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# Motives and Forms of Internationalization of Polish Start-ups

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## Summary

**Research background:** Due to the rapid development of technology, the possibilities of entering new markets are changing. This is evident in the ease with which new companies enter new markets. Tools enabling the rapid transfer of information have meant that the classical stages of internationalization are often overlooked. Classic models of internationalization are often criticized, but this does not mean that there are no new models of internationalization. Considering the importance of start-ups in the economy, it is worth examining how they behave on international markets.

**Purpose of the article:** The main goal of the paper is to answer the following research questions: What forms of foreign expansion do Polish start-ups choose? What methods and tools do Polish start-ups choose on their way to internationalization? What are the motives for the internationalization of Polish start-ups? What are the stages of internationalization of a Polish start-up company? The research hypothesis is as follows: the most common form of internationalization of Polish start-ups is export.

**Methods:** The paper uses the following methods: critical analysis of the literature, online, paper and phone questionnaire and in-depth CATI interview. The data used in the article was collected by the author. The survey was conducted on a sample

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of 174 respondents, and the interview on a sample of 23 respondents. The study was conducted in the period from January 10, 2021 to January 7, 2023.

**Findings and value added:** This paper is the first comprehensive study of Polish start-ups focusing on internationalization motives, tools, determinants and possible stages. The most common motives for the internationalization of Polish start-ups are reactive motives. Enterprises choose exports as a way to enter new markets. The main tools supporting internationalization are social media profiles run in a foreign language and a network of contacts composed of people from the entrepreneur's environment. The research has shown that companies follow certain stages of internationalization.

**Keywords:** start-ups, internationalization, management, foreign investment, small and medium-sized enterprises.

**JEL Classification:** F23, M13, M16

## Motywy i formy internacjonalizacji polskich start-upów

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### Streszczenie

**Tło badawcze:** W związku z szybkim rozwojem technologii zmieniają się możliwości wchodzenia na nowe rynki. Ma to swój wyraz w łatwości, z jaką nowe firmy wchodzą na nowe rynki. Narzędzia umożliwiające szybki transfer informacji sprawiły, że często pomijane są klasyczne etapy internacjonalizacji. Klasyczne modele internacjonalizacji są często krytykowane, nie oznacza to jednak, że nie powstają nowe modele internacjonalizacji. Biorąc pod uwagę znaczenie start-upów w gospodarce, warto przyjrzeć się temu, jak zachowują się na rynkach międzynarodowych.

**Cel artykułu:** Głównym celem artykułu jest odpowiedź na następujące pytania badawcze: Jakie formy ekspansji zagranicznej wybierają polskie start-upy? Jakie metody i narzędzia internacjonalizacji wybierają polskie start-upy w drodze do internacjonalizacji? Jakie są motywy internacjonalizacji polskich start-upów? Jakie

są etapy internacjonalizacji polskich start-upów? Hipoteza badawcza brzmi następująco: najczęstszą formą internacjonalizacji polskich start-upów jest eksport.

**Metody:** W artykule zastosowano następujące metody: krytyczną analizę literatury, ankietę internetową, papierową i telefoniczną oraz wywiad pogłębiony CATI. Dane wykorzystane w artykule zostały zebrane przez autora. Badanie przeprowadzono na próbie 174 respondentów, a wywiad na próbie 23 respondentów. Badanie przeprowadzono w okresie od 10 stycznia 2021 r. do 7 stycznia 2023 r.

**Wyniki i wartość dodana:** Niniejsza praca jest pierwszym kompleksowym badaniem polskich start-upów skupiającym się na motywach, narzędziach, determinantach i możliwych etapach internacjonalizacji. Najczęstszymi motywami internacjonalizacji polskich startupów są motywy reaktywne. Przedsiębiorstwa wybierają eksport jako sposób na wejście na nowe rynki. Głównymi narzędziami wspierającymi internacjonalizację są profile w mediach społecznościowych prowadzone w języku obcym oraz sieć kontaktów złożona z osób z otoczenia przedsiębiorcy. Badania wykazały, że przedsiębiorstwa przechodzą określone etapy internacjonalizacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** start-upy, internacjonalizacja, zarządzanie, inwestycje zagraniczne, małe i średnie przedsiębiorstwa

## Introduction

The role of start-ups in the development of the economy is independently crucial. Start-ups are a group of small companies with big ideas. According to J. Wysocki and A. Kałowski, a start-up is an entrepreneurial venture that is in the phase of searching for and testing its business model and offered values on the market, most often financed from funds alternative to the banking sector due to difficulties in estimating the real risk (Wysocki, Kałowski 2017). Start-ups can do things that are not possible for other, often more experienced and larger companies. An important aspect raised in the discussion on the functioning of start-ups is their internationalization.

