Barriers to SME Internationalisation: A case of India

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Abstract

In an ever changing global business environment, internationalisation has emerged as an integral part of small business's strategy. Many small organisations have internationalised or are in the process of doing it. However, in the context of emerging economies, the process is not always as smooth as is expected and is affected by factors, often referred to as barriers. The objective, therefore, of this paper is to develop the relationships among the identified internationalisation barriers and to assess if these barriers can better explain the SMEs decision to internationalise or not. Further, this paper is also helpful in understanding the mutual influences of these barriers on the overall internationalisation process. Interpretive Structural Modelling methodology is used to understand the relationship between these barriers. The driving and dependence power of these barriers is also examined. This paper is first of its kind using ISM to highlight the relationship between the internationalisation barriers. The paper concludes with a discussion about the implications for the SMEs.

Keywords: *Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); internationalisation; barriers*

Introduction

Study of the internationalisation of small firms has become one of the major attractions among the researchers and practitioners, due to the increase in the globalisation in the past few decades. Firms, irrespective of their size, have increasingly expanded beyond borders to improve their competitiveness (Young et al., 1989). Internationalisation in general and exporting in particular; the first stage of internationalisation (Jones, 2001), can enhance a firm's capability, and make it much more flexible for taking business risks (Young et al., 1989). Also, operating in the foreign markets would allow the firms to become stronger players in their home market (Lages and Montgomery, 2004). Ironically, that also means that smaller firms would have to compete with increasing number of new players popping across the globe continuously, and overcome the hurdles that are constantly hindering their path to internationalise.

SMEs are of great importance to the expansion of export earnings in emerging economies. However, a number of factors affect the SMEs to participate in the global affairs. The conditions in the home and the potential market country, the skill-set and the competencies of the employees, and the owner/manager's orientation to exports (Kazem and Van der Heijden, 2006) greatly influence the success of SMEs in the foreign markets. Many scholars have suggested time and again (e.g. Cateora and Graham, 2007) that dramatic changes are taking place globally, like, optimisation of technologies, removal of trade barriers, formation of multinational market regions and free trade areas, and the regional economic blocks among others. However, smaller firms in the emerging economies have not been able to

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harness the true potential of these transformations. They have failed to overcome the barriers that make their path to internationalisation difficult (Knight, 2000; Julien and Ramangalahy, 2003). Also, Carrier (1999) suggested that many of these firms are sceptical about their ability to succeed internationally.

The intent of this paper, therefore, is to investigate the barriers using Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) affecting the internationalisation strategies of small firms especially from the context of emerging economies or the developing countries, such as India, for enhancing their overall performance. ISM is an interactive learning tool that can be used for identifying relationship among specific items which define a problem or an issue (Sage, 1977; Warfield, 2005). The opinions from the group of experts are used in developing the relationship matrix, which is being later used for the development of the ISM model. The barriers have been identified theoretically from the works of the scholars who have explored the barriers to SME internationalisation in the past and the discussion from the experts (see Table 1). Different scholars have referred to different terminologies to address these barriers; however, for this study the barriers are being represented by the generic themes.

In the next sections the theoretical background is presented, followed by a discussion of ISM methodology, development of the model and the analysis of the barriers. The paper concludes with the discussion of this study followed by the concluding remarks.

Theoretical Background

Exporting is considered to be one of the widely practiced entry mode strategy for the SMEs because it requires low degree of risk, less amount of resources and allows the firms to expand and compete in the new and foreign markets. Many SMEs, however, are still sceptical of exporting because they believe that their lack of resources and expertise are not suited to undertake such a task (Young et al. 1989; Carrier, 1999). Previous studies have identified that exporting tends to be one of the most commonly used methods in the early stages of firms' internationalisation strategies (Burgel and Murray, 2000; Jones, 2001). Therefore, in order to effectively motivate firms, particularly SMEs, to enter foreign markets, it is necessary not only to understand the factors stimulating SMEs to export (Leonidou 2004) but also the barriers they face to successfully enter and operate sustainably and efficiently in foreign markets (Morgan and Katsikeas 1998; Leonidou 2004).

Export barriers are all those constraints that hinder a firm's ability to initiate, develop, or sustain operations in the overseas markets (Leonidou, 2004). Barriers, which impede an organisation to start, internationalising their processes, have been identified by various authors who have researched and written directly about this issue (e.g. Keng and Jiuan, 1989; Hamill and Gregory, 1997; Ibeh and Young 2001; Suarez-Ortega 2003; Leonidou, 2004; Hessels, Overweel and Prince, 2005; Vivekanandan and Rajendran, 2006; Tesfom and Lutz, 2006; Braaksma and Hessels, 2007; Suh et al., 2008; Hessels and Tiggeloove, 2009 etc.). In addition, several firm-level surveys investigating barriers to SME internationalisation have been undertaken by the organisations in OECD, APEC and other economies (OECD, 2009).

