Qualitative Research in Rapid Internationalisation—A Critical Review the Design and Data Collection Issues of an Empirical Study

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Abstract. Qualitative research focuses on utilizing words, which involves an in-depth understanding of human behavior [Bryman and Bell, 2003]. This article critically evaluates the research design and data collection of an empirical study which probes the rapid internationalization phenomenon through qualitative research strategies. The selected articles are “The Born-Global Phenomenon: A Comparative Case Study Research” [Rialp et al., 2005] It has been identified that it is necessary for the authors to compose a detailed justification of their research design and data collection strategy in the research reports.

Research Purpose and Objective

The authors, Rialp et al are aware that the “Born Global” phenomenon are becoming more and more widespread, and challenging the existing internationalization theory. Therefore, it is necessary to provide more theory building efforts and empirical support. The authors are intent on enriching current internationalization knowledge by taking account these “Born Global” firms. The purpose of the study has been stated concretely twice on the abstract and the introduction - “aim to shed light on the type of factors and specific conditions underlying the emergence and further expansion of born global exporters, as compared to other counterparts, which do not share their rapid internationalizing character from inception.” In order to achieve this target, the article clarifies a specific objective to investigate and compare the most relevant factors characterizing “born global” case firms with other staged internationalizing case firms in Spain. Although the article does not explicitly explain its research problem, we can perceive it as “How different antecedents and special conditions determine the emergence and further expansion of early internationalizing firms compared with conventional internationalizing enterprises?”

Concept Framework

A conceptual framework can be defined as a model of how one theorizes or makes logical sense of the relationships among the several factors that have been identified as important to the problem [Sekaran, 2003]. Although Sandelowki [2003] believes that at the basic descriptive level of qualitative research, theory has different definitions and roles, therefore, a conceptual framework is not crucial and a theoretical approach is competent and appropriate. However, the failure to articulate a conceptual framework may make the reviewer difficult to judge whether the research has a sound theoretical and conceptual base [Becker, 2005].

This research has a sound theoretical background and the conceptual framework derived from a systematic literature review towards “Born Global” firms which has been conducted by the authors 2 years ago [Alex Rialpa et al., 2005, Rialpa et al., 2005]. From the theoretical standpoint, the authors have reviewed three different conceptual frameworks [Oviatt and McDougall, 1994, Oviatt and McDougall, 1999, Madsen and Servais, 1997] regarding “Born Global” firms. From the empirical standpoint, the authors pointed out a debate whether “Born Global” is a particular term for high tech companies or also for companies in traditional sectors. They identified two rival theoretical models for traditional and “Born Global” approach and summarized a list of their three dimensions critical differences from extant empirical researches. The conceptual framework/model has been clearly proposed and tabulated in the article.
Overall, this conceptual framework provides an adequate description of its constructs and internal relational linkage; also, its scope breaks through the limitations by taking account of external influences such as industrial differences and geographic characteristic. It merges different view points from previous researchers. However, the present conceptual model is relatively abstract which reflects some not directly measurable content such as commitment, intangible assets etc.

Research Design

Rather than being a work plan, research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible[de Vaus, 2001] . The basic design issues, according to Sekaran, should cover the type of investigation, purpose of the study, extent to researcher interference, study setting, the unit of analysis and the time horizon[Sekaran, 2003]. However, there is little justification regarding the reasons of choosing a comparative case study design for the present research. The reviewers have to perceive it through the whole methodology descriptions. The firms as groups have been selected in this research as units of analysis which cover holistic level of components. It is an explanatory holistic case design which tries to probe more complex and fuller explanations of the “Born Global” phenomena.

The research design of present research can be showed on the following diagram:

![Diagram](image.png)

Data Collection

“The manner in which data is collected could make a big difference to the rigor of the research project”[Sekaran, 2003]. The comparative multiple case studies design acts as a platform on which several qualitative methods are able to be combined; thereby avoiding the reliance on one single approach. Data triangulation concept has been applied in this research and both primary and secondary data has been collected. The collected data are summarized in the followed table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Sources of Study One</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary data</td>
<td>In-depth, semi-structured interviews with decision makers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary data</td>
<td>Company websites, internal documentations, a personal questionnaire report, product and firm brochures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection is a crucial index of the competence of the researchers. A detail practical plan of data collection can boost the quality of research. Although it presents the selection criteria, the article provides little information about how to access the case firms. Apart from entrepreneurs’
willingness and anonymity, it does not cover other ethic issues during the data collection process. A pilot study will help improves the data collection plan[Yin, 2003]. Yin also suggests tree principles for case study collection including multiple sources, a case study database and a chain of evidence. According to the present article, this research has applied this suggestion.

In the data collection techniques, this article mentions its research team, which includes a second interviewer who acted as a note taker in the interview process. Using audio record would help researcher ensure that less information is missing from the interview. However, the research does not unveil any information regarding the topic guides and the interview process. Although it lists down the duration of interviews ranging from 60 to 90 minutes, it does not provide any information to verify whether it reaches saturation of data or not. In this aspect, it is difficult to judge the quality of the research.

