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Born Global: the case of knowledge-intensive services in Southern Spain

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to understand how Knowledge-Intensive Services (KIS) firms can be Born Global right from inception or within a few years (three) of their foundation. To that end, we analyse four cases of KIS firms (two KIS firms that are Born Global right from inception and two KIS firms that are Born Global within the first three years). The firms are from the south of Spain (Andalusia) and operate in the renewable energy and consultancy sectors. The methodology used consists of case analysis and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). We find that these firms should pursue international market-, network- and entrepreneurship-oriented strategies in order to acquire dynamic knowledge, networking and innovation capabilities. By so doing, KIS firms will be able to follow an accelerated internationalisation process and thus be Born Global.

Keywords: knowledge-intensive services; BG; Born Global; internationally-oriented strategies; dynamic capabilities; case study; QCA; qualitative comparative analysis.

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Biographical notes: Clara Martos-Martínez is Assistant Professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Jaén. Her main line of research focuses on the internationalisation of the knowledge-intensive services and the olive oil sector. She has carried out a research stay at Manchester Business School and two teaching stays at the University of Beira Interior (Portugal) and the University of La Sapienza (Rome). In terms of research, she has published articles in JCR and Scopus, SPI Q1 book chapters and in different publication categories, participated in international conferences, given presentations at seminars, and participated in R&D&I projects.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed rapid internationalisation in Born Global (forward BG) firms (Hashai and Almor, 2004; Knight and Cavusgil, 2004; Oviatt and McDougall, 2005; Rialp et al., 2005). BG firms are those that internationalise at the time of their inception or at most three years later (Knight et al., 2004). In this study, we refer to the former as immediate BG and the latter as non-immediate BG. In addition, to be considered BG (whether immediate or non-immediate), the firms must generate at least 10 per 100 of total sales in foreign markets (Crick, 2009).

While BG have been analysed in the literature, there are few studies that focus on BG that are Knowledge-Intensive Services (KIS), these have characteristics that enable them to be BG earlier than other firms: they are notable for features such as personalised services and knowledge, innovative services and culture and qualified employees, among others. Furthermore, KIS firms that are BG usually have dynamic capabilities (unique, intangible and valuable capabilities in knowledge, networks and innovation).

Among the few existing papers on KIS BG we highlight Kumar (2013) studied the importance of human capital for the survival of KIS BG. Kumar and Yakhelf (2014), who study the case of an Indian firm operating in the knowledge-intensive services industry and examine the mechanism through which internationalisation-related capabilities emerge and are acquired as firms internationalise. Dhandapani et al. (2019) analysed the internationalisation strategies of BG service firms and the performance implications of these through strategic analysis of data from Indian information technology firms. Muñoz-Guarasa and Fischer (2021) explored which competitive characteristics differentiate KIS BG from other KIS companies.

In terms of research on BG, we highlight the work of Chetty and Campbell-Hunt (2004), who study the internationalisation process of 16 companies. Zhou et al. (2007) explained the relationship between internationalisation and the performance of this type of company. Melén and Rovira-Nordman (2009) explored the modes of internationalisation used by BG. Kaur and Sandhu (2013) identified the key factors that lead to their internationalisation. Taylor and Jack (2013) studied the pace, escalation and pattern of internationalisation of 6 firms. Cavusgil and Knight (2015) provided a framework for BG. Knight and Liesch (2016) reviewed internationalisation research from earlier times to the present. Francioni et al. (2021) examined the most important factors influencing the internationalisation of BG. Prieto-Sánchez and Merino (2022) studied some factors affecting the creation of BG firms. Behl et al. (2023) studied innovation in services and business strategy as drivers of the international performance of BG.

Mostafiz et al. (2023) reviewed and critically evaluates the literature on this type of company.

In this paper, we apply the theoretical framework of the Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2020), which shows how companies can internationalise in an accelerated way and become BG. Thus, it proposes the following strategies to be carried out and the dynamic capabilities to be achieved: (1) International Market-Oriented Strategies (IMOS), (2) International Network-Oriented Strategies (INOS) and (3) International Entrepreneurship-Oriented Strategies (IEOS). To know if the company has achieved these dynamic capabilities we check it through the existence of intellectual capital: human (HC), relational (RC) and technological (TC). In the current work we are going to check the previous theoretical framework and we are going to apply it to the KIS companies that are BG immediately after their creation. This theoretical framework has been tested in other research such as: Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2021) examined how olive companies can be BG through their competitive advantages. Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2023a) studied why some KIS internationalise gradually and others in an accelerated manner. They find actions for KIS to become BG within the first three years of their creation. Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2023b) analysed how firms in the olive sector can gain competitive advantages to become BG.

It is interesting to know that Andalusia, being the region with the largest population in relation to the rest of the autonomous communities, with 8,600,441 inhabitants, has an unemployment rate of 18.7% (Labor Force Survey, III quarter 2023) compared to 11.8% in Spain. Thus, it is the third autonomous community with the highest unemployment rate. However, it is the region with the highest number of knowledge-intensive service companies after Madrid and Catalonia (García-Manjón, 2008).

The overall objective of our research is to examine the key factors that enable KIS to be BG from inception (immediate KIS BG) or within 3 years after the foundation of the firm (non-immediate KIS BG). To do so, we investigate how KIS firms can achieve said outcome, thereby making an important theoretical contribution to the literature, given the scarcity of research on this subject (Kumar, 2012, 2013; Muñoz-Guarasa and Fischer, 2021; Prieto-Sánchez and Merino, 2022).

To achieve the above objectives this research focuses on 6 propositions: (1) whether international market orientation strategies have been carried out to have dynamic capabilities and be international, (2) whether international network orientation strategies have been carried out to have dynamic capabilities and be international, (3) whether international entrepreneurship orientation strategies have been carried out to have dynamic capabilities and be international, (4) if the company has human capital with dynamic capabilities that allows them to internationalise in an accelerated way, (5) if the company has relational capital with dynamic capabilities that allows them to internationalise in an accelerated way and (6) if the company has technological capital with dynamic capabilities that allows them to internationalise in an accelerated way.

