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The Effect of Internationalization Business Strategies to Access Global Markets: Evidences from the Middle East Area

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In todays interconnected economy, the expansion of businesses across borders, plays a crucial role. It is essential to grasp the tactics employed by companies when venturing into markets. Internationalizing is challenging and present a situation where companies need to adjust to new markets, cultures and regulations. International business strategies range from export mode to more advanced modes of licensing, joint ventures and wholly owned subsidiaries (Cavusgil et al., 2014). The market potential, competitive dynamics, as well as the regulatory environment of the target countries, influence these strategies (Cavusgil et al., 2014).

On the world stage, Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) are extremely important actors, and much internationalization takes place through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The result is to create a dominant foreign market presence for the firm using and integrating its resources and capabilities in the foreign market to exploit market opportunities, achieve economies of scale and scope and establishing a sustained competitive advantage (Dunning & Lundan, 2008).

There are different phases of internationalization strategies such as: market entry, market consolidation, market expansion. Each step along the way spots demanding strategic choices that companies have to make in terms of selecting the right entry mode, establishing the strategic alliance, and dealing with cross-cultural hurdles. Success hinges on the strategic plan and the ability to pivot and adapt to ever-changing global market dynamics (Schmid, 2018).

As, for Schmid (2018):

Market entry refers to the steps taken by a company to venture into a market. This involves choosing the entry method, such as exporting, licensing, franchising, joint ventures or setting up a wholly owned subsidiary. The primary focus is on understanding the target market adhering to regulations and minimizing entry risk.

Market consolidation is the phase where, once established in the market, the goal is to strengthen its presence. This includes optimizing operations enhancing brand recognition and fostering customer relationships.

Market expansion signifies the stage where a company looks to broaden its operations after securing a foothold in the market. This phase involves expanding market share introducing products or services and potentially entering market segments. Strategic partnerships, mergers and acquisitions might also be considered to support growth.

Importantly, internationalization holds considerable significance for the development of businesses and the expansion of exports (Apostu et al., 2022).

Enterprises that pursue internationalization can gain entry into novel markets, amplify their revenue streams, and distribute risks more broadly (Apostu et al., 2022).

Exports often constitute the initial steps of the internationalization process, enabling businesses to test the waters of foreign markets at a relatively lower level of risk. The importance is highly relevant in internationalization strategies toward renewable and sustainable energy. This trend is especially pronounced among Central and Eastern European states beyond the Eurozone. Apostu et al. (2022) (2022) resonate with the growing trends of these countries on incorporating renewables and sustainability into economic agenda.

Such moves not only contribute to international environmental goals but also enhance their countries' global competitiveness. Adopting energy practices enables companies to reduce their footprint in accordance with international norms and increases their appeal in the marketplace (Apostu et al., 2022).

This paradigm can be paralleled with scenarios in the Middle East, where the energy transition exerts a noteworthy influence on the internationalization approaches of indigenous businesses (Apostu et al., 2022).

Most importantly, the Middle East is developing into a key policy area within the global economy, including markets and business (Amran et al., 2020). Through this, countries in the region are taking action to diversify their economies and reduce their reliance on oil revenues. To further illustrate, the Saudi Vision 2030 is an initiative to shape the economy by addressing oil industries and attracting investments from other sources outside Saudi. These efforts provide a friendlier environment, for companies that are trying to get established in the region (Amran et al., 2020).

The GCC is a collective of six Middle Eastern countries. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arab and the United Arab Emirates. GCC was founded in 1981 in Abu Dhabi, UAE to encourage the cooperation of its member states in economy, culture, science and the environment (Low & Salazar, 2011).

It also addresses security concerns through a defense council that facilitates military cooperation among the members (Low & Salazar, 2011).

According to the MENA indicators of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in 2023 Italy's trade with the MENA region was equal to 97,673 million euros and Italian exports to the MENA countries were of 38,939 million euros, with an increase of 0,3% compared to the previous year. Italy imports from the MENA region amounted to 58,734 million euros, which represents a decline of 26.2% compared to the previous year. Industrial machinery, chemical and own-brand fashion goods are the main Italian products exported to the Middle East and North Africa (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

As far as the GCC is concerned, data from the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation indicate that the exchange value between Italy and the GCC region was 29,152 million euros in 2023, down 10.6% compared to the previous year. In 2022, the total contributed to the GCC region was 17,118 million euros with an increase of 5.6% compared to 2022. In contrast, the import of the GCC region decreased by 26.71% compared with the previous year, for a total of 12,034 million euros. The general data showed that Italian exports to the region were slightly up and the value of the good imported by Italy from GCC Countries was down (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

The most noteworthy Italian export is machinery and equipment, followed by basic metals and metal products except machinery and plants, chemicals and chemical products and rubber and plastic articles.

This aggregated data clearly indicates how important the Middle East market is in Italian export trading and how significant it is for international business development. (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

In economic and management literature, internationalization of enterprises is a well-talked subject. The difficulty of the internationalization process calls for an in-depth comprehension of multiple possible strategies. Cavusgil et colleagues (2014) separate entry modes and wholly-owned subsidiaries. Such strategies are shaped by the market potential, competitive dynamics and the regulatory environment of the target countries. Dunning and Lundan (2008) claimed that FDI was vital for Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) to solidify their strategic position in foreign markets. They maximize their resources and abilities to seize sustainable competitive advantages. At a later stage in the internationalization process, Schmid (2018) suggests that organizations must make key strategic choices for each step, including the choice of entry mode and how to handle cross-cultural issues. In a Middle East perspective, the need to change this model through energy transition and economic diversification policies, becomes fundamental**.**

Apostu and colleagues (2022) delve into the impact of energy and sustainable practices, on how companies in their country approach international expansion. Amran and team (2020) shed light on the rising significance of the MENA region in the landscape highlighting endeavors like Saudi Vision 2030 that strive to lessen reliance on oil and draw in foreign capital. Research indicates that the Middle East presents promising prospects, for border trade and commercial growth. However, companies face a range of strategic and operational challenges to succeed in these markets.

Goal of the Thesis

The main goal of this thesis is to investigate and analyze the strategies that companies use to expand their operations in the Middle East. The study will specifically focus on qualitative analysis through in-depth interviews. The objective of this study is to offer an insight into the approaches and techniques employed by businesses as they venture into global markets while also tackling the distinctive obstacles and advantages found in the Middle East.

The thesis will focus on the following goals:

Explore Entry Approaches: research the actions taken by companies to enter markets in the Middle East such as deciding on entry strategies like exporting, licensing, franchising, joint ventures and establishing wholly owned subsidiaries.

Understand Market Strengthening Techniques: analyze the tactics employed by companies to solidify their presence in Middle Eastern markets post entry. This includes examining how companies optimize their operations, enhance brand recognition, and improve customer relationships to establish a market position.

Review Market Expansion Tactics: investigate the strategies utilized by companies to grow their operations within Eastern markets, which may involve increasing market share, introducing new products or services and entering new market segments.

Evaluate the Influence of Sustainable Energy: study how the focus on renewable and sustainable energy impacts internationalization strategies, in the Middle East.

Examine the obstacles and potential advantages: recognize the operational hurdles that businesses encounter in Middle Eastern markets along with the prospects for business expansion and advancement.

In this study we will focus on the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the common entry strategies that companies use when entering markets, in the Middle East and what factors influence their decision-making process in choosing a strategy?

RQ2. How do companies strengthen their presence in markets and what methods prove to be effective, in establishing brand recognition and fostering customer relationships?

RQ3. How do renewable and sustainable energy practices impact the internationalization strategies of companies operating in the Middle East. How do these practices contribute to enhancing their edge in the market?

Chapter 2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Internalization strategies

Going global is important for every business that wants to grow beyond its home country. Internationalization strategies expand markets increase profits and diversify the risk of doing business. International expansion has pathways that offer advantages, and challenges (Cavusgil et al., 2014).

Exporting is generally a key strategy those firms may leverage, and it can be done directly or indirectly. Exporting directly entails selling products to customers in a market, and it is a one of the simplest techniques of worldwide expansion as it includes fewer risks. There could be challenges such as tariff barriers and regulatory compliance, with this approach. Conversely, indirect exporting involves using intermediaries like distributors or agents to market goods. Although this option reduces risks and costs, it can result in a loss of control over sales processes and interactions with customers (Cavusgil et al., 2014).

