The reactive approach is often associated with the incremental internationalisation model initiated by Johanson and Vahlne (1977, 1990). This approach, which refers to the Uppsala model, stipulates that the company internationalises gradually in response to external opportunities. In contrast, the proactive approach, aligns with the concept of International New Ventures (INVs) as introduced by McDougall and Oviatt (1994); and further developed by Madsen and Servais (1997), this perspective stipulates that internationalisation is embedded from the outset of the company's creation, actively driven by the entrepreneur and their network.

In our study, all companies examined align with the logic of INV/BG, However, even within this category, internationalisation can unfold through varying paths—some firms follow a gradual, incremental trajectory often described as « Reactive » or even « Accidental », while others adopt a clearly « proactive » stance, driven by the entrepreneur's intent and international experience.

Below is a summary table presenting the main internationalisation approaches adopted by the interviewees, along with the authors who have previously conceptualised these strategies in the literature:

Table N°2: Key Theoretical Approaches to Internationalisation

Approach	Description	Type of Approach	Key Authors
Progressive	Step-by-step internationalisation based on learning and accumulating experiences.	Incremental, proactive	Johanson & Vahlne (1977, 2009)
Network-based	Access to foreign markets through business relationships, partners, or personal networks.	Hybrid	Johanson & Mattsson (1988), Coviello & Munro (1997)
Born Global / International New Ventures	Rapid and early internationalisation, often enabled by technology and founder's experience.	Proactive and early	Oviatt & McDougall (1994), Knight & Cavusgil (1996)
Opportunistic / Reactive	Response to unplanned external solicitations (e.g., orders from foreign clients).	Reactive	Crick & Spence (2005), Ellis (2000)
Digital / Virtual Internationalisation	Internationalisation through the Internet and digital platforms, without physical presence abroad.	Proactive, innovative	Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson (2011), Coviello (2015)
Defensive / Constrained	Seeking to escape local constraints (e.g., saturated market, regulatory pressure).	Reactive / strategic	Moen (2002), Lu & Beamish (2001)
Imitative	Following the behaviour of other firms to maintain legitimacy or competitiveness.	Imitative/ Proactive	- -

Source : author's elaboration

3.2. Influence on internationalisation Strategies

This section examines the influence of incubation on the strategic choices of Born Global (BG) companies, particularly selecting target markets and determining modes of entry.

In some cases, the choice of initial export markets reflects a reactive approach, where the product gained visibility without any deliberate planning, early adopters emerged first in the United States, followed by Europe, underscoring the role of English language content and web visibility. In such instances, the incubator and co-founders had no direct influence on the market selection.

"We just put our product online, and that's how it started gaining attention internationally. At the beginning, it was just because we were more comfortable with English, like the Gamers community..." (Founder, M)

Other firms targeted Germany through a strategic partnership enabled by the incubator, France as a "gateway" to Europe due to cultural and linguistic proximity, or entered the United States with the help of administrative guidance and access to export programs.

"The incubator helped us handle the administrative procedures and made us aware of the benefits offered by the free trade agreement between Morocco and USA...»
(Founder, A)

Although the internationalisation decisions were primarily driven by internal factors, the incubator played a significant role by offering resources, strategic networks, and timely opportunities that supported these choices.

The studied companies adopted various entry modes: direct export, establishment of local entities and strategic partnerships. The incubator influenced these pathways by helping restructure business models, facilitating partnerships, and providing logistical assistance.

"Before incubation, our product was free on the website. Then, we developed a profitable business model." (Founder, D)

In some cases, direct export was facilitated through connections with Moroccan businesses operating abroad.

"One of our foreign clients is Yamaha, a Japanese company with offices all over the world." (Founder, B)

The incubator also fostered a strategic merger between a Moroccan company and a French partner, accelerating access to the European market.

"We created a holding company in France for better access to venture capital and public funding." (Founder, F)

Finally, the incubator supported the structuring of a company collaborating with an American partner.

"I had a contact with a friend from the United States. After several months of negotiation, we established a Moroccan company in partnership with his business."
(Founder, A)

3.3. Rate of International Expansion

The analysis of verbatim quotes and company case studies reveals that the incubator's influence on the speed of internationalisation of Born Global (BG) firms varies significantly. This variability can be attributed to factors such as the nature of the product, the timing of market opportunities, the maturity of the business model, and the broader incubator environment.

In some cases, internationalisation was natural and rapid due to the intrinsic characteristics of the products:

*"The internationalisation process was natural given the characteristics of the product [...] This international expansion was therefore born thanks to the internet."
 (Founder, M)*

While the incubator did not play a direct role in the speed of internationalisation, it likely contributed to shaping a conducive environment that enabled the company to capitalise on its early international connections.

conversely, there are situations where companies, either poised to internationalise or compelled to do so due to the market dynamics or the specific nature of product or service they offer, require a nudge from the incubator to take that step, incubators also draw upon their expertise to assess whether born global is genuinely prepared to venture into international markets. In such cases, they may find it necessary to temper the enthusiasm of overly ambitious founders, suggesting they delay their global expansion plans until the timing is more appropriate. One of the advisors interviewed shared experiences reflecting both of these scenarios:

"I'd say that normally, maybe they have an idea of what they want to go abroad for. But then we push them to stay alert and we might suggest that it's better to try to succeed at home first for this and that reason. Other times though, we even encourage them to go abroad and leave their domestic market, and in one case it was like that because we discovered that market exploitation was kind of happening in different phases depending on the countries." (Advisor incubator A)

Table N°3: Strategic Aspects of Internationalisation and Incubator Support

Strategic Aspect	Observations	Role of the Incubator
Target Market Selection	- Some markets were identified opportunistically through product availability online or language choice.	- Indirect or no influence in opportunistic choices.
	- Other markets mainly determined by the incubator's partners.	- Networking with partners.
Entry Modes	- Direct export	- Business model restructuring
	- Strategic partnerships	- Connecting with partners
	- Establishment of local entities (e.g., holding company in France)	- Legal and logistical support
	- Cooperation with foreign companies	- Connecting with partners

Source : author's elaboration

4. Discussion

A key insight from this study is the business incubator's pivotal role in shaping the internationalisation trajectory Born Global (BG) firms. Two distinct company profiles emerge: those with a global vision from inception, and those whose international ambitions were sparked during incubation. This aligns with the work of Oviatt and McDougall (1994), who define BGs as companies that adopt an international posture from the outset. Yet, our analysis reveals that for some companies, the incubator functions as a strategic catalyst offering an environment that supports opportunity recognition and capability building (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015). The gas pedal effect of the incubator is mainly manifested through exposure to strategic networks and to international platforms, such as forums and trade shows, that act as gateways to foreign partners. These findings are consistent with research by Spigel (2017), emphasising the role of incubators and entrepreneurial ecosystems in helping startups connect with global stakeholders.

Initial export market choices are often shaped either by opportunistic factors—such as digital visibility and online presence—or through more deliberate planning, supported by incubator-led recommendations and programs. In several cases, entrepreneurs received both strategic and administrative assistance to ease entry into markets like France and the United States. This aligns with Johanson and Vahlne's (2009) view that internationalisation is driven by gradually acquired knowledge and relationship-building, both of which help reduce the uncertainties of entering foreign markets. Additionally, many of the firms analysed pursued a hybrid approach, blending direct exports with strategic alliances to establish a foothold abroad. This adaptability in market entry strategies underscores the entrepreneurs' capacity to tailor their approach based on the opportunities and support structures at hand—a conclusion supported by Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson (2013), who note that BGs frequently adopt flexible strategies aligned with their resources and available backing.

The pace at which a company expands internationally depends not only on the characteristics of its product, but also by the level of the support received from the incubator. In certain instances, the product characteristics—particularly in tech or digital fields—make early internationalisation almost inevitable. In contrast, other firms depend more on structured forms of guidance to achieve this step, a finding in line with research by Rialp and Knight (2005), who indicate that the speed of internationalisation varies depending on industry and the maturity of the business model.

The incubator also plays a filtering function, advising some companies to delay international expansion in order to consolidate their business model within domestic market. This moderating role is in line with the analyses of Autio et al (2000), who point out that while early internationalisation can be an asset, it also entails risks in terms of resource management and growth sustainability.

Conclusion

Incubators play an essential role in the internationalisation journey of startups, providing them with a structuring framework and strategic resources. This study has highlighted the significant influence on several key aspects of the internationalisation process for Born Global (BG) firms. On one hand, incubators help shape entrepreneurs' aspirations toward foreign markets by offering targeted programs and easing their entry into global networks. On the other, they act as catalysts for strategic decision-making, providing advice, training and privileged access to financing and partnership opportunities.

Consistent with the findings of Saidani & Su (2008). The analysis of incubated startups reveals that these firms undergo a gradual developmental process. In the initial phase, they focus on developing new competencies and integrating higher value-added activities, thanks to the support of incubators that facilitate their learning and adaptation to international markets. In the subsequent phase, they gain in autonomy, gradually extending their strategic influence within their international networks, thereby strengthening their position and impact on global markets. This maturing process is supported by the expertise and resources of the incubators, helping them to overcome the challenges of international expansion.

Qualitative analysis carried out with incubated entrepreneurs shows that support from incubators enhances organisational readiness and strengthens the capacity to respond to international market demands by facilitating access to key contacts and providing valuable expertise on entry methods and internationalisation strategies.

However, despite their essential role, this study also reveals certain limitations. Incubators differ in the resources they can provide, and the impact of their support depends on the maturity of their internationalisation programs and the specific sector in which the startups operate. Moreover, the entrepreneur remains a central figure, as their experience, personal networks, adaptability, and responsiveness to opportunities are key to international success.

Several research directions emerge. Future studies could compare different incubation models (public/private, specialist/generalist) to identify optimal internationalisation support frameworks. Additional investigation might explore incubators' ecosystem collaborations or

their evolving impact across startup growth stages. Comparative cross-country studies would be particularly valuable.

In conclusion, incubators represent a critical driver in the internationalisation of startups, though their influence is shaped by the resources they offer, the entrepreneurs' level of engagement, and the characteristics of the target markets. This research provides valuable insights into the role of incubators in accelerating startup internationalisation, while also laying the groundwork for future studies to further examine their effectiveness across various economic and industry-specific contexts.

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