In short, this article sheds light on how KIS firms can become more competitive through an accelerated internationalisation process. No theoretical framework has been found that predicts how KIS can be BG right from inception. The analysis consists of the study of four KIS firms (two immediate BG and two non-immediate BG) in the renewable energy and consultancy sectors in Andalusia, Spain. This region was chosen as it has the largest number of companies of this type, after Madrid and Catalonia (García-Manjón, 2008). Furthermore, consultancy and renewable energy operations account for the largest share of total KIS firms in that region (Muñoz-Guarasa et al.,

2013). The methodology applied consists of the analysis of case studies and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). We conducted and recorded semi-structured personal interviews with the founders and/or those in charge of the internationalisation process. After collecting and coding the data, we studied each case individually and analysed it using fs/QCA software. In order to do so, the qualitative data were transformed into fuzzy sets.

The results of this research allow us to test for, identify and explain the keys to pursuing international market-, network- and entrepreneurship-oriented strategies, and acquiring the dynamic knowledge, networking and innovation capabilities that form part of the KIS firms' intellectual capital (human, organisational and business/social networks), in order to be BG right from inception.

We therefore make a threefold contribution to the literature: First, this study addresses the key factors for KIS firms to be BG right from inception. Second, we test the theoretical framework proposed by Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2020) relating to the KIS firms that are BG from inception and those that are BG within three years. Third, the methodology combines case studies with QCA, which helps improve the interpretation of the results (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009; Medina et al., 2017). Moreover, there has been very little research to date that applies both these methods, meaning this study complements the existing literature.

Following this introduction, in Section 2 we discuss the theoretical framework that underpins the research, which is composed of a theory of accelerated internationalisation (BG), the dynamic capabilities view, and a specific model for the KIS BG. Section 3 presents the methodology with stages of the research. The results are analysed and details the main discussion points in Section 4. Section 5 including theoretical, practical and economic policy implications, as well as limitations and avenues for future research. Lastly, the conclusions are presented.

2 Theoretical framework

KIS BG firms are characterised by: (1) the time lag between the creation of the company and its internationalisation; (2) the founder's international experience and strong entrepreneurial orientation, which makes the company more innovative, proactive and willing to take greater risks than its competitors (Shrader et al., 2000) and (3) the dynamic and competitive capabilities derived from their resources and capabilities, which enable them to compete in the international market and overcome their disadvantages. Moreover, these capabilities allow them to accelerate their internationalisation (Weerawardena et al., 2007). In the following, we will explain each of them in greater depth:

- 1) The time that elapses from the firms's birth to its internationalisation. There is currently no unanimous definition that indicates the minimum number of years that must elapse between the creation and the internationalisation of the firms, as well as the minimum percentage of income received from abroad. In spite of this, the following Table 1 reflects the above requirements reflected by some authors for companies to be BG:

Among the most frequently cited definitions in recent research Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2021, 2023a, 2023b), they choose as a reference for characterising

KIS that three years have elapsed since the firm was created until it internationalises (Knight et al., 2004), since this is the most commonly used in various research studies. In addition, they must have 10 per 100 of their revenues coming from abroad (Crick, 2009). We have chosen Crick's (2009) criterion that in order to be considered BG firms need to sell abroad 10 per 100 of the total. This choice is justified because the study by Muñoz-Guarasa et al. (2013) pointed out that, in Andalusia, the scope of our study, 56.3 per 100 of KIS firms are microenterprises, which makes it difficult for them to access foreign markets and this means that the percentage of exports is very low. Thus, of all the KIS exporting firms, around 40 per 100 sell less than 10 per 100 abroad.

Table 1 Requirements to become BG

	<i>Years/ months from its creation to internationalisation</i>	<i>% income abroad</i>
Rennie (1993)	2 years	75%
McKinsey & Co. (1993)	2 years	75%
Zahra et al. (2000)	6 years	5%
Madsen et al. (2000)	3 years	70%
Moen and Servais (2002)	3 years	70%
Chetty and Campbell-Hunt (2004)	3 years	70%
Knight and Cavusgil (2004)	3 years	25%
Crick (2009)		10%
Escandón-Barbosa et al. (2013)	7 years	25%
Prieto-Sánchez and Merino (2022)	2 years	25%
Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2021, 2023a, 2023b)	3 years	10%

Source: Own elaboration.

- 2) The founder's international experience and strong entrepreneurial orientation that makes a firm more innovative, proactive and willing to take greater risks than competitors (Knight and Cavusgil, 1996; Shrader et al., 2000).
- 3) The dynamic and competitive capabilities they achieve from their resources and capabilities, which make it easier for them to compete in the international market and substitute for their shortcomings, e.g., their young age. In addition, competitive capabilities enable them to accelerate internationalisation (Knight and Cavusgil, 2004; Madsen and Servais, 1997; Weerawardena et al., 2007). These are as follows:
 - Dynamic knowledge capabilities: increased knowledge of the market, customers and the firm itself will allow internationalisation to occur more rapidly (Ball et al., 2008; Brennan and Garvey, 2009). Thus, these capabilities exist in entrepreneurship, in the individual, in the firm and in the network.
 - Dynamic network capabilities: help to create new networks from previously created ones and sustain them over time. Thus, international strategic alliances with customers, suppliers, competitiveness and public/private enterprise can be the most important driving force for internationalisation. In this way, KIS BG

share resources with partners for their management (Oviatt and McDougall, 2018, Jones et al., 2011).

- Dynamic capabilities in innovation: these are those that enable access to effective R&D distribution channels, international collaboration, etc. In addition, it allows the company to offer new specialised services with high added value to compete against its deficiencies in financial and human resources, etc. (Knight et al., 2004).

Although KIS firms are typically proactive, innovative and competitive (Etemad, 2019), they are not all BG. For that, following international orientation strategies (Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2020). Furthermore, they require dynamic capabilities that allow them to rapidly adapt to the international market and compensate for their shortcomings in financial and human resources, etc. (Knight et al., 2004). However, not all KIS firms acquire such capabilities.

Strategic orientation focuses on how firms must interact with external environments: customers, competitors, technology, among others, to conduct international business (Day, 1994; Gatignon and Xuereb, 1997). As such, strategic orientation reflects an outward-looking view of the fit between strategic choices and the environment. In contrast, dynamic capability looks inward, focusing on how to integrate and rejuvenate the firm's resources. Therefore, strategic orientation as a strategic choice should drive how firms acquire, allocate and use resources to build dynamic capabilities (Zhou and Li, 2010).