Business strategies used include licensing and franchising. Licensing enables a company to give a partner permission to use its brand, technology or products in exchange for royalties. This method is quite a good option as it involves investment, but you can enter into new market. Though, it can sacrifice quality and brand image. This is very similar to licensing, but instead it grants the ability to operate under the company's name and system, which falls under what is known as franchising. It is a more controlled way of growing the business instead of licensing the brand in industries, e.g. hospitality and retail (Hill, 2008).

Joint ventures represent another strategy entailing a collaboration between a corporation and a domestic company where both parties contribute investments bear risks and share in the profits. This method capitalizes on the knowledge and minimizes risks by pooling resources. Nevertheless, joint ventures can pose challenges because of disparities and potential differences in strategic direction (Schmid, 2018).

A broader strategy involves creating wholly-owned subsidiaries, where a corporation establishes an owned division in a foreign market. This method allows full control over activities and safeguarding of the brand though it demands capital and carries considerable risks. Such wholly-owned subsidiaries are commonly employed when the foreign market holds significance and the company possesses the means for expansive operations (Dunning & Lundan, 2008).

The process of internationalization generally follows three main phases: market entry, market consolidation, and market expansion.

The first step, in the internationalization process involves stepping into a foreign market. This stage demands an evaluation of the market being targeted encompassing an analysis of demand, competition, and local laws. Companies need to determine the mode of entry, such as exporting, licensing, franchising, forming joint ventures or establishing wholly owned subsidiaries. The decision is influenced by factors like resources, risk tolerance and strategic goals (Gulanowski et al., 2018). The initial entry into the market sets the foundation for triumph. Demands comprehensive market research and strategic alignment.

After a company has set up its foothold in a market, the next step is to strengthen its position. This includes improving operations boosting brand awareness and nurturing customer connections. The strategies for strengthening this position, can differ based on the industry and market conditions. Typically involve investing in marketing enhancing supply chain efficiency and adapting to local business norms to blend in smoothly with the market. This phase plays a role in solidifying the company's standing in the market and securing long term stability (Schmid, 2018).

Once companies establish a foundation, they strive to grow their market presence. This stage may include launching offerings tapping into market sectors and expanding geographically within the intended region. Forming alliances, merging with entities and acquiring businesses can serve as valuable strategies to support this growth and enhance competitiveness. Expanding into markets is crucial for fostering development and staying ahead in the marketplace (Hitt, Tihanyi, Miller, & Connelly, 2006).

Every stage of the internationalization process presents its own challenges as well as opportunities for development. But with careful planning in mind, businesses can once again successfully navigate the complexities of going global during the market entry, consolidation and expansion phases. Not only does this process-driven development allow firms to access markets, but it also allows them to thrive and maintain the competitive advantage in the global marketplace over time (Hill, 2008; Dunning & Lundan, 2008; Hitt et al., 2006).

Globalization comes with benefits like access to markets, diversification of revenue, cost efficiencies and scale competitiveness. However, organizations must also confront challenges, including uneven compliance with regulations, navigating economic headwinds and recalibrating product and marketing strategies. Globalization can be adequately realized through properly designed and suitable management systems to concentrate capital and capabilities on the correlations between the utilization of the established strengths and the positive dynamics of the target market and its characteristics (Hill 2008; Dunning and Lundan 2008; Hitt et al. 2006).

2.2 The Middle East

The Middle East holds strategic and economic importance, comprising a mix of countries with different economic characteristics. It includes nations like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) along with other influential countries, like Iran, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey (Low & Salazar, 2011; Amran et al., 2020).

Geographically, the Middle East is known for its deserts, abundant oil and gas reserves, and key water passages, like the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab el Mandeb Strait. These geographic attributes are essential, for commerce and energy distribution (Low & Salazar, 2011).

Economically the Middle East is involved with energy production leaning toward oil and gas. Historically, the hydrocarbons were the backbone of the economics of this region. However, a number of Middle Eastern countries are now diversifying their economies in order to rely less on oil revenues and to promote enduring development. Among other projects that focus on building a new economy include Saudi Vision 2030 (Amran et al., 2020), aimed at diversifying its economy and developing areas such as tourism, entertainment, renewable energy, and technology.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are diversifying their economies and developing.

Following the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, as summarized in table 1, Saudi Arabia endeavors to improve its economy by investing in sectors other than oil, such as energy, tourism, and entertainment. This effort includes pouring funds into energy businesses to make Saudi Arabia a world leader in sustainable energy. It is focusing on building power facilities to make use of its abundant sunshine and generate clean energy. Besides, there is also development of wind power projects that will complement these efforts. These initiatives are part of a strategy to reduce the carbon footprint of the country and observe environmental regulations (Amran et al., 2020).

The NEOM city project, envisioned as a center for progress and innovation, plays a role in this strategy. NEOM aims to incorporate state of the art technologies like intelligence and robotics to establish an eco-livable environment. The city is planned to operate on energy sources demonstrating Saudi Arabia's dedication to sustainability. NEOM goes beyond energy; it seeks to introduce an approach to urban living that prioritizes social sustainability amidst the digital era. Positioned as a hub spanning three countries, NEOM mirrors its scale and innovative strategies for urban development (Rashed & Mahmoud, 2018).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has established itself as a player in trade, tourism and finance. This has resulted in cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi becoming a busy business place for investments. The UAE is already engaged with energy initiatives, including the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park, a 5,000-megawatt project that is expected to reduce carbon emissions by 2030. A location that has served as links between East and West is also favorable. One of the busiest ports in the world, the Jebel Ali Port in Dubai serves as a trade route between Asia, Europe and Africa. The UAEs development as a logistics and trade node is well-supported by its world class airports and network of connected roads. Foreign investors receive incentives in free trade zones such as Jebel Ali Free Zone (JAFZA), which grants tax exemptions and full foreign ownership rights. Welcome to the UAE as a favorable destination for investment and business activities (Salim & Alsyouf, 2020; Jaber, 2020).

The focus of their economy remains to be infrastructure and energy initiatives, which Qatar has developed based on its natural-gas verts. Qatar's National Vision 2030 outlines efforts to diversify the economy, including investments in renewable energy projects such as solar energy for a sustainable future. According to Salim and Alsyouf (2020), Qatar made two major advancements within the area of energy development: progress as well as challenges with energy development across the region and within the GCC.

Apart from energy initiatives, Qatar is also investing heavily in sectors such as healthcare to offer notch medical services and support research activities. This aligns with strategies aimed at cultivating a sustainable economy echoing similar efforts seen across the GCC region (Amran et al., 2020). These endeavors form part of a strategy to foster an economy that can flourish beyond reliance on the oil and gas industry.

Qatar is also emphasizing the development of infrastructure such as transportation networks like the Dubai Metro for connectivity for economic prosperity. The organization of events such as the World Expo 2020 is regarded as trying to be a

strategic tool to promote Qatar's status in the world and bring more investments to Qatar (Jaber, 2020).
They aim towards growth as realized in Qatar National Vision 2030 which intends to position the country amongst the leaders at all levels and ensure permanent regularity and sustainability

Oman and Bahrain also are pursuing diversification efforts by investing in tourism, logistics and finance. Oman's Vision 2040 plan focuses on sectors such as fisheries, mining and manufacturing. Comprehensive in scope, this plan seeks to reduce the the country’s reliance on oil and gas through the promotion of development. Vision 2040 includes investments in energy projects that promote the efficient use of solar and wind energy by industrial productivity and environmental sustainability (Vision, 2019).

In contrast, Bahrain is bolstering its financial services sector to establish itself as a center in the region. The country is also making investments in tourism and information technology to attract capital. Initiatives like the Bahrain Bay development project and the expansion of Bahrain International Airport are components of endeavors to enhance tourism appeal and improve connectivity. Moreover, Bahrain is emphasizing the creation of an economy by fostering innovation and technological progress. These initiatives aim to diversify the economy and lessen reliance on the oil industry for term stability and viability (Mishrif & Al Balushi, 2018).

Renewable and sustainable energy are gaining significance in the Middle East with countries in the region focusing on wind energy initiatives to lessen their impact and adhere to regulations. For instance, Saudi Arabia’s NEOM initiative involves proposals for wind power systems whereas the UAEs Masdar City serves as a blueprint for progress (Amran et al., 2020; Mishrif & Al Balushi, 2018).