In the emerging economies, small firms continue to face several problems as they try to increase their market share, improve their overall performance or develop operations. Hence, for these firms, barriers to internationalisation have an inhibitive effect (Morgan, 1997) since they severely limit the strategic choices available to a particular firm. Not only do these recurring obstacles adversely affect performance, they often influence the owners or the managers to re evaluate their overall decision to internationalise (Benito and Welch, 1997; Morgan and Katsikeas, 1998). Crick et al. (1998) suggest that export barriers are a reason that hinder firm's capability to enter a potential market for exports and that is why some firms may discontinue exporting or not internationalise to begin with.

Previous researchers have investigated and reported the extent and the importance of the export barriers from the point of view of problems faced by the exporters; comparison between exporting and non-exporting firms and the firms that are de-internationalising (Rabino, 1980; Kedia and Chhokar, 1986; Burton and Schlegelmilch, 1987; Sharkey et al., 1989; Katsikeas and Morgan, 1994; Shoham and Albaum, 1995; Leonidou, 1995b; Dean, Gan and Menguc, 2000; Da Silva and Da Rocha, 2001; Leonidou, 2004; Pinho and Martins, 2010 etc.). And, most notably a comprehensive review of relevant empirical studies by Leonidou (1995a). However, scholars have recognised that there is still a dearth of studies, which have explored the main export related problems of SMEs in the emerging economies and the developing countries, where the SMEs are the main drivers of the economy.

In order to ensure a better understanding of barriers faced by the SMEs in the emerging economies, this study focus on a number of home market barriers, which might act as major drivers to improve the overall internationalisation process. Hence, based on the discussion with the experts and the review of the relevant literature, this study identifies nine barriers related to home market internationalisation barriers (see Table 1). The Table 1 outlines the top barriers identified and the authors involved.

Table 1: Internationalisation Barriers

Barrier Number	Barrier Description	Author (s)
1	Manager's Orientation	Allison, 1971; Ibeh & Young, 2001
2	Resource Constraints	Smyth & Ibbotson, 2001
3	Operational and Organisational Problems	Hamill & Gregory, 1997
4	Insufficient knowledge and skills	Hessels, Overweel & Prince, 2005; Vivekanandan & Rajendran, 2006; Suh et al., 2008
5	Government Policies	Stansfield & Grant, 2003; OECD, 2005
6	Infrastructure	Leonidou, 1995; OECD, 2005
7	Intense Competition	Leonidou, 1995
8	Lack of network to enter potential market	Lindqvist, 1991; Coviello & Munro, 1997; Kneller & Pisu, 2007
9	Payment and currency risks	Braaksma & Hessels, 2007

ISM Methodology and the Model Development

ISM is an advanced interactive planning methodology that allows developing a structure that helps to impose order and direction on the complexity of relationships among elements in a set (Sage, 1997). The structure is obtained by answering questions. The elements to be structured (barriers etc.) are defined by the experts at the beginning of the ISM session. The experts also establish a contextual relationship between elements (e.g. aggravates, enhances etc.) with respect to which pairs of elements would be examined. The structural self-interaction matrix is then developed from this information (Ricardo et. al, 2005).The matrix is then checked by developing a reachability matrix for transitivity; a basic assumption in ISM which states that if element A is related to B, and B to C, then A is related to C. The reachability matrix is then partitioned in different levels. Based on the relationship a directed graph is drawn and the transitive links are removed. The resultant graph is then converted to an ISM model by replacing element nodes with the statements, and the model is reviewed for conceptual inconsistencies and the necessary modifications are made accordingly. ISM methodology can be judiciously applied for getting better insight into the system under consideration. The methodology is interpretive since the judgement of the group decides whether and how the variables are related (Ravi & Ravishankar, 2005).

Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM)

Group of experts, from the industry and the academics were consulted in identifying the nature of contextual relationships among the barriers (see Table 1). ISM methodology suggests the use of expert opinions based on various techniques, for example, brainstorming etc. in developing the contextual relationship between the elements (Ravi & Ravishankar, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the expert group consisted of owners/ managers of 50 SMEs from the five clusters so chosen for this study and researchers and scholars working in this field from the prominent Business schools in India. Based on their inputs and applying the standard rules, the SSIM is developed as shown in Table 2. For analysing the barriers in developing SSIM, the following four symbols have been used.

