



Crowdsourced translation for rapid internationalization in cyberspace: A learning perspective



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Facebook effectively used crowdsourced translation to accelerate its rapid internationalization. We apply the learning perspective of internationalization theory to unpack what the firm learned in order to mobilize crowd-based knowledge to facilitate internationalization in the virtual context, and how it did so. Increasingly, global activities are conducted in virtual space and virtual markets and thus the paper offers insights into successful expansion in this new terrain. The findings highlight two key points: (1) the firm used cognitive/explicit learning to acquire external and codified knowledge, rather than the experiential knowledge traditionally suggested in the literature on the process of internationalization, and (2) the firm's success rested on its ability to use virtual learning tools and incentive systems to acquire, articulate and integrate knowledge from communities of internationally dispersed users – the “crowd” – to accelerate its internationalization in cyberspace. This empirical study extends internationalization theory regarding knowledge and organizational learning.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, Facebook has emerged as the most popular and most highly trafficked social networking website on the Internet. It has also exhibited a notably high speed of international expansion—the network had 1.49 billion users as of July 2015, 83% of which were located outside its home country (Facebook, 2015). To accomplish this significant internationalization, Facebook has engaged over 300,000 volunteers in numerous communities to continuously translate its dynamically evolving web content from English into more than 70 languages. For these translation activities, which are referred to as “crowdsourced translation”, Facebook relies on its network of users to handle the translation of its continuously evolving websites (Facebook, 2008). As such, translation is key for Facebook when entering and penetrating a new international market, and it lies at the core of Facebook's rapid international-expansion strategy.

2. Objective, focus and contributions

In this study, we use a study of Facebook's rapid internationalization process to explore the process of crowd-based learning.

More specifically, we investigate how a firm can organize its learning in cyberspace to enable rapid internationalization through crowd-based translation. The case study also allows us to identify several key mechanisms through which learning occurs in virtual space, as well as the types of learning and knowledge involved in this context. Moreover, we show that rapid internationalization, especially in cybermarkets, makes it possible to gain a first-mover advantage, build name recognition, optimize network effects and acquire market share.

In examining learning in virtual space, this case-based study builds on prior research on internationalization (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 2003, 2009) and international new ventures (Madsen & Servais, 1997; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994, 1999) to suggest that firms need to go beyond experiential knowledge and take explicit learning into account. We also propose that firms can use virtual technology-aided platforms to acquire, integrate and convert codified knowledge, and thereby accelerate their internationalization.

Research on internationalization stresses the importance of experiential learning in acquiring knowledge for international expansion (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Such knowledge, including market-specific knowledge and general knowledge, is accumulated through sequential and incremental steps of international expansion (Vahlne & Nordstrom, 1993). Internationalization has also been viewed as committing to a business relationship

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(Johanson & Vahlne, 1990, 2003) or as committing to a network of business relationships (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Jones & Coviello, 2005). This stream of literature has been criticized for not taking into account of other factors such as irregular or non-incremental behaviours (Chandra, Styles, & Wilkinson, 2012; Hadjikhani, Hadjikhani, & Thilenius, 2013; Vissak & Francioni, 2013) or other unpredictable change in the contexts (Ghuri & Park, 2012; Hadjikhani et al., 2013). Moreover, prior research primarily examines firms that physically expand their market presence by establishing operations in new geographical markets.

In contrast, internationalization in cyberspace does not always require equity investments in foreign locations or foreign operations, nor does it necessarily require a physical footprint in foreign markets (Yamin & Sinkovics, 2006). In cyberspace, the creation and use of networks of business relationships may occur in a virtual, rather than a physical, realm. Along these lines, the international new venture literature (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996; Madsen & Servais, 1997; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994, 1999) acknowledges prior knowledge and experience (Welch & Luostarinen, 1988), and network relationships (Coviello & McAuley, 1999) as facilitators of accelerated internationalization. However, similar to the internationalization-process literature, this research stream has not systematically considered the context of cyberspace, in which experiential knowledge from physical operations abroad may be acquired too slowly, such that firms learn to internationalize not through a network of business relationship but through a network of users—known as “the crowd”.