According to InfoMercatiEsteri (2024), this transaction in 2023 reached approximately 97.673 million euros between Italy and the MENA region. The net exports of MENA countries in Italy increased by 0.3% in comparison with the same month last year and amounted to 38.939 million euros. On the contrary, the Italian imports from the MENA were 58.734 million euros, down 26.2%. Italy's exports to the Middle East and North Africa mainly consist of machinery, chemical products, and fashion goods (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

For the GCC region, the value of the trade between GCC Countries and Italy for 2023 has dropped 10.6% to 29.152 million euros. Compared to 2022 figures, Italian exports to the GCC region grew by 5.6%, standing at 17.118 million euros. In contrast, Italian imports from the GCC region fell by 26.7% to 12.034 million euros. Key Italian export items to the GCC include machinery and equipment metals and metal products, chemicals well as rubber and plastic articles (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

These economic interactions underscore the role of the Middle East in trade and business growth initiatives. The regions continuous focus, on diversification and sustainable energy practices is anticipated to boost its economic position and appeal for global business opportunities.

Table 1
The GCC Nations.

GCC Nations	Findings and Results	Literature
Saudi Arabia	It is looking to enhance its economy, through the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, by venturing into sectors beyond oil. Additionally, the NEOM city project aims to incorporate state of the art technologies, to establish an eco-livable environment.	Amran et al., 2020; Rashed & Mahmoud, 2018
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	The UAE is a major player in trade, tourism, and finance. The country is heavily involved in renewable energy projects, such as the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park.	Salim & Alsyouf, 2020; Jaber, 2020
Qatar	Qatar has leveraged its natural gas resources to build a strong economy. Qatar's infrastructure development and strategic events like hosting the World Expo 2020 aim to boost its international standing and attract foreign investment.	Salim & Alsyouf, 2020; Amran et al., 2020; Jaber, 2020
Oman	Oman is implementing Vision 2040, which prioritizes the diversification of its economy through investments in fisheries, mining, manufacturing, and renewable energy. This plan aims to reduce Oman's dependence on oil and gas, while promoting sustainable industrial	Vision, 2019

	productivity and environmental sustainability.	
Bahrain	Bahrain is strengthening its financial services sector and investing in tourism and information technology to attract foreign capital. Projects like the Bahrain Bay development and the expansion of Bahrain International Airport are key to enhancing tourism and connectivity.	Mishrif & Al Balushi, 2018

2.3 Relevance of the Middle East for Investments

The Middle East is significant for wider European Union investments, because of its position, rich natural resources, and growing markets. Foreign investors can find opportunities in the regions efforts to diversify its economy and implement large scale development projects (Al Naimi, 2022; Mishrif & Al Balushi, 2018).

Italy has a standing history of economic connections with the Middle East. Italian companies play a role in sectors in the region, such as energy, infrastructure, and manufacturing. The recent uptick in exports to the Middle East, as indicated by data from InfoMercatiEsteri (2024), emphasizes the importance of this market for Italy.

In the energy sector, companies like Eni from Italy are players in the energy industry of the Middle East in oil and gas exploration and production. With the increasing focus on energy there are also opportunities for investments in solar and wind projects (Amran et al., 2020).

The infrastructure sector is another area where italian firms have made significant contribution. Italian construction companies are actively involved in large scale infrastructure projects throughout the Middle East, including transportation systems, urban development initiatives and smart city projects (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

The demand for manufacturing technologies and industrial machinery in the Middle East presents a market for Italian exports and investments (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

The European Union considers the Middle East a significant region for trade and investment, due to geopolitical reasons. Its investments in this region are backed by initiatives and partnership agreements that aim to promote economic cooperation and stability.

Strategic energy partnerships are particularly important, given the Middle East's role as an energy supplier to Europe it is seen as an essential partner in the EUs energy strategy. The focus on investing in energy projects has become increasingly important for cooperation between the EU and the Middle East (Al Naimi, 2022).

The EU provides support for efforts aimed at diversifying economies in the Middle East offering funding and expertise in sectors like tourism, technology and services that are not solely dependent on oil (Mishrif & Al Balushi, 2018).

Through investments the EU works towards improving infrastructure and connectivity in the Middle East to enhance trade routes and boost integration between regions (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

In addition to aspects of the EU's investments, the Middle East also prioritize development by backing projects that promote environmental sustainability, social progress and economic resilience (Mishrif & Al Balushi, 2018).

The strategic significance and economic opportunities in the Middle East have captured the attention of EU investors. The regions continuous efforts to diversify and grow, offer prospects for investment. Initiatives such as Vision 2030 and ambitious renewable energy projects indicate a move towards a greener varied economy. These factors highlight the Middle East's position in the economy and its appeal as a hub for international investments (Al Naimi, 2022; Mishrif & Al Balushi, 2018)

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section provides the methodology of this study, specifically the analysis of the strategies that companies use to enter the markets of the Middle East. The qualitative research approach is the one taken and is the best design if the goal is to explore internationalization and understand experiences and perspectives. It presents the research framework, sampling methods, data collection approaches, analysis techniques and steps to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. This section aims to verify the credibility of the research and the soundness of the findings by detailing the aikido of the study (Creswell, 2013).

3.2 Research Design

The study's research design is based on methodology. Qualitative research is great for delving into the nuanced experiences of participants, especially when the aim is to grasp the underlying reasons, opinions and motivations behind behaviors and strategies (Creswell, 2013). In contrast to research, which focuses on measuring and quantifying variables, qualitative research delves into the "how" and "why" of a phenomenon. This makes it a fitting choice for examining businesses internationalization strategies in this study (Creswell, 2013).

The choice to opt for a method is further backed by the nature of the research inquiries, which necessitate a thorough examination of the factors influencing company's decisions to venture into markets in the Middle East. Qualitative inquiry allows for capturing intricacies and intricate relationships between variables that are frequently disregarded in research (Merriam & Tisdell 2015). Additionally, this method proves effective in investigating processes and experiences within their environments thus offering a more comprehensive comprehension of the phenomena being studied (Denzin & Lincoln 2011).

The chosen method for this study is structured interviews, which offer flexibility in gathering data by allowing the interviewer to adjust questions based on the conversations direction while ensuring all relevant topics are addressed (Gill et al., 2008). Semi-structured interviews prove valuable in research, aiming to gather insights from participants without being limited by question formats. This approach also encourages participants to express their experiences and viewpoints in their words for capturing a wide range of perspectives on internationalization strategies (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.3 Sample and Participant Selection

The study's participants were carefully chosen using sampling, a known method in qualitative research that involves selecting individuals based on their ability to offer valuable and detailed information (Patton, 2002). The selection criteria considered aspects such as the company's engagement in markets experience with Eastern markets and the participants involvement in strategic decision making. The aim was to encompass a variety of companies in terms of size, industry and market reach to gather viewpoints on expansion strategies.

A range of sectors was well-represented in the selection of 17 emerging individuals, such as IT, electrical engineering, finance and public services. The respondents had positions in their respective organizations such as CEOs, CTOs, IT Managers and Regional Sales Managers. This was to allow for an understanding of the varying methods deployed across those levels within the organizations.

3.4 Data Collection

Information was gathered by conducting structured interviews. The goal of these interviews was to delve into the experiences and approaches of individuals regarding internationalization, with an emphasis on entering and expanding in markets within the Middle East. Various topics were covered during the interviews, starting with the tactics companies used or contemplated for entering the Middle Eastern markets. Participants talked about the factors that influenced their decisions on entry strategies, like establishing partnerships engaging in ventures or opting for direct investments.

The discussions also delved into how businesses grew and solidified their market reach following their introduction. Attendees shared perspectives on the advertising tactics and brand positioning endeavors that aided in sustaining competitiveness, emphasizing the significance of innovation in these strategies. Another key topic was adapting to cultures. With the milieu of the Middle East participants recounted the obstacles faced in acclimating to local traditions, commercial norms, and legal frameworks. They also talked about handling communication and bargaining to adeptly maneuver through these intricacies.

As countries and companies worldwide lean into renewable and sustainable energy practices, sustainability was a focus as participants talked about how delegates plan to expand internationally. They examined how these practices influence their market standing and create value in the region. The interviews also explored the operational challenges that companies in the Middle East struggle with, including instability, complicated regulations and competitive pressures. Using only the best examples for business.

3.5 Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the information gathered from the interviews using analysis, a respected method in qualitative research, known for its emphasis on recognizing, examining and presenting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). For this study, thematic analysis was selected to establish an in-depth understanding of participants experiences and perspectives which is important when exploring complex topics, such as internationalization strategies and cultural adjustment.

The process of doing thematic analysis began with familiarisation with the data, which involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. This first step was crucial in understanding the content and context of each participants' responses, which then allowed for the exposure of ideas and possible themes for additional focus.

