



# A bibliometric analysis of born global firms

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to review the scientific research on born global firms' phenomena to date. Based on a bibliometric analysis of 453 scientific papers on born global firms from the Thomson Reuters's Web of Science™ Core Collection database for the period 1994–2016, the authors discuss the results from the following perspectives: *general results, number of publications per year, the articles that other authors cite most, most eminent authors, journals with the highest citation per article, institutions with the highest citation per document, and countries with the highest productivity*. This analysis provides networks of co-cited references, journals, and first authors, and their respective clusters, revealing their rankings in terms of contributions to the born global firms' literature. The results of the analysis can be used to enhance our understanding of born global firms' research and support further research in this area.

## 1. Introduction

Recognition of born global firms (BGs) as important and distinctive organizations across the global economy has been growing in recent years (Autio, Sapienza, & Almeida, 2000; Cavusgil & Knight, 2009; Dow, 2017; Knight & Cavusgil, 1996; McDougall & Oviatt, 2000; McDougall, Shane, & Oviatt, 1994; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005a). BGs are typically young, entrepreneurial, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) characterized by limited resources. Despite this constraint, they undertake international business from an early stage in their development (Cavusgil & Knight, 2009; Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Weerawardena, Mort, Liesch, & Knight, 2007). The emergence of BGs contributes to national economic development, and they often act as key players in ecosystems that support large multinational enterprises (Zander, McDougall-Covin, & Rose, 2015), foster innovation and technology (Baum, Schwens, & Kabst, 2011), support industrial growth (Cannone & Ughetto, 2014), have significantly higher job growth rates (Choquette, Rask, Sala, & Schröder, 2017) and play a fundamental role in the economic development of emerging countries (Borini, Cahen, & Oliveira Jr., 2017; Lamotte & Colovic, 2015). The development of BGs challenges traditional stage theory (e.g., Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 1990), changing the way that the role of SMEs in the global market is recognized (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005a).

Many excellent theoretical surveys focusing on international entrepreneurship including BGs have been published (e.g., Aspelund, Madsen, & Moen, 2007; De Clercq, Sapienza, Yavuz, & Zhou, 2012; Jones, Coviello, & Tang, 2011; Keupp & Gassmann, 2009; Knight & Liesch, 2016; Laufs & Schwens, 2014; Rialp, Rialp, & Knight, 2005;

Zander et al., 2015). However, there is a lack of quantitative, bibliometrically based surveys exclusively focused on BGs. Existing surveys offer an in-depth perspective, although they are subjected to bias by the researchers and often lack a comprehensive picture based on systematic, chronological, and synthesizing studies (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003).

Notwithstanding the fragmentation of the theories and concepts surrounding BGs, this study investigates and demonstrates how research on BGs develops over time. Further, it scrutinizes the most frequently occurring themes in the literature to identify potential weaknesses and gaps in scientific research into the subject.

The research includes a bibliometric analysis based on 453 pieces of research on BGs published from 1994 to the end of 2016, retrieved from the Web of Science™ (WoS) Core Collection (CC). The WoS CC is composed of six databases provided by Thomson Reuters with a view to getting a better overall picture of BGs research, and it includes: Science Citation Index Expanded (1970–present), Social Sciences Citation Index (1970–present), Arts & Humanities Citation Index (1975–present), Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Science (1990–present), Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Social Science & Humanities (1990–present), and Emerging Sources Citation Index (2015–present). The study period begins in 1994 because the earliest article on BGs in the WoS dates from the same year.

The results include a general perspective, number of publications per year, articles most cited by other authors, most eminent authors, journals with the highest citation per article, institutions with the highest citation per document, and countries with the highest productivity. This analysis provides networks of co-cited references,

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journals, and first authors, and their respective clusters, revealing their rankings regarding contributions to the BGs literature.

In the following section, a brief review of the BGs literature is presented, followed by a description of the study method and a brief overview of the bibliometric methods. Next, results of the bibliometric analysis are presented. The paper ends with the conclusions, limitations, and main implications of this research.

## 2. Literature review

The literature on BGs includes many different definitions of the same phenomenon. The term ‘Born Globals’ was introduced in a study of exporting firms in Australia that uncovered a surprisingly large number of firms undertaking economic cross-border transactions either at or near their inception (McKinsey & Company, 1993; Rennie, 1993). In other studies (Knight & Cavusgil, 1996), BGs were exemplified as being either “small, [usually] technology-oriented companies that operate in international markets from the earliest days of their establishment” or firms that internationalize early and rapidly (Madsen & Servais, 1997). Oviatt and McDougall (1994) conceptualized ‘International New Ventures’ (INVs) phenomenon as “a business organization that, from inception, seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and the sale of outputs in multiple countries”. Contrary to the Knight and Cavusgil’s (2004) definition, which emphasizes BGs’ young age and the firm as the unit of analysis and early internationalization, Oviatt and McDougall’s (1994) definition is much wider and includes various ventures at different stages of their development.