Despite the fact that start-ups operate in different industries, and their level of innovation or risk appetite is different, they have common features. The literature on the subject most often points to: orientation towards scalability, propensity to take risks, young age of the enterprise up to five years, or a special interest in innovations (European Startup Network 2023). The definition of a start-up does not include the international aspect, so these can be enterprises operating only on the local market. The first of the research objectives is to distinguish typical features of Polish enterprises that internationalize their activities, and to compare them with start-up enterprises that decide to develop locally.

Start-ups that implement innovative solutions have a special place on foreign markets, but at the same time they are burdened with a high risk of failure. Innovation based on new technologies makes crossing borders for business more and more accessible. The internationalization of start-ups is very important because it has a number of positive aspects for the home country. The most important of them include increasing GDP or promoting the native country as an innovative one (Szarek, Piecuch 2018).

Start-ups are a kind of negation of the existing models of internationalization, because they must be difficult to enter the external, young age and barriers of a formal or legislative nature (Burżacka 2017). It has been shown that start-ups, due to their characteristics, do not follow the paths outlined by ordinary models of internationalization. The motives behind entering new markets by Polish start-ups have not been sufficiently researched. Dynamic changes in the economy in the area of entrepreneurship make it necessary to update and verify additional knowledge.

Classical theories of internationalization assume resource-intensive stages: setting up commercial subsidiaries, manufacturing abroad, or exporting through intermediaries. Start-ups are by definition young enterprises with limited resources. Therefore, the question arises: What forms of foreign expansion do Polish start-ups choose? Another research question is related to this question: What methods and tools do Polish start-ups choose on their way to internationalization? Another important research question is: What are the motives for the internationalization of Polish start-ups? The last research question relevant to the article is: What are the stages of internationalization of Polish start-up company? The use of modern technologies means that physical presence on the foreign market is no longer required. We offer a range of solutions that eliminate obstacles to entering new markets. The existing literature on the subject indicates that the internationalization of start-ups is different than in classic enterprises, but there are no studies that would indicate the specific stages that a start-up company goes through on its way to internationalization.

The method of critical analysis of literature, survey and in-depth interview, which were prepared on the basis of literature analysis, was used to conduct the research.

## Literature review

The internationalization of enterprises has been studied in the literature since the 1970s (Johanson, Vahlne 1977). The rapid development of technology and progressive liberalization have resulted in significant changes in the development of enterprises. The availability of new tools enables new internationalization paths. For this reason, internationalization models are constantly changing and become

outdated quickly. Access to advanced technology and information transfer to the masses has resulted in an increase in the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in creating international markets. The first theories of internationalization made a clear division into small companies that competed on the local market and large companies that competed on international markets. Progressive globalization, which changed the competitive environment, has significantly leveled the chances of small enterprises. They have gained access to technological solutions that facilitate access to international markets. As a consequence, the area of competition between small and large companies has changed. Large companies have the largest budget for research and development, but it is small enterprises that can make a revolution on the market thanks to their innovation. Even companies that do not participate in internationalization have to compete on their local market with other international companies that operate in this market. This type of competition has forced small businesses to make significant changes.

Start-ups are less and less often manufacturing or commercial enterprises. More and more frequently they are companies dealing with new technologies. Therefore, the traditional stages of internationalization are no longer relevant. For this reason, the internationalization of software model was created. The concept is categorized into three routes of global expansion (global, cooperative, and organic) that stem from the company's age in conjunction with its level of international involvement (Äijö, Kuivalainen, Saarenketo, Lindqvist, Hanninen 2005). Subsequently, it is segmented into four phases of the international expansion journey (pre-start, start, growth and maturity/consolidation).