. This immersive approach set the groundwork for analysis phases, guaranteeing that the researcher was actively involved with the data (Tuckett, 2005).

After that, we carefully analyzed the data to find sections that related to our research inquiries. Coding plays a role in analysis by helping us organize the data into smaller portions that represent key ideas or concepts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The codes were created inductively, meaning they came directly from the data itself rather than being predetermined by existing theories. This approach ensured that our analysis stayed true to the participants real experiences and viewpoints, preserving the authenticity and integrity of their contributions (Charmaz, 2006).

After creating the set of codes, the next task was to organize these codes into themes that highlighted important trends present in the data. A theme signifies a pattern that arises from the data and is pertinent to the research inquiries. These themes were pinpointed by considering their alignment with the study’s goals and their consistency across interviews. This phase demanded grouping of codes and fine tuning of initial themes to guarantee they truly mirrored the data.

After pinpointing the ideas, we carefully adjusted them to accurately reflect the data. We cross referenced the themes with the coded data to confirm their consistency and significance. Any themes that were overly broad or duplicated were combined, while those lacking substantial supporting evidence were eliminated. This review process was essential for guaranteeing the credibility and strength of the analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006).

At last, we labeled the themes. We made sure to define each theme to capture its essence in the data, giving them names that convey their central ideas. In this phase we also wrote descriptions for each theme using direct quotes from the interviews to show how these themes were drawn from the data. This method guaranteed that our analysis offered a precise portrayal of the participants views on internationalization strategies and cultural adjustment.

Chapter 4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The participants of this study consist of a variety of demographics and professions, as illustrated in Table 2, which provides a well-rounded understanding of the approaches and trials companies experience when entering foreign markets in the Middle East. These individual clustering's could further lead to a separate cluster for each profession just as the sample can be considered a cross-section of different professions, in mechanical and electrical engineering, information technology, public services, education, finance, and that new veneer (the Middle Eastern market) that gives such a wealth of variety in understanding how the outsourcing phenomenon is perceived in such different terms in other sectors.

Respondents' ages ranged from early thirties to mid-fifties, with an average age of approximately 47 years. The interviewees thus include seasoned professionals with decades of experience as well as relatively new practitioners, and offer insights into contemporary techniques of internationalization. Despite the predominantly male nature of the sample, it does include female professionals who are increasingly taking on managerial and strategic roles in different sectors.

In terms of educational background, the respondents with Master of Science degrees represent the highest level of educational qualification among the participants. These individuals are employed in organizations that range from micro-enterprises to larger entities. Additionally, some respondents hold doctorate degrees. This elevated level of education indicates a well-informed group capable of offering comprehensive and nuanced reflections on international business strategies. Furthermore, this robust academic foundation appears to align well with the practical insights shared during the interviews.

From a professional point of view, respondents hold important positions within their organization, from senior management such as CTOs (Chief Technology Officers) and Senior Managers to specialized IT Managers, Technical Leaders, and Project Managers. The different roles covered in the sample provided a multi-level insight of internationalization strategies from a high-level strategic decision to operational problems on ground. This is important as the interviewees span quite a range of years in their career, from over 30 years to as few as 3 years, revealing insights into how the approach to internationalization may differ depending on years of experience and exposure to global markets.

Geographical, companies are headquartered in fair geographical proximity to each other, and all based in Italy such as Milan, Rome, Bologna and Udine. And the fact that this is a study covering Italy means that it adds an extra layer of depth, as it shows again how internationalization strategies can depend on local business environments and regional economic conditions. The participants also come with experience in multinational settings, providing insights at the intersection of local relevance and global business strategy.

The wide range of demographic and professional backgrounds of the participants is critical for the richness of this study. These individuals offer diversity in experience and perspectives and contribute to the generalizable nature of the findings on international business expansion in Middle Eastern markets. Using replies and insights from diverse sectors, backgrounds and experiences, this study hopes to show a multi-level perspective on the push and pulls factors influencing Italian firms to internationalize in one of the most constantly changing and complex regions of the world.

Table 2
Comprehensive Profile of Participants

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	2	88.2%
	Male	15	11.8%
Age Range	20-29	1	5.9%
	30-39	8	47.1%
	40-49	4	23.5%
	50-59	4	23.5%
Education Level	M.Sc.	9	52.9%
	Less than or equal to high school	4	23.5%
	B.Sc.	3	17.7%
	Doctorate	1	5.9%
Professional Role	Senior Manager/CTO	2	11.8%
	IT Manager/Technical Leader	3	17.6%
	Project Manager	1	5.9%
	Others	11	64.7%
Years of Experience	0-5 years	6	35.3%
	6-10 years	6	35.3%
	11-20 years	5	29.4%

Geographic Location	Northern Italy	9	53%
	Central Italy	3	17.6%
	Southern Italy	2	11.8%
	Italy in general	3	17.6%

4.2 Results of the interview

The following section describes the insights provided by the interviews carried out among industry professionals and company representatives engaged in the process of internationalizing towards Middle Eastern markets. The information was obtained through exploratory interviews shedding light on the motivations behind strategic decisions, the drivers at play & challenges facing businesses in the region. The discussion is organized to identify key themes, major trends, and multiple viewpoints that were expressed during these interviews.

It presents the findings in subsections dealing on certain aspects of internationalization such as modes of entry, factors considered when making the decision to internationalize, as well as how the environment, cultural, political or economic affects the way businesses operate

4.2.1 Entry strategies in the Middle Eastern Markets

Entering the Middle Eastern markets requires a strategic decision-making process (Root, 1998). Each type of entry modes — joint ventures, local partnerships, direct subsidiaries, and so on. — has its own pros and cons depending on what your company wants to achieve and what resources you have at hand. In Table 3 we can see some of the reasons for choosing entry strategies.

The best company structure for penetrating Middle Eastern markets is often a joint venture. This strategy is a way of doing this with local partners that can bring foreign companies local market knowledge; access to distribution most foreign firms are not able to access; and a greater understanding of the political, legal and regulatory environment in the host market. Carrefour, for example, leveraged superior transportation networks, a clear legal framework, and favorable conditions for retailers to successfully expand in Dubai (SIS International Research, n.d.). Moreover, they help mitigate political risk, and local partners have established ties with key stakeholders, thereby providing additional stability to operations. As one respondent said: " We would probably rely on a local distributor initially to understand the market dynamics better," which is "crucial" for navigating the complex regulatory landscape.

The opportunity to work with local partners is one way for multinational businesses to establish meaningful connections between themselves and others involved in the business in the local context which will help them tailor to local consumer preferences and cultural practices. These partnerships come as distribution agreements, franchising, or partnerships. One example is that companies from the Veneto region have used targeted marketing strategies employed in the UAE, due to the important geographical location of the UAE as a commercial hub in the Persian Gulf (Da Corta, 2016). Aligned with this, one interviewee said " Forging partnerships and strategic alliances has been fundamental for us to establish a foothold in new markets," cross-market alliances are used for successful market entry.

Direct subsidiaries require more investment but allow for more control over operations. This strategy is typically pursued by businesses that have the resources and a solid understanding of the market in a given country. For instance, Italian firms have been investing in Dubai to gain access to other strategic markets in the region (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2021). Having direct subsidiaries allows companies to enforce their corporate culture, uphold quality standards, and adapt quickly to market changes. As one respondent indicated, “Logistically, we would create a dedicated office to manage local operations directly,” emphasizing the strategic importance of a physical footprint in the target market.

Table 3
Key Reasons for Choosing Entry Strategies

Entry Strategy	Key Reasons
Joint Venture	Benefit from shared risks, local knowledge, and simpler regulatory environment navigation.
Local Partnerships	Facilitates quick market penetration, creates solid local ties, and adapts to cultural preferences.
Direct Subsidiaries	allows for quick decision-making, complete operational control, and brand integrity.

4.2.2 Key decision factors

There are many interlinked determinants that influence decisions related to entry strategies and in Table 4 is summarize the key decision factors for market entry.

Root (1998) states that political stability is one of the most basic requirements of having a secure environment to conduct businesses. Political uncertainty is risky for corporations, and one respondent noted that their firm is avoiding certain markets for fear of political risk.

Learning local government regulations is also a significant step that needs to be taken before entering a foreign country, as knowing the legal barriers related to a country’s trade, taxes, and foreign investments can be quite overwhelming (SIS International Research, n.d.). One interviewee pointed out that working with local consultants was essential to ensure compliance with specific local laws, emphasizing that regulatory barriers can literally shape strategy.