The Harmony of Question, Design and Data Collection

Evaluating a research design should review the initial research question. As discussed above, this research is to achieve a better understanding of the differences between traditional and rapid internationalising phenomena, which matches the contrasting notion of a comparative design[Bryman and Bell, 2003]. The research question is a “why” and “how” one; the researchers have no intention to control the events and it focus on contemporary events. Hence, it fulfils the determinative factors of a case study design[Yin, 2003]. After a systematic literature review, it seems to reach a medium to high level of prior theory which determines the suitability of case study research[de Vaus, 2001]. A comparative multiple case studies design is able to both empirically test previous theories and build new theoretical explanation for the phenomenon.

For multiple case studies, the number of cases is difficult to decide. The suggested numbers range from 2 to 4 as a minimum, and to choose 10 to 15 as a maximum by different scholars [Hedges, 1985, Miles and Huberman, 1994]. This case study which intends to archive theoretical replications should add more cases[de Vaus, 2001]. Also, at least the number of cases should guarantee the study reaches “theoretical saturation”[Eisenhardt, 1989] and “the point of redundancy”[Lincoln and Guba, 1985]

In the sampling selection process, the authors are too ambitious to take account of many other variances, the possible influence of external conditions, such as sectors, technology, geographic location and degree of market internationalisation. This shows that 4 selected cases are insufficient to represent these varieties.

Semi-structured interviews are used to facilitate more focused exploration of a specific topic. Using an interview guide which usually contains a list of questions and prompts designed to guide the interview in a focused, yet flexible and conversational, manner [Minichiello V et al., 1990]. Another reason for semi-structure interview is that the researchers have a clear idea of how the data will be analysed[Bryman and Bell, 2003]. Also, some structure of the interview ensures the cross-case comparability [Bryman and Bell, 2003].

Reliability and Validity

According to Kirk and Miller (1986), in qualitative research, reliability refers to the degree to which the same measurement procedure in the same context can yield the same information. Validity is the quality of fit between an observation and the basis on which it is made[Kirk and Miller, 1986].

Qualitative research should be judged according different criteria than quantitative study [Guba and Lincoln, 1994, Lincoln and Guba, 1985]; they suggest trustworthiness and authenticity as two primary criteria for qualitative study evaluation. More precisely, for a case study research, taking a more qualitative sense Riege [2003] develops a “generic” technique to gauge its quality in term of credibility( analogous to internal validity) , transferability (parallel to external validity) , dependability (analogous to reliability) and conformability(constuct validity). In this study, the authors consider to improve the conformability (construct validity) by imputing key informants’ feedback on drafts of the case studies. Also, dependability (reliability) is supposed to be improved
by using the same research protocol for all case companies and by developing of a complete
database in the data collection phase. For a qualitative research, extensive engagement with
participants, data and setting are essential features [Fossey et al., 2002]. It is important to inform
readers the roles of researchers and participants. However, this research provides little information
on this aspect.

The instruments applied in this research for validity and reliability can be summarized in the
following table:

Table 2. Checking Case study design of study one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tests</th>
<th>Case study tactics</th>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construct validity</td>
<td>Use multiple sources of evidence</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establish chain of evidence</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have key informants review draft case study report</td>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>Do pattern matching</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do explanation building</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do time series analysis</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External validity</td>
<td>Use replication logic in multiple case studies</td>
<td>Research design</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Use case study protocol</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop case study database</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: Developed based on Yin [2003]*

At the end of the article, the authors clarify some limitations of their studies due to the qualitative
nature, and constraints of case study research design. They also acknowledge that their studies can
be theoretically instead of statistically generalised.

**Findings and Suggestions from Evaluation**

According to the evaluation above, the quality of the research can be improved through various
ways. First of all, it should emphasize the justification of the comparative multiple case design. A
more explicit justification in both research design and sampling, particularly for the number of
cases will make the research more convincing. For data collection strategies, a pilot study and well
prepared data collection plan also will assist to improve the quality of the research. Consideration of
more ethical issues and how to access the firms might decrease some problematic consequences. A
tape recorder is a more desirable and reliable instrument in the data collection process and a well
designed interview information guide will facilitate the semi-structured interviews to achieve
construct validity. Furthermore, researchers should self-alert their biases for the credibility and ask
external auditors to examine whether the process followed in the inquiry is in order, understandable,
well-document.

To sum up, a multiple comparative case study enjoys its flexibility of data collection and
triangulation techniques. Therefore, apart from the problem of generalization, it is not only able to
test theory, but also able to explore and build up theory.

Both quantitative and qualitative researches have their own advantages and disadvantages.
Therefore, if a multiple research strategy is possible, this would be a better option. Coviello and
Jones comment that “Research design in internationalisation field needs to identify
internationalisation evidence and deconstruct it to its bare components and then reconstruct
knowledge about reality from different complementary disciplinary perspectives” [Coviello and
Jones, 2004]. They suggest a need for a process of research or for a series of complementary studies
and multistage studies rather than static isolated pieces of works in the future of internationalisation
study.
References