The other relevant model is tech start-up internationalisation model which aims to visualise the process of internationalization of modern tech and web-based companies (Koch 2017). This model consists of four stages. The first stage is the preparation phase. Internal factors in this phase are: availability of resources, nature of product or service, customisation of product, the founding team and a business model. External factors are: domestic and foreign market potential, third-party decision makers. The second phase is strategy development. The third phase is implementation on internal level. Factors influencing a company in this stage are an entry mode and company culture and communication. The last phase is implementation which is influenced by the external level by foreign business culture. This model is relevant when it comes to internationalization of web-based companies because it updates old theoretical models and adds more practical approach. The authors discovered that none of the interviewed representative start-ups had formulated a strategy or a roadmap before they started their internationalisation process, which is a contrast to recommendations from the literature.

Despite numerous research endeavors aimed at comprehending the mechanisms and reasons behind the global expansion of start-ups, a definitive explanation remains elusive. In 2009, a study was conducted among 47 Singaporean

startups, which aimed to investigate why companies decide to internationalize (Dana, Hamilton, Wick 2009). The outcomes of their investigations indicated that the majority of the examined entities ventured into the international arena due to their recognition of a prospect for growth within a novel market. Furthermore, the researchers also discovered that a notable portion of organizations embraced internationalization as a result of adverse conditions within their home country, such as the saturation of the domestic market and heightened local competition.

Numerous scholars highlight the significance of the domestic demand's magnitude as a pivotal determinant elucidating a company's early foray into international operations. Rennie, the originator of the concept of "born global" asserts that enterprises operating in smaller domestic markets tend to initiate and accelerate their internationalization efforts swiftly, driven by the advantages of economies of scale and the quest for profit (Rennie 1993). Born global companies do not consider foreign markets as only supporting their domestic activities. They consider the global market as appropriate for their operation. Consequently, these businesses stand out from their rivals by offering superior quality or additional value (Przybylska 2010).

The idea of born global is related to other similar concepts. The idea of "born regional" pertains to companies that start their operations with an international focus, yet, initially concentrate primarily on markets within their neighboring countries. Over time, some of these companies gradually expand their international endeavours (Melén Hånell, Nordman, Tolstoy 2019). It is worth emphasizing that even born global enterprises go through certain stages on the way to appearing on many international markets and need to take appropriate actions to achieve this (Ferguson, Henrekson, Johannesson 2019).

These forms of internationalization were examined in Polish start-ups by Maciejewski and Wach in 2019. The study was conducted on 355 companies that at least export to other countries (Maciejewski, Wach 2019). Findings of the studies show that companies that engage in foreign markets and operate within either formal or informal international networks are more likely to experience a faster process of international expansion. The presence of a conducive foreign environment and its utilization, which includes the process of internationalization, contributes as one of the elements leading to higher-than-average growth.

Similar results were shown by the study conducted among Italian SMEs. The researchers discovered that "international networking capabilities play a critical role in influencing the entrepreneurial venture's opportunity development processes, including internationalisation of operations" (Jafari Sadeghi, Dutta, Ferraris, Giudice 2020). It is worth mentioning that network approach is visible in updated Uppasala model of 2009 (Wach 2021). Hence, an internationalization model based on business networks could be particularly advantageous, namely when elucidating the process for international new ventures. Instead of concentrating solely on country-specific markets, the emphasis should be on fostering

connections with customers or supplier companies within the broader context of the international business landscape.

Networks are built by entrepreneurs themselves. Thus the role of entrepreneur in internationalization process is crucial. According to Oviatt and McDougall the process of internationalization can be understood not only by investigating processes inside the company but also by illustrating transnational entrepreneurs' unique positioning (Oviatt, McDougall 2005). Internationalization exploration includes comparing national systems, cultures and entrepreneurial behavior across national boundaries.