Another key aspect lies in market opportunities, where firms evaluate consumer demand, competitive forces, and emerging trends as they seek to capitalize on growth potential (Da Corta, 2016). Clearly, the company would explore new markets only when they could see some undeveloped segments that match their product offering and thus could allow for potential market expansion, as one interviewee described. Lastly, cultural factors should be taken into consideration as they affect customer decisions and business conduct (Linguise, 2023). Another respondent emphasized both the necessity of staff training and hiring locals to fill roles to help bridge cultural gaps in all business processes and help to navigate local customs and operations.

Ultimately, choosing the right entry strategy for Middle Eastern markets is a nuanced decision that must take into account the unique characteristics of each market, the resources of the company, and its long-term objectives. Success in this ever-evolving area becomes highly probable through a blend of intensive market research, sturdy local collaborations, and cultural versatility.

Table 4

Key Decision Factors for Market Entry

Key Decision Factor	**Impact on Entry Strategies**
Political Stability	Ensures a secure environment for business operations, influencing risk assessment and investment decisions.
Local Regulations	Affects ease of market entry through legal compliance, taxation, and trade policies.
Market Opportunities	Drives decisions based on consumer demand, competitive dynamics, and growth potential.
Cultural Differences	Impacts marketing strategies, business practices, and customer relationships, requiring cultural adaptation.

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1 discussion overall

The results of this research provide an overall perspective of the entry policies associated with businesses in the Middle East, addressing both those elements that were anticipated, as well as some new challenges. The results from the interviews support the significance of choosing the right mode to enter a market, highlighting how joint ventures, local partners, and direct subsidiaries are key in managing the challenges found in this complex part of the world. The responses also demonstrate how firms strategically respond to political, regulatory, and cultural context, which aligns with existing literature, but also sheds new light on this strategic decision with regard to internationalization (Table 5).

One of the most striking parts that emerged from the interviews is that there is a trade-off between control and market accessibility. Although joint ventures and local partners do give access to an existing network and make it easier to make sense of regulations, they complicate decision-making and create reliance on potential competitors in the local market. This is consistent with Root (1998), who singled out joint ventures as a preferred risk-mitigating strategic approach in foreign countries. While interviewees indicated that joint ventures provide a valuable entry tool, they may curtail the company's capacity to make independent strategic decisions, as in the case of highly regulated industries (Da Corta, 2016). This challenge is particularly in areas such as finance, healthcare and energy where the impact of these dynamics is exacerbated by location and extant government policies and business practices. According to institutional theory, as discussed in Chapter 2, firms are expected to conform to the regulatory and cultural pillars of a host country in order to be recognized (Dunning & Lundan, 2008). This resonates with the findings of this study, as companies with joint ventures do so to abide by local institutional pressures and also be legitimate in the market place.

Another important insight has to do with how much political stability is weighted in decision-making. Although the literature (SIS International Research, n.d.) portrays the state of political stability to be a prerequisite of international expansion, some interviewees expected to re-consider entering politically unstable markets if the opportunity for profitable growth justified such a move. This indicates the increasing sophistication of firms in balancing geopolitical risk with potential rewards (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2021). Smaller firms that have less slack to manage and are unwilling to enter high-risk markets tend to gamble on certainty with regulatory predictability instead of high returns. This is the tradeoff between risk and reward that highlights how important it is for corporations to integrate adaptable practices that will help them to remain flexible while reducing their exposure to political and economic volatility. This echoes the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), which highlights that firms with strong internal capabilities, such as risk management frameworks, are more likely to enter and sustain operations in volatile markets.

Cultural adaptation has proven to be a pivotal note of success in the process of market entry. As many respondents pointed out, knowing local consumer behavior, embracing local cultures and hiring local staff to deal with operational shortcomings are key. This finding aligns with the works of Earley and Ang (2003) which emphasize cultural intelligence in international business. Interestingly, firms which integrated elements of cultural into the model of business—rather than simply responding to culture—demonstrated more customer engagement and acceptance of their brand.

Moreover, companies that implemented cross-cultural training programs for overseas employees and crafted localized marketing strategies proved to be more successful in surmounting cultural barriers and cultivating robust relationships with customers (SIS International Research, n.d.). This is consistent with Dunning & Lundan's (2008) eclectic paradigm, discussed in Chapter 2, which emphasizes how location-specific advantages must be taken into account by firms seeking to move beyond their borders. This theory is in line with the notion that cultural, regulatory, and economic factors are important in determining successful international market entry strategies.

Another influential theme in internationalization was the role of digital transformation. Others argued that digital marketplaces, e-commerce, and data analytics have reduced the need for an overseas office, enabling entry into Middle Eastern markets without a traditional physical presence. These outcomes indicate an evolution in the international expansion paradigm, where companies use technology to overcome entry barriers and improve scalability. Online platforms allow companies to test the waters to see if a market exists with a lower capital investment, decreasing the financial risks of establishing a physical incubator. In particular, this is concerning with respect to the role of technology in retail, financial services, and the technology industry, sectors where being 'digital-first' enables new approaches to market entry and competition (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2021; Autio, Sapienza, & Almeida, 2000).

Related to the discussion in Chapter 2 with regards to the theories of internationalization, Dunning & Lundan's (2008) eclectic paradigm suggests that firms looking to expand internationally must consider location-specific advantages such as digital infrastructure and ease of regulation. Digital transformation, however, does also have the potential to short circuit some of the stepwise processes of internationalization, allowing firms to enter global markets more quickly than ever, all without the need for extensive physical infrastructure.

A further key lesson from these interviews is the changing landscape of competitive dynamics in Middle Eastern markets. Well-known barriers to investment, such as regulatory complexity and political uncertainty (Root, 1998), were mentioned in the literature but not by interviewees who skillfully sidestepped the possibility that their firms would be discouraged from mobilizing investments into the region, instead highlighting the growing influence of regional economic diversification programs, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's economic reforms. As highlighted by Amran et al. Al (2020) and Al Naimi (2022), these initiatives have opened new opportunities among foreign investors through the liberalization of ownership regulations and promoting investment in non-oil sectors. Salim & Alsyouf (2020) and Jaber (2020) echo the information by highlighting UAE's way of utilizing its strategic location and economic policies to garner attention on FDI and develop its non-oil economy. Organizations that stay attuned to these economic trends and align their strategies accordingly will outpace those reliant on traditional models of entering and capturing the market. This fits with Dunning & Lundan's (2008) eclectic paradigm, which emphasizes the necessity for firms to consider the location-specific advantages of their project during international expansion, thereby reiterating that institutional and economic reforms can act as potential pull factors of foreign direct investment.

Overall, the discussion verifies numerous theoretical orientations presented in the literature and at the same time brings forward insights into risk assessment practices, cultural involvement, as well as new analysis streams regarding the increasing potential of digitalization in market entry operations. In the subsequent sections, we discuss managerial, as well as policy and theoretical implications building on these findings. A firm's successful entrance into Middle Eastern markets will depend on the degree to which they can adapt to an ever-changing landscape of regulatory changes, technological advances, and socio-political landscapes. Through integrating these insights to recent research, this research allows for a more complete picture of internationalization within one of the world's most dynamic economic environments.

5.2 Managerial implications

This study has some essential managerial implications for managers who wishes to grow their business to Middle eastern markets. In the context of the region's complex regulatory environment, cultural diversity, and dynamic economic environment, managers need to adopt strategic approaches that can help their firm become more adaptable and competitive. This section presents a set of managerial implications deduced from the interviews and the literature.

The use of the most suitable market entry strategy depending on their firm resources, risk-tolerance, and future goals should be understood by managers. Joint ventures and local partnerships were also highlighted to be preferred in terms of being able to navigate through regulatory intricacies and in exploiting local networks (Root, 1998; Da Corta, 2016). Direct subsidiaries, on the other hand, are a more appropriate alternative for businesses that desire complete control over their operations and the positioning of their brand (Dunning & Lundan, 2008).

Hence, considering the changing policies in Saudi Arabia and the UAE due to regulatory and economic reforms (Amran et al., 2020; Al Naimi, 2022), managers must refresh their market entry strategies periodically. Greater resilience in downright uncertain environments could come for flexible, hybrid, and part-time firms, which integrate local partnerships for capital access and partial direct investment (Dunning & Lundan, 2008; Cavusgil et al., 2014). As such, firms employing variety in their market entry strategies, for example partnerships alongside an online sales channel, can limit reliance on any single mode of operation, thus enhancing their capacity to respond to changing regulatory environments (Cavusgil et al., 2014).