Strategic orientations are considered crucial for improving firm performance and their impact can be even greater when associated with dynamic capabilities (Sarkar et al., 2016). Recent research combines strategic orientations with dynamic capabilities, assuming that in complex and dynamic environments strategic orientations are not sufficient to explain improved firm performance (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000).

Thus, our starting point is the dynamic capabilities model, in which company managers 'integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competencies to cope with rapidly changing environments' (Teece et al., 1997, p.516). Firms need dynamic capabilities, that is, assets, processes and structures that allow them to detect and seize new opportunities and renew their asset base, the use of which is indispensable if they are to compete on an international stage (Jiang et al., 2020). Therefore, for firms to internationalise they need to have dynamic capabilities, which lead to competitive advantages; moreover, these capabilities are important for innovative firms to improve their performance (Sarkar et al., 2016).

Therefore, pursue internationally oriented strategies and the possession of dynamic capabilities thus indicates whether or not a firm can be BG. Thus, there is some research that clarifies how firms can internationalise in an accelerated manner on the basis of these capabilities. Weerawardena et al. (2007) proposed a model of an accelerated internationalisation process based on the theory of dynamic capabilities, their link to innovations and the literature on international entrepreneurship. Sarkar et al. (2016) analysed the relationship between market, entrepreneurial and learning orientations, dynamic capabilities and their performance. Swoboda and Olejnik (2016) highlighted the role of knowledge and learning from foreign markets following the dynamic capabilities perspective. Finally, Laukkanen et al. (2013) and Paul et al. (2017) highlighted that firms perform better in the international arena if they combine different strategic orientations.

Thus, this work is reinforced by Acosta et al. (2018) and Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2020, 2021, 2023a, 2023b) in highlighting that the combination of market, network and international entrepreneurship orientation strategies are the most relevant for business internationalisation. Thus, Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2020, 2023a) in his research it develops the strategic bases, as well as the dynamic capabilities for KISs to follow a rapid and successful internationalisation process. This theoretical model focuses on the strategies of market orientation (IMOS), network orientation (INOS) and international entrepreneurship (IEOS), as well as intellectual capital: human, organisational, business, social and technological. The measure of intellectual capital comes from the *intellectus* model (Bueno et al., 2008), which emerged as a practical tool for identifying and measuring intangible assets that add value to organisations. Therefore, if the KIS firms have acquired dynamic capabilities (intangible assets) that are beneficial for the internationalisation process, they will form part of the HC, RC and TC. This theoretical model has been tested in case studies in the knowledge-intensive services sector and in the olive grove (Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2021, 2023b).

Therefore, for companies to become BG, they must achieve dynamic capabilities. To do so, they must follow the following strategies:

- a) International market-oriented strategies (IMOS)
- b) International network-oriented strategies (INOS)
- c) International entrepreneurship-oriented strategies (IEOS)

The dynamic capabilities acquired will be studied through intellectual capital: human (HC), relational (RC) and technological capital (TC).

- a) *International market-oriented strategies (IMOS)*: These strategies are customer-centric, coordinated and designed with the marketing plan in relation to the entire organisation, and externally focused (Jansson et al., 2017). According to Daengs and Soemantri (2020), the main objective of market orientation is to provide greater value to the consumer based on knowledge derived from analyses of clients and the competition, such that this knowledge is acquired and distributed among the elements of the organisation.

Therefore, through IMOS, the firm captures objective knowledge on the foreign market (for example, through market studies), in addition to the knowledge derived from the founder and/or head of exports due to their experience of having participated in previous internationalisation processes (e.g., knowledge of customers). All this makes it possible to adapt the product to the needs, tastes and demands of potential customers. In line with the above arguments, we put forward the following proposition:

Proposition 1: *International market-oriented strategies have been implemented in order to acquire dynamic capabilities and to be international.*

- b) *International network-oriented strategies (INOS)*: These strategies are focused on the creation of international networks. Companies can successfully internationalise by building and developing significant positions in these foreign networks (Sanyal et al., 2020). Networking activities (attendance at international trade fairs, international trade promotion agencies, etc.) and business networks (clients, business services, etc.) both help to identify international entrepreneurial opportunities and

provide a means of access to new and different types of information and ideas (Wilkinson and Young, 2005) as well as enabling companies to obtain new resources (greater knowledge). In line with the above arguments, we put forward the following proposition:

Proposition 2: International network-oriented strategies have been implemented in order to acquire dynamic capabilities and to be international.

- c) *International entrepreneurship-oriented strategies (IEOS)*: These strategies are centred around the entrepreneurial and innovative spirit of the founder. The entrepreneurial spirit represents creative and innovative capacity and forms the basis for seeking out opportunities for success (Daengs and Soemantri, 2020). Zahoor and Lew (2022) suggested that the propensity to innovate, attitude towards risk and proactivity affect progress in the early stages of firm growth. By implementing IEOS, a firm can achieve competitive advantages, since innovative behaviour allows it to introduce new products/services and capabilities before its competitors do (Dias et al., 2021).

Therefore, the founder must have the following characteristics: (1) autonomy, referring to the independence and freedom to conceive an idea and take it to its conclusion; (2) innovativeness, which is the tendency to produce and support new ideas and creative processes that can give rise to new services; (3) proactiveness, which is a forward-looking perspective that accompanies an innovative activity and allows the founder to see new means and ends before others do; (4) risk-taking propensity, referring to the inclination to enter foreign markets, which is associated with the founder's values and (5) competitive aggressiveness, which is the propensity to successfully enter the international market by challenging competitors (Kreiser et al., 2002). In line with the above arguments, we put forward the following proposition:

Proposition 3: International entrepreneurship-oriented strategies have been implemented in order to acquire dynamic capabilities and to be international.