Another term which is relevant in case of internationalization of start-ups is institutional entrepreneurship. Institutional entrepreneurship centers on how an individual perceives and conceives the world, along with its inherent values and goals (Steinhäuser, Rocha 2022). This aspect holds significance, given that existing entrepreneurship studies have indicated that start-ups often expand their operations globally, primarily to explore novel prospects or in response to unfavorable conditions within their local surroundings. By comprehending the entrepreneur's worldview, it becomes feasible to grasp the reasons behind the organization's recognition of foreign opportunities or local market challenges. Additionally, institutional entrepreneurship seeks to elucidate the processes through which institutions come into being and undergo changes within the organization (Hinings, Gegenhuber, Greenwood 2018). This becomes pivotal in analyzing how entrepreneurs can effectively convey their concepts and persuade the entire organization to align with their objectives.

The decision about internationalization is affected by specific internal and external factors (Lindsay, Rod, Ashill 2007). In addition to these internal and external elements, it is also observed that both host and home institutions play a role in influencing the internationalization of an organization. The study emphasizes the correlation between the mentioned factors and institutions with the method of entry chosen by the organization.

The literature on the subject shows that internationalization is influenced by many factors, both internal and external. The most important stimuli influencing the decision on internationalization include:

- willingness to conquer new markets related to the weak domestic market;
- a strong network of contacts allows for faster internationalization;
- the person of the entrepreneur;
- their knowledge and connections have a significant impact on the company's presence on international markets.

The literature research conducted reveals a deficiency in appropriate internationalization frameworks for modern Polish startups. However, it suggests the potential value in identifying such a framework. As a result, the research will proceed to create such a model.



## Research methods

The method of questionnaire and in-depth CATI interview (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) was used to carry out the research. The survey was conducted over the phone, online and on paper. Before formulating the final questions for the survey and the interview, a trial study was conducted on five respondents. The questions that were included in both the interview and the survey were prepared on the basis of literature analysis. The interview consisted of 10 questions, and the survey consisted of 14 questions, which included additional sub-questions. Most of the questions were single choice questions. Responses to the interviews were coded. The average time to complete the questionnaire was 32 minutes, and the interview time ranged from 20 minutes to 90 minutes. The interview had a semi-structured form, which means that there were general questions, but the respondents were free to express themselves. The survey was conducted on a sample of 174 respondents, and the interview on a sample of 23 respondents. The study was conducted in the period from January 10, 2021 to January 7, 2023. The study used purposeful stratified selection according to the following criteria:

- 1) the sample includes only start-ups which are consistent with the start-up definition;
- 2) the sample includes Polish companies which were present in Crunchbase start-up database;
- 3) the sample includes only internationalized firms (at least exporters).

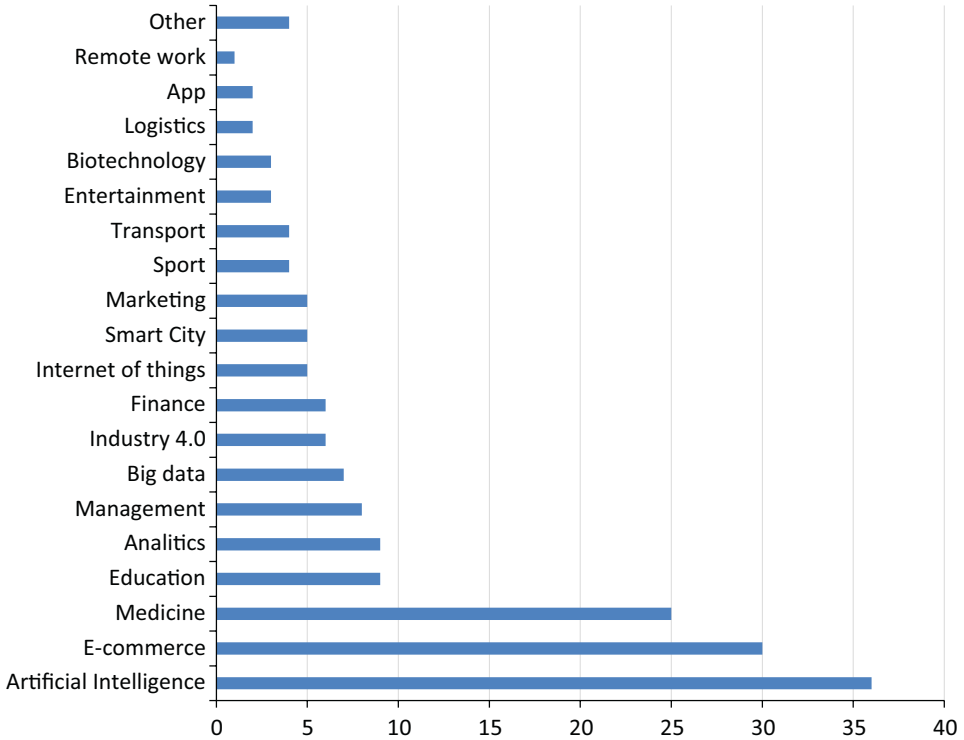
From the 1233 selected firms, the sampled part of population consisted of 728 firms. Final research sample showed a 23.9% response rate in the survey and 31% response rate when it comes to interviews.