In addition to choosing the right mode of entry, companies need to rapidly ensure themselves into the local culture and the marketplace. This highlights the need for cultural intelligence as a new important factor of international business success. As emphasized by Earley & Ang (2003), cultural intelligence is an important aspect in determining the success of international business, especially in contexts where cultural differences play a major role in areas such as business negotiations, consumer behavior, or employee relations.

The interviews found that companies that incorporated cultural adaptation efforts into their business strategies—such as hiring local employees, localizing their marketing messages and participating in CSR efforts—had more engaged customers and better brand loyalty. This is consistent with Dunning & Lundan's (2008) eclectic paradigm, which posits that firms leverage location-specific advantages to ensure market success. In addition, organizations that do not account for cultural differences when making decisions do so at the risk of losing their customers as well as create inefficiencies and lower productivity levels through poor management practices and as a result, a lack of employee satisfaction.

For managers, this also means that more efforts and resources should be invested on cross-cultural training programs, investments in the local language, and specific customer engagement strategies. On the other hand, businesses that do not take into consideration cultural differences face the risks of damaging their reputation, low consumer trust, and limited market penetration (Earley & Ang, 2003) Moreover, the greatest ability to replicate cultural values, when hiring a diverse workforce can also help align to local cultural standards, which will in turn assist the firm in gaining credibility and assess its ability to perform effectively in the region (Earley & Ang, 2003).

Digital transformation has restructured the enter to and conduct in universal markets (Autio, Sapienza, & Almeida, 2000). Cultural adaptation is still an important factor for market success, but digital transformation has become a strong weapon in this battle. Firms that leverage digital platforms can navigate cultural differences to a degree, and expand operations with some measure of flexibility as well (Autio, Sapienza, & Almeida, 2000). According to the interviews, e-commerce platforms, data science, and digital marketing are some of the tools businesses can use to drop entry barriers and operating costs. Firms with a proven digital supply chain only need to replicate it and gain traction in the country they enter, which in the case of a potential Middle Eastern expansion means that UAE and Saudi firms are at the forefront of being able to trial new market entry strategies with a lower capital outlay before scaling up.

Managers must develop AI-driven market analysis, virtual supply chain management, and digital marketing for consumers, for example, to improve their competitive position. Moreover, companies may utilize hybrid business models; they can maintain a presence in the physical market and complement this with strong digital business operations while ensuring the scalability and flexibility of such business models to respond to fluctuations in the market (Cavusgil et al., 2014). That is especially important for industries like retail, fintech, and technology in education, where digital innovation has become a major factor for international growth (Cavusgil et al., 2014; Autio, Sapienza & Almeida, 2000).

Moreover, organizations that embed advanced cybersecurity protocols within their digital transformation agendas will find it easier than ever to meet local data protection requirements, a growing concern in the Middle East's regulatory landscape (OECD, 2024a). As digital ecosystems in the region continue to develop, an adaptable company willing to utilize emerging technologies such as blockchain, artificial intelligence, and IoT may be able to create a long-lasting competitive advantage in the market (OECD, 2024b).

While digital transformation presents businesses with new pathways to global reach, it also brings with it new sources of risk, and particularly with respect to cybersecurity and regulatory compliance (OECD, 2024a; OECD, 2024b). This highlights the need for strong risk mitigation strategies to safeguard long-term sustainability in volatile markets (OECD, 2024b).

The negotiation of contracts in the Middle East is also complex due to the unique business environment which carries political risk, such as instability, regulatory risk, and economic risk. Although some firms might hesitate to participate in uncertain markets, the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) indicates that firms with strong risk management capabilities are more equipped to deal with uncertainty and achieve long-term growth.

This requires that managers have dynamic risk assessment enabling frameworks in place, inclusive of scenario planning, geopolitical monitoring, and regulatory forecasting as key features in decision-making. Risk mitigation tactics can also include forming local partnerships and permitting a wider dispersion of market exposure (Dunning & Lundan, 2008; Miller, 1992). Proactive engagement with government agencies, business councils, and trade organizations among companies can lead to insights about where critical policy development and regulatory changes are headed, instead of having to be reactionary (InfoMercatiEsteri, 2024).

The interviews also reaffirmed the significance of financial risk hedging in managing currency fluctuations and economic downturns. To protect their revenue streams from macroeconomic volatility, companies in the Middle East should consider implementing multi-currency pricing models and diversification of their finances regionally. Moreover, organizations that develop agile crisis-management teams responsive to geopolitical shocks can sustain the endurance of their resilience in turbulent markets (Miller, 1992).

Overall, the managerial implications of this study are reflected in the need for strategic flexibility (Dunning & Lundan, 2008), cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003), digital adoption (Autio, Sapienza, & Almeida, 2000) and proactive risk management (Miller, 1992) in firms who will operate in Middle Eastern markets. By incorporating these principles into their internationalization strategies, managers increase the likelihood of attaining sustainable success, minimizing risks, and maximizing new economic opportunities available in the region. Moreover, organizations that are proactive in engaging in policy matters, regulatory compliance, and technological progress will also be able to thrive in a more durable fashion in this dynamic ecosystem (OECD, 2024a; Cavusgil et al., 2014).

5.3 Policy Implications

The results of this study have several key policy implications for governmental authorities, regulatory institutions, and trade associations shaping the Middle East international business environment. Foreign direct investment (FDI) plays a critical role in shaping the competitive landscape of both countries and sectors, making its regulation a crucial concern for policymakers.

Regulatory uncertainty is one of the biggest concerns for foreign businesses in Middle Eastern markets. Governments must strive to open and clarify the final framework, particularly concerning foreign ownership laws, taxation policies, and business licensing requirements. Clearer, more standardized regulatory frameworks would contribute to lowering entry barriers for foreign firms and to improving the investment climate (OECD, 2024a).

Several interviewees said they faced challenges even in navigating the regulatory environment, stressing that unknown policy changes posed operational risks. As one of the respondents put it: “With respect to the defense sector, international constraints (EU, NATO, and so on) are—at least in a restrictive sense—crucial in shaping strategies and decision-making processes with regard to access to the Middle Eastern market.”, “The company is already investing in the Middle East together with local groups, for instance in Turkey, to produce and commercialize the vehicles," added another interviewee. This aligns with the explanation provided by Dunning & Lundan (2008), who write about the influence of institutional environments on organizational behavior. Governments could enable investment facilitation institutions or dedicate summary electronic platforms to facilitate the bureaucratic processes that provide for the efficiency and predictability of market entry (OECD, 2024b).

As usage of digital platforms and data-driven business models proliferates, stronger intellectual property (IP) rights and cybersecurity policies must be enforced by governments to protect foreign and domestic enterprises alike. This is especially relevant for Middle Eastern economies navigating a shift towards knowledge-based industries through Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE's digital transformation plans (Amran et al., 2020; Al Naimi, 2022).

Interviews also indicated that they are worried about cybersecurity threats and data privacy regulations. Respondents noted that data localization policies differ across various Gulf countries and add complexity to cross-border digital transactions. International best practice-compliant cyber security standards should be adopted in a harmonized manner including the OECD Digital Security Recommendations (2024b) following international best practice in order to provide legal certainty for companies operating in the region. Moreover, strengthening enforcement mechanisms of intellectual property rights would foster innovation and lure high-tech foreign investments in the country (Cavusgil et al., 2014).

Another important policy implication is also to promote regional economic integration so that trade flows and supply chain efficiency can be increased. The divergence in regulatory frameworks in Middle Eastern nations often causes compliance costs and trade inefficiencies, making it less attractive for firms to enter new national markets (Dunning & Lundan, 2008).

Interviewees from logistics, manufacturing and other industries pointed to gaps in customs regulations and certification standards that hinder regional trade and create bottlenecks. Policymakers should prioritize harmonizing trade regulations, reduce both tariff and non-tariff hurdles, and upgrade cross-border infrastructure. In line with the view of Salim & Alsyouf (2020), the UAE plays a strategic role in the world of commerce, owing to its investment-friendly policies and equipped logistics. By agreeing to reinforce its multilateral trade agreements and integrating free trade zones, regional connectivity will also be strengthened, helping attract foreign investors who seek wider access to markets in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Salim & Alsyouf, 2020; Jaber, 2020).