Prior research acknowledges cyberspace as an increasingly crucial context for international business (e.g., Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2011; Petersen & Welch, 2003; Pezderka & Sinkovics, 2011; Tallman & Yip, 2001; Yamin & Sinkovics, 2006). The facts support this focus. For example, the number of Internet users worldwide grew from merely 360 million in 2000 to more than 2 billion in 2011 and surged up to 3 billion in 2015 (Internet Society, 2015). Research indicates that the Internet may enable early and accelerated internationalization owing to, for example, the digitization of products and production processes (Petersen, Welch, & Liesch, 2002; Glavas & Mathews, 2013), and to the development of online sales channels (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2011). This research also notes that online internationalization is associated with additional risks (Pezderka & Sinkovics, 2011). However, despite recent progress in understanding the contextual impact, including the possibilities and challenges associated with internationalizing in cyberspace, the question of how a firm learns to accelerate its internationalization process has not been systematically addressed. In particular, learning to mobilize globally dispersed user communities (Afuah & Tucci, 2012; Jeppesen & Lakhani, 2010) for the benefit of a firm’s internationalization has not been addressed in prior empirical research.

In this paper, we adopt the learning perspective from the internationalization-process school, and we make two primary contributions. First, we extend prior empirical research on internationalization in the relatively new context of cyberspace by offering insights into the crowd-based translation process, which the focal firm uses to facilitate its rapid internationalization in the virtual space. These insights include how the firm learns to host the translation activity by engaging the crowd and motivating its members’ participation; how the firm promotes coordination and interactive learning among the crowd to capture the best knowledge; and, most importantly, how the firm articulates and converts external knowledge into internal expertise to achieve rapid internationalization. Second, by connecting prior literature on internationalization with new insights into learning in cyberspace, we offer a fresh perspective on how firms may enhance their learning capacity by learning from and with users—both before and during international, network-based market

creation. Moreover, in line with recent research efforts in advancing the internationalization process (IP) model, e.g.: by incorporating irregular behaviours (Hadjikhani et al., 2013) or integrating the influence of knowledge on international behaviour from organizational learning perspective (Casillas, Moreno, Acedo, & Gallego, 2009), this study provides an empirical case of irregular behaviour – how a firm learns from the crowd to accelerate internationalization in cyberspace – towards building a comprehensive IP model.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. After this introduction, we outline our research context. Thereafter, we explain our methodological approach, data collection and data-analysis methods. We then present the case study, followed by our findings and interpretations. The findings and interpretation section also offers a visual illustration of crowdsourced translation, a table summarizing our thematic coding, and a model illustrating the internal and external learning processes. A discussion follows, including theoretical propositions, as does an overview of research and managerial implications. We summarize our conclusions and contributions in the final section.

3. Research context

In the following sections, we discuss our research context based on theoretical pre-conceptions as well as prior empirical insights from the internationalization model, the international new venture literature, and research related to internationalization in cyberspace.

3.1. *The internationalization-process model and the role of experiential learning*

Internationalization theory (e.g., Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 1990, 2003, 2009) initially painted the process of internationalization as one “in which firms gradually increase their international involvement” (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, p. 23). Based on acquired knowledge of the foreign market, this theory originally suggested that firms that perceive opportunities in a market will incrementally invest resources and commit to that market (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). In later versions, these theorists viewed internationalization as committing to a business relationship (Johanson & Vahlne, 1990, 2003) and then to a network of business relationships (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). While focal types of commitment change as the context of doing business internationally changes, this theory focuses on “experiential” learning aimed at acquiring internationalization and market knowledge. To the extent that experiential learning is slow, the internationalization processes, which are understood as increasing commitments to locations, specific relationships abroad and international networks, may be incremental. Nonetheless, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) suggest “that experiential learning can be complemented with other ways of knowledge development” (p. 141). This may be of particular relevance in cyberspace, where internationalization may be pursued without the establishment of physical operations abroad.

3.2. *The international new venture literature: Prior knowledge and the use of networks for rapid internationalization*

The international new venture, or “born global”, literature addresses the phenomenon of companies undertaking accelerated internationalization rather than incremental steps even though they are young and lack significant resources (Bell, 1995; Coviello & McAuley, 1999; Knight & Cavusgil, 1996; Madsen & Servais, 1997; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Welch & Luostarinen, 1988). This research emphasizes a variety of factors that can accelerate the firm’s internationalization process: technological developments in

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