The characteristics of the respondents in this publication will be presented in the form of characteristics of the average company participating in the study. The average respondent's enterprise was 2–3 years old and employed up to five people, so it had the status of a micro enterprise. The equity of enterprises was usually €10,000–50,000. Enterprises operated in various fields. The keywords that most often described the activities of entrepreneurs were artificial intelligence, e-commerce and medicine.

Due to the potentially sensitive data that could be revealed by the study, it was decided to conduct a nameless (anonymous) survey. Anonymous surveys are more popular because respondents are not afraid to reveal their honest answers to the questions asked and it is a big advantage of conducted study. However, the anonymity of the answers does not allow for formulating a case study on the example of specific enterprises. Another advantage is the high response rate in the case of interviews. The disadvantage is the low response rate in interviews.



**Figure 1.** Industries in which the surveyed start-ups operate



Source: own elaboration on the basis of the study.

The study was empirical in nature, so its limitations are related to the fact that the researcher did not have measurable data and based on answers provided by employees or business owners who have individual perceptions.

The study was conducted in Poland, only among Polish companies, so it is not possible to generalize the results to the whole world. The sample is not representative.

## Results

The first section of interview and questionnaire was devoted to motives of internationalization. Internationalization motives were classified into proactive and reactive ones based on the Czinkota model. Each company could indicate only one main motive for internationalization, the most important for a given entity. The results show that the vast majority of respondents (81%) choose foreign markets because of reactive motives (Czinkota 2004). More than a half of respondents (56%)

indicate that Polish market is too small and saturated. Respondents pointed to the size of foreign markets, which allows for increased sales of products or services. Another motive for internationalization was entering new markets due to competitive pressure on the domestic market. Respondents claim that it is easier to enter a completely new market than to fight the competition. An interesting phenomenon that was raised by respondents, especially in interviews, was the creation of international communities that have common features despite completely different nationalities. Examples of such communities include online forums, app participants, and members of social media groups. According to respondents, these communities may be characterized by a huge diversity of members' origins, but they have unique behaviors and rules visible to a given community, which reduces the psychological distance. One of the motives for entering new foreign markets were problems related to the Polish tax law. The topic of unclear tax regulations and complicated interpretation of the law by tax offices came up in the interviews. Respondents indicated that they do not always know how to tax a given service in Poland, while abroad there are proven tax solutions and the uncertainty of running a business is lower. The study also highlighted one of the most important advantages of offering services or products in a digital form. This form is often used in start-ups due to the possibility of quick scalability compared to more traditional products that exist in a material form in a physical space. The cost of distributing and offering such products or services abroad is low. In practice, this means that a given application or website is translated into another language and minimal adjustments are made to the foreign market.

A definite minority of respondents pointed to proactive motives (17%).

The second section of the questionnaire and interview was dedicated to tools and methods of internationalization. The most popular method of internationalization turns out to be creating social media on profiles in a foreign language (35% of respondents). Respondents point out that this method is cheap and doesn't require any IT skills. Another important tool in the internationalization of start-ups, according to the respondents, is the use of a network of connections built by contacts, friends or family (20%). The factors that turned out to be less important in the internationalization process included: preparing professional multi-language website (13%), hiring foreign experts (6%), participating in international exhibitions, fairs, meetings (4%).

**Table 1.** Motives of internationalization

Determinants of internationalization	Number of responses from questionnaire	Number of responses from interview	Selected quotes from the interview
Domestic market: small or saturated	99	7	<i>Polish market is quite small and saturates very fast. In the USA the market is unimaginably bigger.</i>
Competitive pressure	23	5	<i>We prefer to find a new market than to compete with “copycats”.</i>
Proximity in international distance	20	4	<i>My company created a unique society which is present all over the world, especially in Asia.</i>
Tax benefits	19	4	<i>Tax law in Poland is unclear. We prefer not to take risks.</i>
Economics of scale	11	2	<i>We offer digital products that can be offered locally and globally at a similar cost of distribution.</i>
Other	2	1	<i>Running an international company means frequent opportunities to travel.</i>
In total	174	23	

Source: own elaboration on the basis of the study.

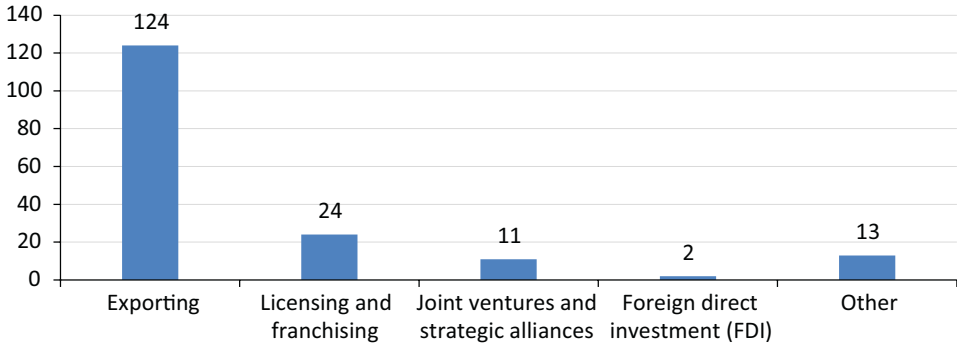
**Figure 2.** Tools of internationalization



Source: own elaboration on the basis of the study.

The vast majority of respondents indicate that export is their most important method of internationalization (71%). Licensing and franchising came in the second place (24%). Joint ventures and strategic alliances turned out to be less popular (6%). The fewest respondents chose foreign direct investment as a method of internationalization (1%). A few respondents also condemned other methods of internationalization (7%).

**Figure 3.** Methods of internationalization



Source: own elaboration on the basis of the study.

The respondents of the interview were asked to justify the choice of methods of internationalization of their enterprises. According to them, the advantages of exporting are considered to be a quick start time for exporting to foreign markets and the ability to start operations quickly. In the case of licensing and franchising, respondents also pointed to the speed of commencement of activities and the lack of required knowledge. Respondents justified the choice of joint ventures and strategic alliances due to financial benefits and access to the partner’s technology. The leitmotif of the choice of foreign direct investment was the speed of starting a foreign activity. Other respondents indicated that they would like to enter foreign markets in this way, but it is associated with significant costs.

**Table 2.** Justification for the choice of internationalization methods

Methods of internationalization	Selected justification for the choice
Exporting	<i>It's easy to start and doesn't require any budget.</i>
Licensing and franchising	<i>By choosing franchising, you can start working quickly without any specialist knowledge.</i>
Joint ventures and strategic alliances	<i>It is financially viable and gives access to the partner's technology.</i>
Foreign direct investment (FDI)	<i>Brownfield enabled my company to enter the German market in a short time.</i>
Other	<i>My company only has occasional international activities, so our activities cover a little bit of everything.</i>

Source: own elaboration on the basis of the study.

## Discussion

Each company is unique and behaves differently on its way to internationalization. The answers from the interviews were sorted by coding to create an approximate picture of how Polish start-ups are progressing on their way to internationalization, broken down into stages.