V - Will help achieve
A - Will be achieved by
X - Help achieve each other
O - Unrelated

Table 2: Structural Self-Interaction Matrix

Barrier Number	Barrier Description	Barrier Number							
		9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2
1	Manager's Orientation	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
2	Resource Constraints	V	V	V	V	V	A	A	
3	Operational and Organisational Problems	V	V	V	V	V	X		
4	Insufficient knowledge and skills	V	V	V	V	V			
5	Government Policies	V	V	V	V				
6	Infrastructure	V	V	V					
7	Intense Competition	O	V						
8	Lack of network to enter potential market	A							
9	Payment and currency risks	X							

Reachability Matrix

As per the ISM methodology and the standard rules used therein; the SSIM is converted into binary matrix, called the reachability matrix (see Table 3), by substituting V, A, X and O by binary codes 1 and 0 as per given case. Since, there is no transitivity in this case; hence this matrix will be used for further calculations. The Table 3, also shows the driving and dependence power of each barrier. The driving power of each barrier is the total number of barriers (including itself), which it may help achieve. Dependence is the total number of barriers (including itself), which may help in achieving it.

Table 3: Initial Reachability Matrix

Barrier Number	Barrier Description	Barrier Number									Driving Power
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	Manager's Orientation	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9
2	Internal Resource Constraints	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	6
3	Operational and Organisational Problems	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
4	Insufficient knowledge and skills	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
5	Government Policies	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	5
6	Infrastructure	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4
7	Intense Competition	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
8	Lack of network to enter potential market	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
9	Payment and currency risks	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
	Dependence Power	1	4	3	3	5	6	7	9	7	

Level Partitions and Level of Barriers

From the reachability matrix, the reachability and antecedent set for each barrier is obtained (Warfield, 1974). The reachability set consists of the element itself and the other elements which it may help achieve; where as the antecedent set consists of the element itself and the other elements which may help in achieving it. Thereafter, the intersection of these sets is derived for all the barriers. The barriers for which the reachability and the intersection sets are the same occupy the top level of the ISM hierarchy. The top level element of the hierarchy would not help achieve any other element above its own level. Once the top level element is identified, it is separated from the other elements. Then the same process is repeated to find out the elements in the next level. This process is continued until the level of each element is found. These levels consequently help in building the directed graph and the final model. On the basis of the iterations, a revised reachability matrix is developed along with all the levels, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Revised Reachability Matrix

Barrier Number	Barrier Description	Barrier Number									Driving Power	Rank
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		
1	Manager's Orientation	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9	**VII**
2	Internal Resource Constraints	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	6	**V**
3	Operational and Organisational Problems	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8	**VI**
4	Insufficient knowledge and skills	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8	**VI**
5	Government Policies	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	5	**IV**
6	Infrastructure	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4	**III**
7	Intense Competition	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	**II**
8	Lack of network to enter potential market	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	**I**
9	Payment and currency risks	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	**II**
	Dependence Power	1	4	3	3	5	6	7	9	7		

Classification of Barriers

Based on the driving and the dependence power, the barriers have been classified into four categories; viz: Autonomous, Dependence, Linkage and Independent (Mandal & Deshmukh, 1994). These four categories are represented in the four quadrants that are obtained by drawing average driver and the dependence line, as shown in Figure 1. The first quadrant shows the first cluster of the barriers, these are autonomous barriers with weak driver and dependence power. The second quadrant shows the second cluster of barriers, these are dependent variables. These barriers have weak driving power but strong dependence. The third quadrant represents the linkage variables, with strong driver and dependence power. And, quadrant four shows the fourth cluster of barriers known as independent variables. These barriers have strong driving power but weak dependence. Figure 1 shows the clustering of barriers based on MIC-MAC analysis. The analysis suggests that 'manager's orientation', 'operational and organisational problems', 'insufficient knowledge and skills', and 'internal resource constraints' are the independent barriers with high driver power; whereas, 'government policies', 'infrastructure', 'intense competition', 'payment and currency risks', and 'lack of network to enter a potential market' are the dependent barriers with high dependence power.

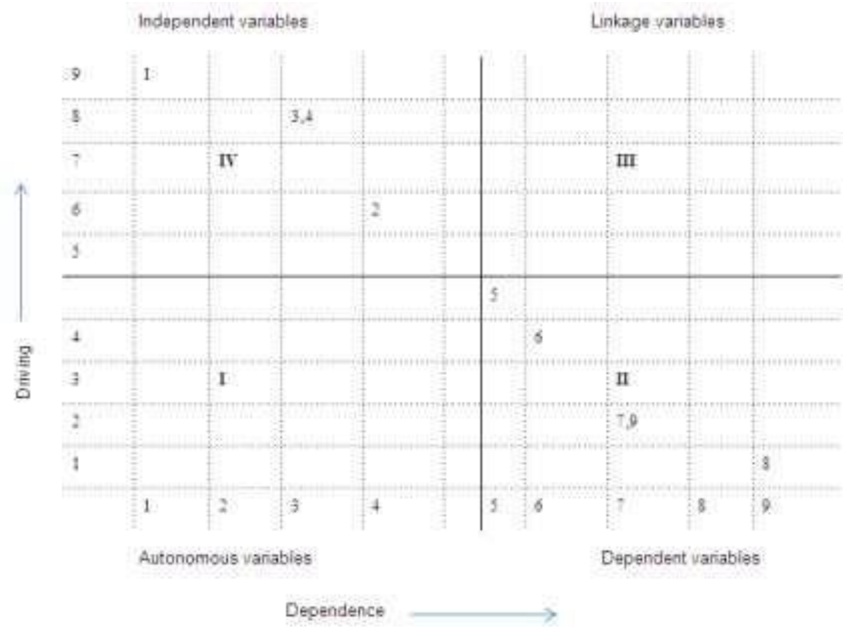

Fig. 1 Modelling of Barriers

Formation of ISM Model

Based on the revised reachability matrix, the ISM is developed, as shown in Figure 2.

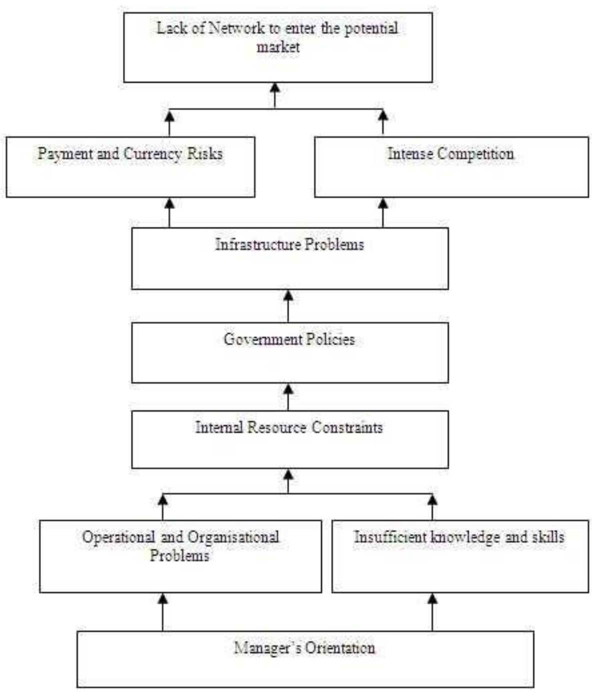

Fig. 2 The ISM Model

Discussion

Based on the review of the relevant literature and the brainstorming sessions with the experts of the field, nine home market barriers related to internationalisation in the context of emerging economies are identified. Interactions, suggestions and recommendations of the experts helped in developing ISM for these barriers. The ISM model illustrates that manager's orientation toward the barriers to export is a critical deciding factor in their willingness of the internationalisation endeavours. Consequently, insufficient knowledge and the skills, operational and organisational problems including paperwork, restricted experience of international activities etc. (Hamill & Gregory, 1997), followed by the internal resource constraints i.e. resources needed in order for the firm to be able to commence export activity (Suarez-Ortega, 2003) significantly hamper the export activity of a firm. The model also suggest that lack of favourable government policies, lack of infrastructure, for example, poor transport facilities etc. (Leonidou, 1995a), intense competition, payment and currency risks and the lack of network to enter a potential market have remained critical constraints to SME internationalisation. These findings are very important for the personnel involved with the smaller firms, be it the owners/managers, industry professionals, policy and decision makers and researchers to help build a competent SME fit for internationalisation. This study gives an insight into the home market barriers to internationalisation for emerging economies and hierarchy of relationship among them. The developed ISM reflects upon the barriers that are essentially endogenous as they showcase the limitations of a small firm in regard to the key resources and capabilities that they need to internationalise, and hence need to be addressed promptly to motivate smaller firms to enter the foreign markets.

Concluding Remarks

Small firms in the emerging economies and the developing countries have difficulty competing successfully in the international environment. This study has highlighted that small businesses' decision to enter a foreign market is not a smooth ride and is more often riddled with barriers. This is an issue of great significance in the internationalisation process, since the ways these barriers are perceived by the SMEs often determine the course of their international business strategies. The ISM model indicates that the manager's (or owner's) orientation to internationalisation has a huge influence on a firm's decision to indulge in the international activities. The success of the SMEs very much depend on its management's orientation toward international activities, favourable home market conditions, and established networks in the foreign markets. Different implications can be derived from this study; with regard to the policy makers, certain policy measures should be taken into account, for example, creating the right framework conditions and implementing initiatives specifically keeping in mind the SMEs.

This research can be further enhanced by including studies by clustering barriers in more levels and establishing a level of hierarchy of relationship among them. Model specific to a particular industry can also be developed and validated. ISM can be linked with other modelling approaches and can be further used to validate the model. Effective use of this model will lead to breakthrough strategies of internationalisation, which can facilitate the SMEs in better managing their resources and capabilities to streamline their international activities.

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