Other notions define ‘Start-ups’ as firms that, from their inception, engage in international business (McDougall, 1989). ‘Global Start-ups’ are described as INVs that coordinate many organizational activities across many countries (Jolly, Alahuhta, & Jeannot, 1992; Mamis, 1989; Oviatt, McDougall, & Loper, 1995; Tanev, 2017). ‘Instant Internationals’ refers to small technology firms achieving global diversity in the formative stages of their business development (Hordes, Clancy, & Baddaley, 1995; Preece, Miles, & Baetz, 1999). ‘Instant Exporters’ is used to convey unplanned rapid internationalization (McAuley, 1999). ‘Borderless Firms’ are defined either as the result of geographically dispersed resources and capabilities (da Rocha, Simões, de Mello, & Carneiro, 2017) or simply as ‘International Ventures’—firms that carried out activities at dedicated sites abroad and started activities within 1 year after founding (Kuemmerle, 2002). Rialp et al. (2005) connected the Knight and Cavusgil (1996) definition with the McDougall et al. (1994) definition and referred to such businesses collectively as ‘early internationalizing firms’. One of the most relevant definitions is the term ‘Born Global’ to mean business organizations which, either from or near their founding, seek sustainable international business performance from the application of knowledge-based resources to the sale of outputs in multiple countries (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004). For brevity’s sake, the most commonly used labels of INVs and BGs will be interchangeably used throughout this research.

It is worth noting that very different definitions have been used to distinguish between BGs and other internationalizers (Rasmussen & Madsen, 2002). In fact, researchers have pointed to several distinct variables, including the time lag between the foundation of a firm and its export debut (Jones & Coviello, 2005); the percentage of sales that a firm exports, foreign market scope, and scale of internationalization (Kuivalainen, Sundqvist, & Servais, 2007); home market potential, product, and export market receptivity (Gabrielsson, Kirpalani, Dimitratos, Solberg, & Zucchella, 2008); the speed of a firm’s subsequent international growth and development (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005a); and export intensity achieved by the firm at a certain point in time (Autio et al., 2000). However, the literature has emanated from different countries and settings, leading to different definitions and conclusions (Gabrielsson et al., 2008). Rennie (1993) and McKinsey and Company (1993) define BGs as firms that are able to export as much as

75% of their sales as little as two years after inception. On the other hand, Knight and Cavusgil (1996) find that BGs export at least 25% of their production within a few years of their formation. Zahra, Ireland, and Hitt (2000) suggest that BGs export only 5% of their sales and are not more than six years old. Other studies argue an average export of 70% within the first 3 years of operation (Chetty & Campbell-Hunt, 2004; Moen & Servais, 2002). Madsen, Rasmussen, and Servais (2000) define BGs as firms having a high share of foreign sales (almost 70%). Moen (2002) defines BGs as firms “having export sales higher than 25% and an establishment date post 1990”. A widely accepted definition proposed by Knight and Cavusgil (2004) suggests that BGs export at least 25% of their sales within 3 years from inception.

However, there are different time frames used in the literature, spanning from 2 to 15 years. Some scholars have used a 6-year threshold to identify ‘new firms’ (McDougall, Oviatt, & Shrader, 2003; Zahra et al., 2000). Kuivalainen et al. (2007) indicate different types of BGs, including firms that either can export only to close markets or are genuine BGs operating in distant markets and multiple regions.

A notable feature of the literature on BGs is that the empirical research has tended to be far more abundant than have the efforts to develop theories (Rialp et al., 2005). Furthermore, theories on BGs remain underdeveloped and fragmented (De Clercq et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2011), with a few exceptions (Coombs, Sadrieh, & Annavarjula, 2009).

Scholars apply many theories to different aspects of BGs (McDougall et al., 1994). Such theories include monopolistic advantage theory (Hymer, 1976), product cycle theory (Vernon, 1966), stage theory of internationalization (Bilkey & Tesar, 1977), oligopolistic reaction theory (Knickerbocker, 1973) and internalization theory (Buckley & Casson, 1976), network theory (Granovetter, 1973, 1985), and effectuation theory (Sarasvathy, 2001).

However, most of the theories lack coherence and legibility. Moreover, studies typically have not been built on one another (e.g., Jones & Dimitratos, 2004; Laufs & Schwens, 2014).

At the firm level, many studies have highlighted the role of organizational resources and competences (e.g., Moen & Servais, 2002; Sapienza, Autio, George, & Zahra, 2006). However, little is known about the characteristics of BGs in their later life, and empirical literature is lacking (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; Johanson & Martín, 2015).

Fernhaber, McDougall, and Oviatt (2007) reported that BG studies tend to focus on high-technology industries and the role of innovative product characteristics and industry structure in internationalization (e.g., Baum et al., 2011; Laanti, Gabrielsson, & Gabrielsson, 2007; Paul & Gupta, 2014; Preece et al., 1999; Terjesen, O’Gorman, & Acs, 2008), with a few studies of either low- and medium-technology sectors (Andersson, Evers, & Kuivalainen, 2014; Evers, 2010) or service sectors (Sakata et al., 2013). Contrary to the rich empirical research from well-developed economies (e.g., Aspelund et al., 2007; Crick & Spence, 2005; Moen & Servais, 2002; Spence & Crick, 2006), studies from emerging economies are far less abundant (Glaister, Liu, Sahadev, & Gomes, 2014; Khavul, Pérez-Nordtvedt, & Wood, 2010; Lamotte & Colovic, 2015; Nowiński & Rialp, 2013; Wood et al., 2011; Yamakawa, Peng, & Deeds, 2008).

Notwithstanding the growth of research on BGs, no definition of success, concerning quality and efficiency, exists. Nor is there a consensus regarding which indicators exert the greatest influence on their key success factors (Coviello, 2015). Much past research has neglected the effects of variables related to organizational environment and context, and resources, capabilities, and strategies that impact performance and long-term survivorship (Knight & Liesch, 2016).

The variety of BGs’ perspectives drawing on theories and frameworks from various domains, the inconsistency of definitions, and the range of criteria to be taken into account make research on BGs broader in scope, heterogeneous, and inconclusive (Keupp & Gassmann, 2009).

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