In the first stage, companies look for information on possible directions of internationalization. It is especially important for born global companies. Born global firms do not limit themselves to certain geographical areas or cultural specifications, as they act globally from the moment of their emergence (Pawęta, Chung-Yu 2015). Social media and industry forums are used for this purpose because their reach is global. Start-ups often operate in niche sectors with a specific culture. According to the respondents, it includes slang, graphic elements, or specific ways of behaving in a given community.

In the second stage, the start-up tries to appear on the Internet on a larger scale, but without a significant budget. It has already made itself known in the industry via industry forums in the previous phase and is now trying to establish itself outside the industry. Social media prove to be helpful, as they do not require specialist knowledge and help to reach both individual and business customers. Respondents indicate that popular social profiles add credibility.

**Table 3.** Stages of internationalization, accompanying activities and tools

	Stage	Activities	Tools
1	Searching for information	Recognizing opportunities and threats on the available communication channels, getting to know the customs in a given field	Social media, Internet forums, industry websites activity
2	Basic online presence	Creating company's own social media informing about the company and taking budgetary marketing activities	Social media
3	Organized activities on the international market	Expenditures on international activities are increasing. The importance of human resources acquired through the network of contacts is increasing	Participating in international exhibitions, fairs, meetings, entering new markets with the help of contacts, friends or family
4	Sustained presence abroad	The company has an established position and is confident of its future abroad. Employment is increasing and there are needs for professional marketing and communication channels	Hiring foreign experts, preparing professional multi-language website

Source: own elaboration on the basis of the study.

In the third stage, the company goes beyond online activities and participates in live events. At this stage, it is important to build a new network of contacts, as well as to use existing connections. This is possible thanks to the increased budget for marketing activities and travel. The share of foreign sales is significant in the whole sale at this stage.

At the last stage of internationalization, the company already has a budget that allows it to employ international specialists. Social media profiles are only a link to professional websites that operate in many languages and have advanced features. The company regularly sells its products or services abroad, often forming joint ventures or having its own subsidiaries abroad.

The conducted study shows compliance with the network theory (Oviatt, McDougall 2005). Entrepreneurs seek resources from friends and family first, and then hire experts. The respondents of the survey indicated the network of contacts as the second most important tool supporting the process of internationalization. The confirmation of the significance of the network in the process of internationalization in Polish start-ups can be found in research conducted on a sample of 355 respondents. It has been shown that there is a statistically significant relationship between the functioning of companies on the network and the speed of their internationalization (Daszkiewicz 2016).

The literature on the subject indicates that Polish enterprises develop in accordance with theories of internationalization, however, in the case of many of them, internationalization proceeds faster than it would result from theoretical assumptions (Jarosiński 2013). It is indicated that the acceleration of internationalization processes is largely influenced by external factors, such as Poland's accession to the EU and competitive pressure exerted by globally operating corporations.

Most of the analyzed publications on the internationalization of Polish enterprises indicate that the most frequently used model of internationalization is export (Jarosiński 2013). Publications suggest that Polish startups are at an early stage of international expansion, which means that they strive to reduce the risk associated with internationalization by limiting themselves to low-capital-intensive forms of foreign expansion.

## Conclusions

In the light of the conducted research, it is visible that Polish start-ups choose export as a method of internationalization of the company (71% of respondents). Other forms of internationalization, such as licensing and franchising, joint ventures and strategic alliances or foreign direct investment, turned out to be much less used (in total 29% of respondents).

The most common motives for the internationalization of Polish start-ups are reactive motives. Companies decide to enter foreign markets due to the small and saturated domestic market, competitive pressure and proximity in international distance.

Polish start-ups have two main tools that support the internationalization process. The most important are social media profiles run in a foreign language. The second most important tool is your network of friends and family.

The stages of internationalization are unique for each company. By grouping the most popular answers, it was possible to distinguish approximate stages of internationalization of Polish start-ups. They are as follows:

- 1) searching for information;
- 2) basic online presence;
- 3) organized activities on the international market;
- 4) sustained presence abroad.

The main limitation of the conducted research was the lack of representativeness of the research sample. Therefore, the research results cannot be generalized to other enterprises in Poland.

The literature on the subject of internationalization needs to be updated frequently as new tools for entrepreneurs affect the speed and stages of internationalization. Future research may explore internationalization tools in more detail.

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