Firstly, governments from the Middle East need to reshape their policies on foreign investments as per sustainability requirements, in order to secure that foreign direct investment (FDI) projects are contributing to the long-term economic and social progress. Although economic diversification plans like Saudi Vision 2030 promote increased private sector involvement, it is imperative that investment incentives are designed in a way that drives inclusive growth and environmental sustainability (Al Naimi 2022).

Respondents expressed concerns about overdependence on extractive industries and short-term investment incentives that do not always translate into longstanding commitments (Amran et al., 2020; Salim & Alsyouf, 2020; OECD, 2024a). Policymakers addressing this could offer green investment incentives and tax breaks for companies that promote renewable energy, sustainable manufacturing and carbon reduction efforts. Integrating Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles into investment policies would place the region in line with global sustainability standards and help attract impact investors (OECD, 2024a).

The policy implications affirm the importance of enhanced regulatory transparency, improved intellectual property rights protections, deeper regional economic integration, and sustainability-focused investments. Supporting these efforts by working to improve in these areas, the governments of the Middle East can make strides towards a business environment that is more conducive to their goals of long-term investment, innovation and economic diversification.

5.4 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study enhance existing literature in the sphere of internationalization strategy, specifically in Middle Eastern markets. This research makes a novel contribution to the field of international business by interconnectedly exploring multiple areas of theoretical exploration and applying empirical evidence to the complexities of market entry strategies, institutional adaptation and digital transformation.

This study confirms and refines the applicability of Dunning & Lundan (2008) eclectic paradigm that stresses the importance of ownership, location, and internalization (OLI) advantages in firms' internationalization decisions. However, these insights complement the eclectic paradigm by revealing the complex interplay of contextual dynamics that shape foreign firms' entry strategies in the unique socio-economic landscape of the Middle East. A number of our interviewees highlighted that the decision to enter the region is not purely a consideration of economic benefits but is also driven by institutional pressures and government interventions — consistent with the theory of institutions (Dunning & Lundan, 2008).

The study also demonstrates the shortcomings of Uppsala's internationalization model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), which postulates that businesses expand internationally gradually through a series of phases that are progressively influenced by experiential learning. Responses raise doubts about the linearity of the Uppsala model and highlight the significance of flexible internationalization trajectories by indicating that companies entering the Middle East use joint ventures, strategic alliances, and digital entry modes instead of traditional incremental stages (Autio, Sapienza, & Almeida, 2000). A shift in the internationalization trajectory of businesses is suggested by the incorporation of digital strategies as an alternative to traditional internationalization models, necessitating a reassessment of plans for progressive market entry (Cavusgil et al., 2014).

The study advances institutional theory, showcasing how firms adhere to regulatory and cultural norms in their pursuit of legitimacy in Middle Eastern markets. The results indicate that institutional adaptation is not just a matter of conformity, but a set of tactics for an organization in its bidding game. Institutional frameworks, according to Dunning & Lundan (2008), influence firms' behavior and push them to adopt standardized practices to achieve legitimacy. But interviewees indicated that compliance for companies entering the Middle East involves dual institutional pressures, requiring adherence to global best practices and locally defined rules.

For example, several respondents mentioned that they had to partner with local firms to establish their institutional legitimacy due to foreign ownership restrictions, licensing complexities, and bureaucracies. "For example, the company is already investing in the Middle East alongside local groups, in Turkey for vehicle production and commercialization," said one interviewee. This is consistent with the idea of coercive isomorphism, which explains how firms adopt practices to meet governmental and regulatory demands to function within a new market (Dunning & Lundan, 2008). In addition, companies actively involved in government and business councils are among the first to receive guidance on policy developments and can adapt to regulatory changes or implications early (OECD, 2024a). By emphasizing that institutional adaptation strategies are not merely passive adjustments but are also courses of action, this study expands upon prior research by highlighting the availability of such tools to firms and their positive implications for regulatory shaping in favor of organizations.

The study also extends the literature on digital internationalization, showing ways in which firms are leveraging technology to bypass standard barriers to market access. These findings confirm Autio, Sapienza, & Almeida (2000) that digital infrastructure in the ecosystem expedites internationalization, as it reduces information asymmetry and lower operational costs. But many interviewees pointed out how e-commerce, AI-driven analytics, and virtual business models have allowed companies to test the Middle East markets without making substantial capital investments. As one respondent stated, for example, "Logistically, a dedicated office would be created in the area solely for customer support, without geolocating production". One other interviewee said: "If there were an opportunity to expand and create business in the Middle East, I would say yes. As of today, this possibility has not been considered due to the lack of potential customers".

Additionally, the research offers empirical evidence supporting Cavusgil et al. (2014), proposing that the nature of digital platforms promotes a mode of market entry that is both physically and digitally agnostic in its need for scalable leverage. The results of the interview show that the companies that adopted digital marketing, blockchain-augmented supply chains, and artificial intelligence-based customer engagement tools adapted much faster to local market conditions than those that relied solely on classical methods. This represents a step forward in the Dunning & Lundan (2008) location advantages model, where digital connectivity is now a key parameter determining market selection and entry mode decisions.

In addition, we extend current theories by conceptualizing how digital transformation leads to emergent theory of internationalization via rapid internationalization process while reducing dependence on gradual and experience-based models of internationalization. While traditional theories foreground incremental commitment, the authors suggest that technology gives firms the flexibility to bypass old barriers to entering new markets, heralding a break from conventional global business tactics (Autio, Sapienza, & Almeida, 2000).

The study sheds light on the role of cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) as an important predictor of success in international expansion. Interviews for the study reveal that firms with a focus on gaining an understanding of the host culture, employing local talent and implementing culturally aware marketing strategies do better across both consumer acceptance and operational efficiency. This reinforces the idea that cultural intelligence is not just an interpersonal tool but a competitive advantage that impacts the performance of the firm in foreign contexts.

In addition, the study is consistent with the work of Earley & Ang (2003) and their theory of cultural intelligence, particularly factor power distance and uncertainty avoidance, that guide the ways of doing business within the region of Middle East. Respondents noted that decision-making structures tend to be hierarchical and relationships take a different role in transactions, meaning that negotiating and business development must be approached differently in this market. As one interviewee put it, “With respect to the defense sector, international constraints (EU, NATO, and so on) are—at least in a restrictive sense—crucial in shaping strategies and decision-making processes with regard to access to the Middle Eastern market.” Companies that embed these cultural dimensions within strategy and practice have better stakeholder connections and sustainable business performance over time.

This research contributes to the population of existing literature in showing that cultural intelligence also needs to be embedded in decisions at all tiers of the organizational structure, from the operational management to the governance of the corporation. Although most of the earlier studies spoke about cultural awareness as a competitive advantage for the company, this particular study stresses that cultural adaptability needs to be rooted inside the organization behavior by revising recruitment policies, leadership styles and even marketing strategies to become international.

Table 5

Summary of Key Interview Findings

Criteria	Topic	Gender	Age	Quotes
Market Entry Strategy	Use of joint ventures and local partnerships	M	31	The two main strategies would be collaboration with local companies through partnership or joint venture agreements and licensing with the granting of licenses for the production and sale of our products.
	Preference for direct investment	M	58	We would probably rely on an internal distributor at first to reduce

				the friction on the input.
	Role of digital transformation in market entry	M	37	Logistically, an ad hoc office would be created in the area just for customer support, without geolocalizing production.
	Hybrid models for risk mitigation	M	29	One entry strategy could be to buy shares of listed companies that already operate in the Middle East.
Regulatory Challenges	Legal and bureaucratic barriers	M	30	When talking about the defense sector, international constraints (EU, NATO, etc.) play a determining role - in a restrictive sense - with regards to strategies and decision-making processes related to entering the Middle Eastern market.
	Government restrictions and compliance	M	29	Certainly, the adoption of renewable and sustainable energy practices by companies operating in the Middle East enhances their reputation. Furthermore,

				such companies have an advantage in obtaining licenses and operating permits in markets that have stringent environmental regulations.
	Impact of political instability	M	43	As a company that deals with banking/finance, I believe that the company would invest in the Middle East provided it has the right guarantees
Cultural Adaptation	Hiring local workforce for adaptation	M	31	Through training of staff who will interact with customers in the Middle Eastern market (training on religious and social values, hierarchical structures and interpersonal communication methods) and through the use of professional cultural mediators
	Customizing marketing strategies	F	46	We have hosted users from Middle Eastern countries and accommodated cultural differences through the intervention of

				cultural mediators who spoke their language.
	Cross-cultural training programs	M	35	Guarantee greater welfare policies for local workers and try to contribute to "compensate" territorial exploitation with benefits to be shared between individuals and society
	Challenges in customer engagement	M	56	Cultural differences are very important and we have always weighed them carefully. The local regulatory framework, even if it is clearly improving, is not enough; specific knowledge is needed (participation in local fairs and events), the progressiveness of the action.