Below, we discuss the intellectual capital (human, relational and technological) that we use to identify the dynamic capabilities acquired by the company after having carried out the aforementioned internationally-oriented strategies:

- *Human capital (HC)*: Human capital includes the skills, experiences, attitudes and abilities of the employees of an organisation (Zakery and Saremi, 2020), and represents what the people and groups belonging to the organisation know and their ability to learn and share that knowledge with others for the good of the organisation (Kidwell et al., 2020). It should be emphasised that human capital with dynamic capabilities better understands global opportunities and establishes more effective linkages to take advantage of them, which can become part of the company's organisational culture. Thus, such capabilities and their interaction increase internationalisation and reduce the risk of failure of BG (Kumar, 2013). Based on the above arguments, we put forward the following proposition:

Proposition 4: The firm has human capital with dynamic capabilities, which enables its accelerated internationalisation.

- *Relational capital (RC)*: Companies need to achieve networking capabilities to build relationships in foreign markets (Sanyal et al., 2020). According to Ivanova and

Torkkeli (2013), networking capabilities are defined as the ability of business owners and managers to develop, manage and maintain relationships with key partners such as suppliers, clients and competitors, and to manage interactions with them effectively. Therefore, the question of whether the firm has achieved dynamic networking capabilities can be assessed by means of its Relational Capital (RC), which refers to the invaluable relationships within an organisation among individuals and external groups in the form of social capital, and, crucially, outside the organisation in the form of customer-company relationships, as well as work networks (Zakery and Saremi, 2020). In line with the above arguments, we put forward the following proposition.

Proposition 5: The firm has relational capital with dynamic capabilities, which enables its accelerated internationalisation.

- *Technological capital (TC):* A firm has Technological Capital (TC) if its employees have technical and technology management skills, relating to the way to conceive, deploy and exploit ICT to support and improve the organisation and coordinate activities (Gulati et al., 2012). It also has technological capital if it has an innovative or entrepreneurial culture, which reflects the degree to which companies in the sector are proactive in exploring new opportunities (Menguc and Auh, 2006). According to Bendak et al. (2020), a rapid, innovative response to changes in the environment is critical for any organisation, and the type of company culture contributes to the existence of the different types of innovation. In line with the above arguments, we put forward the following proposition.

Proposition 6: The firm has technological capital with dynamic capabilities, which enables its accelerated internationalisation.

In summary, in this paper we propose the key factors that drive KIS firms to internationalise from inception or as quickly as possible. By examining real-life cases of internationalisation, we check whether the firms implement IMOS (objective and experiential knowledge of the international market), INOS (international networks of contacts) and IEOS (provision of innovative products and the characteristics of the founder), and whether they have dynamic capabilities integrated into the firm's HC (employees' values, skills and attitudes, organisational learning, organisational culture), RC (expanding the network and maintaining it over time) and TC (technical and technology management skills and innovative culture).

3 Methodology

The methodological procedure applied is based on Eisenhardt's (1989) proposal, which focuses on building a descriptive theoretical framework based on the qualitative study (2 or more cases). For the choice of the number of cases to study, we have been inspired by the research of Wiedersheim-Paul and Johanson (1975), who analyse four cases and propose the Uppsala model of gradual internationalisation. Rialp et al. (2005) investigated four cases of firms with factors associated with the BG and gradual internationalisation path. Thai and Chong (2008) conducted a study of four firms that internationalise at the time of their creation. Likewise, Amal and Freitag (2010) analysed the determinants of SME internationalisation in Brazil. To do so, they conducted a

qualitative study using a sample of three firms. Zha et al. (2019) studied two cases of Chinese universities to study how these universities have managed to move up in internationalisation and its benefits. Yan and Gray (1994) and Rosati and Chazarreta (2017) claimed that two cases are sufficient.

For all of the above, we chose four cases, whose information is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Case studies and characteristics

<i>Firms</i>	<i>Immediate BG</i>		<i>Non-immediate BG</i>	
	<i>Bester</i>	<i>Track Global Solutions</i>	<i>GP Tech</i>	<i>Clever</i>
Servicios Generales	Renewable Energies	Consultancy	Renewable Energies	Consultancy
CNAE Activity	A*	B*	A*	B*
Year of foundation	2010	2013	2002	2004
Year of internationalisation	2010	2013	2004	2007
% foreign income	90	15	15	12

Notes: A*: technical engineering services; technical testing and analysis (71). Other professional, scientific and technical activities (74);
 B*: activities of head offices; management consultancy activities (70);
 (*): % foreign income/total income in the year that the internationalisation process begins; Own elaboration.

In this research, we have combined two methods: case analysis and QCA, since according to Rialp et al. (2005) the value and rigour of case-based research is enhanced by combining it with other methods. Also, in-depth knowledge of each case has been essential to conduct the QCA. Furthermore, this combination is suitable in a later stage of the analysis and the interpretation of the results (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009; Rohlfing, 2012). Consequently, one of the challenges presented by this research has been to structure the QCA with the case analysis, in both the pre-QCA stage and the post-QCA stage; in other words, in the data collection and the data analysis stages (Medina et al., 2017). Lastly, it is worth noting the scarcity of studies that apply these two methods; hence the need to propose more dynamic research designs that integrate different methodologies (Rialp et al., 2005). This methodological approach therefore complements and contributes new knowledge to the existing literature.

Our study was conducted in the following stages:

- We prepared a technical data sheet (see Table 3), setting out the protocol of action for the research, contributing to the rigour and validity of the study.
- We perform an individual analysis of each case.
- We proceeded to study the comparative analysis of the cases.
- We analysed the data using QCA. For its calibration we started from the study of Basurto and Speer (2012) focused on qualitative data as QCA fuzzy sets and from the research of Ragin (2000). Thus, they are included in Table 4.

Table 3 Technical data sheet

Research objective	To analyse, understand and identify the relationships between the conditions causing KIS firms from Spain (Andalusia) to be BG from inception, and to disseminate the findings to other KIS firms, thereby facilitating their internationalisation process. To combine the theoretical perspective with the practical business perspective of the experiences of internationalised KIS firms (BG).
Methodology	A holistic comparative study of four cases.
Unit of analysis	Knowledge-intensive service firms from Andalusia that internationalised between 2003 and 2013, with internationalisation occurring in two time frames: immediately upon inception or up to three years after inception.
Geographical scope	Southern Spain (Andalusia)
Sample Universe	KIS BG firms from Spain (Andalusia).
Type of sampling	Logical and theoretical sampling (capacity for analytical generalisation of the phenomenon under study).
Sample	Four KIS firms from Andalusia, of which two are BG right from inception (immediate BG) and the other two are BG within the following three years (non-immediate BG). They are classified according to CNAE 2009 Group M, corresponding to professional, scientific and technical activities. Among those selected based on their importance in the region are, on the one hand, technical architecture and engineering services; technical testing and analysis (71) and other professional, scientific and technical activities (74), and on the other, activities of head offices; management consultancy activities (70). Specifically, the cases analysed are <i>Bester</i> , <i>Track Global Solutions</i> , <i>GP Tech</i> and <i>Clever</i> .
Data collection methods	Documentary review (documentation and files). Conducting in-depth interviews: open-ended, semi-structured and face-to-face. Direct observation.
Sources of information	<i>Internal</i> : documentation (briefings, reports and internal studies), files (web pages, presentation files, image and sound files), in-depth interviews, questionnaires, real-world physical context. <i>External</i> : specialised publications, reports and websites of ICEX, Andalusian Public Company for Foreign Promotion (EXTENDA-Andalusia Export and Foreign Investment), chambers of commerce.
Key informants	Founders and/or those in charge of the firm's internationalisation department and other departments.
Analysis of the evidence test, identify and explain the keys to being BG from the results obtained from the case studies and QCA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of theoretical explanation. • Search for key factors. • Search for common behavioural pattern • Identification and structural classification of strategic dimensions. • Calibration of qualitative data using QCA. • Theoretical, temporal, methodological and investigator data triangulation. • Truth table. • Superset analysis. • Analysis of critical decisions.

Table 3 Technical data sheet (continued)

Rigour and methodological quality	<p><i>Internal validity:</i> achieved through personal interviews with those in charge of the firms’ internationalisation process, supplemented with the information provided by the reports. Use of the fs/QCA method through the Truth Table and Superset Analysis.</p> <p><i>External validity:</i> achieved through the logical application of multiple cases (Yin, 2015).</p> <p><i>Reliability:</i> achieved through this technical data sheet of the case studies, with the coding and calibration of the data from the case studies.</p>
Fieldwork	<p>Semi-structured personal interviews, recorded at the companies’ facilities:</p> <p><i>Bester:</i> Head of marketing and communication. Ms. Cristina Gadea</p> <p><i>Track Global Solutions:</i> Partner and head of internationalisation, Ms. Reyes Farfán.</p> <p><i>GP Tech:</i> Head of strategic planning, Ms. María José Muniz</p> <p><i>Clever:</i> Director of Strategy and Development, Mr. Alejandro Jos Gallego</p> <p>The questionnaire consisted of seven levels: (1) technical data sheet, (2) brief history of the company, (3) internationalisation process, (4) international market-, network- and entrepreneurship-oriented strategies, (5) acquisition of dynamic capabilities, (6) current situation of the company in the international arena, (7) future prospects.</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4 Definition of fuzzy set values

Condition	Variables	Defined fuzzy-set value	Bester	Track	GP Tech	Clever
IMOS ¹	Objective knowledge of the international market	1: the variables are present before the founding of the firm.	1	1	0	0
	The founder’s experiential knowledge of other internationalisation processes	0.67: Only one of the variables is present before the founding of the firm.				
INOS ²	Having a social network	0.33: The variables have been present since the founding of the firm.	1	1	0	0
	Having a business network					
IEOS ³	Founder characteristics: innovativeness, autonomy, proactiveness and risk-taking propensity	0: the variables emerge during the first three years after the founding of the firm.	1	1	0.33	0.33
	Providing innovative services					

Table 4 Definition of fuzzy set values (continued)

<i>Condition</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Defined fuzzy-set value</i>	<i>Bester</i>	<i>Track</i>	<i>GP Tech</i>	<i>Clever</i>
HC ⁴	Human resources: values, skills and attitudes Organisational learning Organisational culture		1	1	0	0
RC ⁵	Using social networks Using business networks		1	1	0	0
TC ⁶	Innovative culture Technical and technology management skills		1	1	0	0

Notes: IMOS¹: international market-oriented strategy, INOS²: international network-oriented strategy, IEOS³: international entrepreneurship-oriented strategy, HC⁴: human capital, RC⁵: relational capital, TC⁶: technological capital; Own elaboration.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Case studies

- *Bester*: This is a renewable energy company that was established to meet a global demand. The management team that started *Bester* came from *Inetel* (a company dedicated to electronic engineering and telecommunications founded in 1989). In 1996, it changed its name to *Grupo AMS* (part of which was dedicated to renewable energies). In 2010, these employees decided to set up *Bester* as a spin-off from the renewable energy division of *Grupo AMS*. The founders of *Bester* had ample experiential knowledge and training, having worked in the industry for 15 years and taken part in previous internationalisation processes. They conducted market research to identify international opportunities. *Bester* went international in Italy, due to their prior knowledge of its market and the networking from their time working in *Grupo AMS*. They took advantage of the Andalusian international trade promotion agency EXTENDA and the Spanish Institute of Foreign Trade (ICEX) to initiate and expand international relations. They also made use of contacts with Spanish offices located all over the world, attended international trade fairs, etc. The entrepreneurial culture was a characteristic feature of the company from the outset. The founders had the characteristics of innovativeness, autonomy, proactiveness, risk-taking propensity and competitive aggressiveness. The firm has the capacity to produce and develop innovative ideas relating to both the service and the firm's internal operations. Employees were integrated into the internationalisation project and have received continuous training. The founders have demonstrated an ability to learn from previous experiences and convey this learning to the organisation so that it can be applied to its international activity. *Bester* has been able to develop new networks based on those created in the previous company (*Grupo AMS*) and to maintain them over time. Since its foundation, there have been people in charge of

information management and active participation in the internationalisation process. Finally, this company has an innovative culture and has used it to achieve rapid internationalisation.

- *Track global solutions*: The management team that founded *Track* had participated in the internationalisation process of another engineering and construction company that went international in Mexico in 2008. Thus, in 2013, five partners decided to create *Track*, with the intention of being international from the very beginning. *Track's* partners had extensive experience in internationalisation processes and public procurement, having secured numerous international contracts and established subsidiaries throughout the American continent. Along with their international experience, the partners have objective knowledge of the Latin American market and were aware of competing firms' limited experience in the foreign market. Therefore, firms located in Spain that were considered competition were not direct competitors outside of Spain. The partners had contacts with Latin American and Spanish trade promotion agencies. The founders can be characterised by their innovativeness, proactiveness, risk-taking propensity and competitive aggressiveness. The firm's employees had values, skills and attitudes that facilitated the internationalisation process. The entire organisation was coordinated to anticipate and adapt to possible changes in the internationalisation process. It thus drew on the organisational culture of the previous company to accelerate the internationalisation process. *Track* has been able to create new networks and maintain those it started out with. It has technical and technology management skills, as well as an innovative culture.
- *GP Tech*: The company was established in 2002 as a spin-off initiative from the University of Seville. After a rise in demand for the services in question (power electronics to develop solutions for the renewable energy sector), three professors from the University of Seville decided to create this firm to take an entrepreneurial approach to providing these services. In 2004, they started the internationalisation process following increased demand from their main client in the Latin American market. The founders had no previous entrepreneurial or international experience, but it was their intention to go global at the outset. They carried out in-depth market and country analyses for locations where they intended to operate and prepared market forecasts. They took part in cluster missions and independent missions, through which they built up their international networks and contacts. The firm has implemented innovative ideas, facilitating its degree of adaptability to the international market. An internationalisation department was created, the head of which already had international training and experience. The employees had acquired values, skills and attitudes that were beneficial to the internationalisation process and they have relied on their organisational culture to anticipate possible international changes. This firm has demonstrated capabilities that have enabled it to increase its number of international contacts. It has technical and managerial skills and capabilities in ICT (reporting, information and customer management, online systems, etc.). Finally, the firm has the initiative to develop innovative services wherever it internationalises.
- *Clever*: *Clever* was established in 2004 as spin-off. The managing director was an executive at *Sadiel*, an information technology company. At a certain point in time, *Sadiel* executives opened up the opportunity to create another company to supply

some of its services, and the owner of *Clever* decided to undertake this project. He had national and international experience. In 2007, a client company in Spain offered them a business opportunity in Chile and *Clever* decided to start up in this South American country. While setting up an overseas subsidiary too soon represented a potential error, it was beneficial in terms of creating competitive advantages related to loyalty, commitment and trust with the Latin American market. Both the founder of *Clever* and the head of internationalisation had experience in the international field, since they had both previously worked in companies from different countries. The fact that this company is a spin-off of *Sadiel* with multinational Spanish companies as clients has provided it with important contacts. In addition, it made use of foreign trade promotion agencies (EXTENDA and ICEX). It was clear to the founder from the outset that *Clever* was part of a network of networks. The employees had acquired capabilities, skills and attitudes that helped with the internationalisation process. *Clever* is a network connected to all the subsidiaries located in international markets. From Seville, it provides services to the entire foreign network and carries out coordinated work around the world, fostering the use of the organisation's learning capability in its internationalisation process. This company has been able to create new networks and maintain existing relationships over time. *Clever* uses its innovative culture to adapt more quickly and effectively to the international market. It has provided and continues to provide innovative services, as they are designed, supported and managed within the company.

In summary, the tactics that managers of BG companies (e.g., *Track* and *GP Tech*) have used to acquire dynamic capabilities focused on knowledge, networks and innovation have been as follows:

- They conducted in-depth market, country and customer studies they wanted to target, thereby developing dynamic capabilities in knowledge.
- The founders of *Track* had participated in the internationalisation process of another company in Mexico. They also had extensive experience in internationalisation processes, which motivated them to develop dynamic knowledge capabilities since their creation.
- The founders of *GP Tech* had no business or international experience, so it created an internationalisation department, whose head already had international training and experience. These actions contributed to achieving dynamic knowledge capabilities within the first three years of its creation.
- Both companies created networks with partners, suppliers, competitors, media and others. For example, *Track's* partners had contacts with Latin American and Spanish trade promotion agencies since before their creation, which led them to achieve dynamic networking capabilities from their inception.
- *GP Tech's* founders participated in cluster missions and independent missions, through which they built their international networks and contacts. This enabled them to achieve dynamic network capabilities within the first three years of their creation.
- Both offered innovative services from the company's inception. Thus, *GP Tech* has applied innovative ideas, facilitating its degree of adaptability to the international

market. It has technical and managerial skills and capabilities in the field of ICT (reporting, information and client management, online systems, etc.). *Track* has technical and technology management skills, which contributed to achieving dynamic innovation capabilities.

- The founders of both companies intended to be international from the very beginning of the company. They were also proactive and inclined to enter new international markets and showed innovative spirit and competitive aggressiveness. All this contributed to their dynamic capabilities.

QCA does not follow statistical logic, but rather employs Fuzzy Set Theory and Boolean and fuzzy algebra (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). The method is based on the principle of multiple conjunctural causation, which means that a combination of the variables can lead to the KIS being BG right from inception (Sehring et al., 2013). QCA is suitable for application to a small number of cases (Meyer et al., 2018). That said, our choice of the QCA method is justified by our interest in obtaining results by analysing configurations rather than because of case numbers (Thiem, 2014).

Specifically, we use the fuzzy-set QCA (fs/QCA) approach, in order to understand the possible effects that may arise through the combination of conditions. There are numerous studies of companies that have used fs/QCA; e.g., Fiss (2011); Kraus et al. (2018) and Brennes et al. (2020), among others. In our study, we have transformed qualitative data into fuzzy sets. This is an important analytical step that strongly influences the results of the QCA. Most studies do not provide many details about how the qualitative data are transformed into fuzzy sets (e.g., Lam and Ostrom, 2010). Therefore, indicating the steps followed to calibrate the qualitative data collected through interviews adds rigour to the research. Finally, these data bring theory closer to reality than statistical data do.

The ultimate output of fs/QCA is one or several combinations sufficient for a specific outcome. For example, $X1 * \sim X2 * X3$ is sufficient for the outcome (Y).

$$X1 * \sim X2 * X3 \rightarrow Y$$

where $X1$, $X2$ and $X3$ are antecedents; Y is the outcome; $*$ the union and \sim the absence or negation, in this case the opposite value to $X2$ ($1 - X2$). We obtain 65 possible combinations, of which only one presents solid results as indicated by its high degree of consistency. Thus, the following combination leads to KIS firms being BG right from inception:

$$\text{Combination 1: } IMOS * INOS * IEOS * HC * RC * TC$$

According to combination 1, in order for KIS firms to be BG right from inception, they need to pursue international market-, network- and entrepreneurship-oriented strategies, as well as acquiring dynamic knowledge, networking and innovation capabilities before starting the internationalisation process. Of the main results, the following findings are worth highlighting:

- a) For KIS firms to be BG as soon as they are founded, it is necessary to combine strategies oriented towards the international market, international networks and international entrepreneurship, along with dynamic knowledge, networking and innovation capabilities.

- b) All the conditions analysed (IMOS, INOS, IEOS, HC, RC, TC) are necessary for KIS firms to be BG from inception. If any of these conditions are not met, the outcome of the KIS firm being BG from inception is less reliable.

Following the analysis carried out, we can state that the theoretical framework proposed by Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2020, 2021, 2023a, 2023b) for the internationalisation of KIS firms is applicable to the KIS that are BG right from inception.

There are some immediate KIS BG firms that were created from a previous internationalised company dedicated to the same activity (e.g., *Bester*). As such, they had knowledge of the international market, the founder had participated in other internationalisation processes, they had created both social and business networks, and the founder fulfilled the necessary characteristics for the company to be BG from inception. Therefore, the earlier company's strategic orientation towards the international market, networks and entrepreneurship speeds up the internationalisation process of the new BG.

These findings are in accordance with those reported by Gull et al. (2021), since they demonstrate that the founders or directors of BG should cultivate the company's knowledge, improving performance over the long term. Therefore, the pursuit of internationally-oriented strategies allows KIS to develop their existing resources. Our results are also in line with the study by Hernández-Perlines et al. (2016), since it focuses on understanding how an international business orientation produces a better international performance, creating competitive advantages. Likewise, a series of studies have found that entrepreneurial orientation leads to a greater degree of internationalisation (Javalgi and Todd, 2011; Jones et al., 2011, among others).

In short, the pursuit of international market-, network- and entrepreneurship-oriented strategies accelerates the internationalisation process. Furthermore, these strategies may have been developed from a previously existing company dedicated to the same activity that had already internationalised, meaning that the new company is international from inception. The KIS firms that were not BG from inception but did internationalise within in a short period of time (three years at most after inception) needed to implement international market-, network- and entrepreneurship-oriented strategies to acquire dynamic knowledge, networking and innovation capabilities and thus be BG within this three-year time span.

Previous studies such as the one by Kumar and Yakhlef (2014) detailed the evolution of the capabilities of a BG firm, in an effort to explain how KIS firms adapt to and exploit changes in their business environment through their dynamic capabilities. They show that a KIS firm acquires dynamic capabilities through a process of evolution. Without these capabilities, BG would have difficulty maintaining their competitive position in the outside world. Therefore, relative to previous research, our study represents a step forward as it identifies the key factors enabling KIS firms to acquire dynamic capabilities from the outset and be BG right from inception. Consequently, if they manage to develop dynamic capabilities from the very beginning, they can become more competitive on the international scene.

5 Implications for theory, practice and economic policy

Carrying out strategic orientations has a positive and significant impact on firm performance, but only when mediated by dynamic capabilities. Such capabilities assign a prominent role to business decision-makers in the formulation and implementation of competitive strategy (Weerawardena et al., 2007) in adapting, integrating and reconfiguring the organisation's internal and external capabilities, resources and competencies appropriately in a changing environment (Montealegre, 2002). They also involve organisational and strategic routines by which firms achieve new configurations of resources as markets emerge, collide, divide, evolve and die (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). Based on this, Montealegre (2002) explained how firms develop these capabilities by adapting and reconfiguring existing capabilities. According to his case study, dynamic capability development accelerates the internationalisation of firms. Therefore, achieving dynamic knowledge, network and innovation capabilities means that the company can adapt more easily to the dynamism of the international market.

In summary, for KIS to be BG they need to carry out IMOS, INOS and IEOS, as well as to achieve dynamic knowledge, network and innovation capabilities, since following the above strategies allows the company to reconfigure and adapt its resources and capabilities to a dynamic and changing environment. All these variables are necessary for KIS to be BG. On the one hand, if these companies want to be BG immediately after their creation, they must have carried out the above strategies, as well as achieving the dynamic capabilities of knowledge, network and innovation since their creation. In some cases, companies carry out these strategies and acquire the dynamic capabilities from a previous company. On the other hand, if the company wishes to become BG (set period of three years since its inception as per: Madsen et al., 2000; Moen and Servais, 2002; Chetty and Campbell-Hunt, 2004; Knight and Cavusgil, 2004; Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2021, 2023a, 2023b), it will be necessary for them to follow IMOS, INOS and IEOS, as well as to achieve dynamic capabilities in knowledge, network and innovation during the first three years from their creation.

Pursuing internationally-oriented strategies leads to a rapid process of internationalisation. This study thus builds on previous research focused on strategic orientations. For example, empirical evidence reported by Goerzen and Makino (2007) suggested that having a strong organisational culture characterised by an entrepreneurial orientation can bolster a firm's ability to internationalise early. Falahat et al. (2018) developed and test a model that links entrepreneurial orientation, networking capabilities and marketing strategies in a BG firm operating in the Malaysian market. However, neither of these studies identifies the strategies that KIS firms should implement to acquire dynamic capabilities and be BG from inception.

Moreover, there are few studies on the importance of BG in services (e.g., Ripolles-Meliá et al., 2010; Laudien and Daxböck, 2017), since the BG analysed previously are almost exclusively manufacturing firms. Therefore, in order to build related theories, it is important to produce more knowledge on BG services firms (Taylor et al., 2021).

Among the small number of studies on KIS BG, the one by Muñoz-Guarasa and Fisher (2021) is worth highlighting: it explores the competitive characteristics (mode of entry, technological capabilities, among others) that set KIS BG apart from other KIS firms. Said study sheds light on the intrinsic capabilities of KIS BG compared to their competitors that do not engage in rapid internationalisation. However, it does not predict the strategies that KIS firms should implement to become international from the outset.

Kuma (2013) examined the role of different resources (human, relational, market, technological, among others) in the early stages of KIS firms' internationalisation, and their effect on the survival and growth of the company. Kumar (2013) studied how marketing, innovation and project management capabilities are developed in a short period of time, as well as the evolution of KIS BG. However, no previous study indicates the necessary strategies for KIS firms to have dynamic capabilities, nor the key factors for KIS firms to be BG right from inception.

Ultimately, this work represents a contribution to theory, as it reinforces previous research on the combination of strategic orientations and dynamic capabilities to improve firm performance (e.g., Sarkar et al., 2016). It also represents an advance to what has been researched so far, as a theoretical framework integrating this combination of variables has not been detailed for BG. Thus, following market, network and entrepreneurship international orientation strategies, allows them to obtain knowledge of customers, competition, create international networks, as well as innovate and all this, enables them to reconfigure their initial resources and capabilities to obtain dynamic capabilities in knowledge, network and innovation, which accelerates the internationalisation process. In this direction, as in the work of Sarkar et al. (2016) our results indicate that the possession of dynamic capabilities reveals an important feature to explain the internationalisation process of the company, this was expected considering the dynamic environment in which KIS operate.

Therefore, the fact that KISs follow all the proposed strategies, as well as develop dynamic knowledge, network and innovation capabilities, is decisive for the internationalisation process to accelerate and for them to become BG. In summary, this study provides illustrative examples of innovative and entrepreneurial KIS companies and their international success and examines the conditions necessary for them to become international from their foundation, enabling them to become more competitive, which justifies the importance of the topic under investigation.

This study answers calls made by some researchers for the use of multiple theoretical frameworks and the application of fs/QCA in analyses of early internationalisation (Ciravegna et al., 2018). Previous examples of such studies include that by Ho et al. (2016), who examine the complementarity of strategic orientations. Berné-Martínez et al. (2021) explored whether internal (human capital) and external (cooperation and financing) conditions are necessary and/or sufficient for technological innovation to occur in KIBS using fs/QCA.

The aforementioned studies have applied fs/QCA as a useful method for identifying the conditions that are key to achieving the outcome. However, there is no recent research that predicts the key conditions that can lead KIS firms to be BG right from inception, and there are few studies that combine case studies with QCA. As such, this study represents a contribution to the existing research, since it not only focuses on an understudied topic, but it does so by means of a combination of methods that lends validity to the analysis and interpretation of the results.

Our results are relevant for entrepreneurs and managers, as we provide some recommendations for KIS firms that want to be BG right from inception and for those who want to be BG within the first three years after inception.

- 1) The KIS firms that intend to be immediate BG should:
 - Start to pursue international market-, network- and entrepreneurship-oriented strategies before the foundation of the firm, in order to acquire dynamic knowledge, networking and innovation capabilities.
 - Have someone in charge of internationalisation that has experiential knowledge of the process and involve the company's staff in this process.
- 2) The KIS firms that intend to be non-immediate BG should:
 - Conduct market research to gain objective knowledge of the international market.
 - Identify as many networking activities as possible.
 - Develop technical and management skills related to ICT.
 - Invest in employees with capabilities (ICT training, knowledge and skills, languages, experience in international markets, etc.).

Public policy makers could benefit from our case study in establishing future key guidelines for the design and implementation of public programs to support internationalisation and thus encourage the emergence of new BG companies. We propose the following actions:

- Create training programs to learn about the international market with internships in companies located in that market.
- Finance and advise companies to attend international trade fairs.
- Organise round tables in which speakers present their experience in internationalisation.
- Facilitate infrastructures to be innovation incubators.

6 Limitations and future research

The main limitations of this work are the following:

- First, it is important to be aware that the number of cases studied is small. However, there are numerous studies that do use a similar number of cases for analysis. Thus, in future research it could be applied to other cases, as it would allow to know if other companies have followed the combination of actions proposed in this research.
- Secondly, only the most important knowledge-intensive service sector activities in Andalusia have been analysed, so future research could analyse other KIS activities, e.g., education, as there are few studies that include the keys to making companies BG from their creation.

7 Conclusions

KIS firms have a set of characteristics that make the pace of their internationalisation faster than that of other companies. These firms should pursue market, network and entrepreneurship international orientation strategies, as well as they should acquire dynamic knowledge, networking and innovation capabilities in order to rapidly internationalise, enabling them to be BG from inception. These capabilities also include human, network and technological capital.

This study has focused on identifying the combinations of conditions that lead KIS firms to be BG. To do so, these firms can follow two strategic directions:

- a) On the one hand, they can pursue internationally-oriented strategies related to the market (objective and experiential knowledge), to networking (activities and business) and to entrepreneurship (characteristics of the founder and the provision of innovative services). By so doing, the firm can acquire dynamic knowledge (the values and skills of its human resources, organisational learning and organisational culture), network (using the previously established social and business networks to create new ones) and innovation (innovative culture and technical and technology management skills) capabilities, which enable KIS firms to be BG from inception. If the firm has been able to carry over these strategies from a previous company, it can have the corresponding dynamic capabilities from the moment of its foundation.
- b) On the other hand, pursuing the aforementioned combination of strategies for a maximum of 3 years after inception means that the firm can develop dynamic capabilities focused on knowledge, networking and innovation, which facilitate the accelerated internationalisation process and thus enable KIS firms to be BG.

Many of the KIS firms that are BG from inception are constituted from existing internationalised companies dedicated to the same activity, meaning that they have acquired dynamic and competitive capabilities prior to their constitution: they know the market they are targeting; the founder has international experience; they have already built up a network of contacts and they exchange information with clients, the media, press, competing companies, etc.; the founder has the characteristics of innovativeness, autonomy, proactiveness and competitive aggressiveness; they provide innovative services; their human resources have values, attitudes and skills that are beneficial for the process of internationalisation; they use previously-established networks to create new ones; and they have an innovative culture.

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