MOTIVATIONS TO INTERNATIONALIZE: THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURS’ VALUES (SUMMARY)

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SUMMARY

MOTIVATIONS TO INTERNATIONALIZE: THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURS’ VALUES

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Principal Topic

According to available literature, motivation to internationalize is related to firms’ proactiveness towards foreign-market opportunities and firms’ environment. In this perspective, the emphasis is on the firm rather than on the decision-makers within the firm. However, we know that firms do not set goals for themselves: entrepreneurs do.

Building on psychological theories of goal-directed behavior (Locke and Latham, 1990) and of values (Schwartz, 1992), we propose that internationalization - as any entrepreneurial action - is motivated by entrepreneurs’ desires and goals (Shane et al., 2003; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011), in a complex interplay between personal- and company-level goals (Zahra et al., 2005).

Goals are cognitively organized in hierarchies, where lower-level goals are instrumental to achieve higher-level goals (Rokeach, 1973). The highest level of goals is represented by personal values, which serve as guiding principles in people’s lives (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987). This study aims at: (1) highlighting the hierarchies of goals which motivate entrepreneurs to internationalize; (2) analyzing the relationship between values and internationalization attitudes.

Method

We obtained primary data through face-to-face structured interviews with 108 entrepreneurs in Italian new technology-based firms, not yet internationalized. We first carry out an inductive study to highlight hierarchies of goals for entrepreneurs thinking about a potential internationalization opportunity. To this end, we use a ‘laddering’ interviewing technique and a means-end-chain analysis (Gutman, 1997) to uncover increasingly abstract goals (i.e., (1) focal-goals; (2) intermediate-goals; (3) values). We then use hierarchical regression to test whether the set of identified goals are antecedent to entrepreneurs’ internationalization attitudes.

Results and Implications

Respondents produced 196 ‘ladders’, mentioning 500 goals, which were content-analyzed by three judges. We numerically and graphically analyzed the relationships among goals and their hierarchical structure. We find subordinate internationalization goals (e.g. increase revenues; diversification; personal growth) and their relationship with super-ordinate individual values (i.e., power, achievement, self-direction; security). The regression shows that self-direction and security value-orientations enhance internationalization attitudes.

Our theoretical contribution is twofold: i) complementing firm-level internationalization motivations with individual-level ones; ii) investigating the role of goals and values on entrepreneurial attitudes. In addition, we present a methodological contribution, i.e. the laddering technique. Policy makers can gain relevant insights to influence entrepreneurs’ values and attitudes conducive to internationalization choices.

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