Chapter 6. Conclusion & Final Remarks

6.1 Conclusion

This study has shed light on internationalization processes in the Middle East, revealing the relationship of multiple facets such as market entry strategies, institutional adaptation, digital transformation, and cultural intelligence. The research has offered a nuanced understanding of the reasons why firms choose to expand and grow into this specific dynamic region by combining theoretical frameworks with empirical findings.

The findings highlight that companies have to navigate their own regulatory framework, economic zone, and cultural sphere in ways that best facilitate sustainable entry into the market, adapting to each market's needs while aligning that with the corporate strategy of the company itself. The research also calls traditional models of internationalization into question, showing how digital transformation influences the market entry and lowers the dependence on slow market expansion approach. All these set apart proves to be the reason for the long-term relevance and success of the project, identifying necessarily institutional pressures and cultural adaptation.

International expansion in the Middle East comes with both unique opportunities and challenges for businesses. Despite the region's increasing economic diversification initiatives, foreign investment-friendly policies, and sophisticated digital infrastructure, businesses must also navigate regulatory uncertainty, geopolitical volatility, and cultural complexities. Market entry success is not achieved through a single perspective but rather through a combination approach that integrates partnerships, digital transformation, and cultural understanding to orient companies in a market landscape. Another key insight from this research is the importance of institutional adaptation shaping internationalization strategies. In fact, government is at the heart of business in the Middle East, and regulatory frameworks in the region are in a constant state of flux as they are developed and iterated to complement national development agendas. Companies must be able to stay ahead of legislative changes and create a trusting environment within the captive ecosystem, by being proactive in their engagement with policy makers, regulatory agencies and global stakeholders. The findings suggest that companies that align their market entry strategies with national economic visions, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's diversification push, tend to have greater operational stability and long-term success. Moreover, the acceleration of digital transformation is changing the landscape of foreign market entry for businesses in the Middle East, with e-commerce, blockchain solutions and artificial intelligence emerging at the forefront of this process. This enables corporations to lower operational barriers to entry into their industries, optimize supply chains, and advance customer engagement by utilizing digital platforms as a more agile and capital-efficient reference for capturing market share. Without an overarching digital strategy, businesses tempting to live in the analogue world will be unable to compete on speed, as firms that use digital strategies to gain a competitive edge will accelerate growth by leveraging technology.

Furthermore, this research emphasizes the need for cultural intelligence for business success. According to the research, cultural differences, the use of hierarchical decision-making structures, relationship-based transactions and different consumer behavior, define business in the Middle East. Companies that focus on cultural adaptation by using localized marketing strategies, recruiting experts within region and participating in CSR (corporate and social responsibility) show the best stakeholder relationships and better customer trust.

6.2 Limitations of the study

Despite its contributions, this study is not exempt from limitations that should be considered. One limitation pertains to the size and scope of the research sample. The research is based on a small number, ultimately, of interviews, all conducted with Italian professionals which cannot represent the heterogeneity of the situations of the firms in the Middle East. However, the insights that emerge from this research are specific to Italian companies and may not represent the experiences and strategies of companies from different national contexts. To enhance generalizability, future studies should consider a larger and more diverse sample size, including perspectives from companies in various countries.

Another limitation relates to the socio-economic factors of the study. While this research analyzes adoption strategies for regional internationalization that specifically addresses the Middle Eastern context, it does not consider the wide range of factor conditions, including regulatory frameworks, economic policies, and market conditions among individual countries in the region. Future research could provide further insights by conducting country-specific analysis that considers the specific business environments of each nation. And even if the study spotlights broader trends in economic and regulatory change, it does not offer a firm assessment of each country's distinct institutional landscape that could be a target of further work.

Additionally, the fast-changing business landscape poses another challenge. Due to the fast-paced nature of digital transformation, government policies, and geopolitical factors, some of the study's findings may become outdated over time. With ongoing new policy implementation and exponential trends of digitalization penetrating and transforming industries, the internationalization strategies presented in this research could potentially undergo a refinement phase. Longitudinal studies that monitor changes over time could provide stronger evidence of how businesses adjust to these changing circumstances.

6.3 Final Remarks

This study highlights the changing aspect of internationalization and the need for firms to adapt their strategies in a digitally-embraced and culturally-sensible manner. Markets in this region remain maturing and diversifying; therefore, businesses must continue to be agile in their approaches in order to remain competitive, leveraging strategic partnerships, digital tools and institutional engagement.

A prominent takeaway of this research is that digital transformation increasingly influences decisions related to market entry. Organizations which are able to capitalize on technological advancements — to drive efficiencies in operations, improve customer engagement, and navigate regulatory challenges — will be more likely to gain a road-hardened position in the region. Agreements include that explicit institutional requirements for business inevitably affect the underlying assumptions and incentives facing all businesses, and businesses with positive engagement on these fronts are at a competitive advantage compared to those that do not have similar proactive structures.

The study also indicates the role of cultural intelligence in the long-league for commercial success. Businesses that forge deep-rooted relationships with stakeholders in the community, acclimate to cultural norms, and embed localized strategies into their processes will gain customer trust, brand recognition, and allegiance.

Going forward, research needs to further investigate about how businesses can calibrate their internationalization frameworks in line with evolving regulations, technological changes and geopolitical shifts. With the Middle East expected to continue to play an essential role in global business growth, companies that take the initiative to modify to this developing landscape will be in the strongest position to seize new opportunities.

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Appendix

DOMANDE INTERVISTA

Gentile rispondente, benvenut*!

siamo un team di ricerca sotto la guida del *Prof. Andrea Sestino* (LUISS Guido Carli, Roma), impegnati nella conduzione di una ricerca scientifica relativa alle strategie di internazionalizzazione delle imprese.

La sua partecipazione è fondamentale per noi: si prenda il tempo necessario per rispondere con sincerità, poiché **non vi sono risposte giuste o sbagliate**, ma siamo davvero interessati a comprendere la sua **opinione**.

Grazie in anticipo per la tua collaborazione preziosa.

Rossana Di Stasio
Undergraduate School, LUISS Guido Carli University

Info e segnalazioni: asestino@luiss.it

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1. Cosa ha motivato la vostra azienda ad entrare nel mercato del Medio Oriente?
2. Quali sono le strategie di ingresso comuni utilizzate dalle aziende quando entrano nei mercati del Medio Oriente e quali fattori influenzano il loro processo decisionale nella scelta di una strategia?
3. Quali strategie ha utilizzato la vostra azienda per rafforzare la sua presenza nel mercato del Medio Oriente dopo l'ingresso iniziale? E quali metodi si dimostrano efficaci nell'instaurare il riconoscimento del marchio e nel coltivare le relazioni con i clienti?
4. Come affronta la vostra azienda le sfide interculturali nel mercato del Medio Oriente? Quali differenze culturali specifiche avete incontrato e come vi siete adattati?
5. Quali strategie ha utilizzato la vostra azienda per espandere la sua quota di mercato nel Medio Oriente? Avete introdotto nuovi prodotti o servizi, o siete entrati in nuovi segmenti di mercato?
6. In che modo le pratiche energetiche rinnovabili e sostenibili influenzano le strategie di internazionalizzazione delle aziende che operano in Medio Oriente? Come contribuiscono queste pratiche a migliorare il loro vantaggio competitivo nel mercato?
7. Quali sono le principali sfide strategiche e operative che la vostra azienda ha affrontato nel mercato del Medio Oriente?
8. Quali opportunità vede per lo sviluppo e la crescita del business nel mercato del Medio Oriente?

Sociodemografiche

Sesso: Uomo/Donna
Età:
Livello di Istruzione:

- Inferiore o pari alla scuola superiore
- B.Sc.
- M.Sc.
- Dottorato

Industry di appartenenza:

- Agriculture, plantations, other rural sectors
- Commerce
- Education
- Financial and professional services
- Food, drink, tobacco
- Health services
- Mechanical and electrical engineering
- Media, culture, graphical
- Postal and telecommunication services
- Public sector
- Utilities (water, gas, electricity)
- Oil and gas production, oil refining
- Other

Sede legale dell’attività:

Ruolo in azienda:

Anni di esperienza nel ruolo: