Born digitals: Thoughts on their internationalization and a research agenda

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Overview:
This is a conceptual paper that comments on the seminal firm internationalization process model by Johanson and Vahlne (2009). As the winner of the 2019 Journal of International Business Studies (ABS 4*, FT 50) Decade Award, the Johanson and Vahlne (2009) model is notable for many reasons. These range from the number of citations the paper has received, to its relevance and adoption by scholars outside of International Business (based on citation records). In the tradition of strong scholarship, Johanson and Vahlne have consistently refined their arguments regarding internationalization (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; 1990; 2003; 2006; Vahlne & Johanson, 2017, 2020). In so doing, they acknowledge theoretical advancements since their original article, take stock of environmental and organizational changes, and consider the role and influence of changing business practices.

Photo: With Jan-Erik Vahlne, one of the big thinkers of International Business, at the Journal of International Business Studies Decade Award 2019 Plenary Presentation at AIB Copenhagen (from left: Professor Nicole Coviello, Dr Sinead Monaghan, Professor Esther Tippmann)
Main Argument and Implications:
Johanson and Vahlne (2009) articulate various theoretical mechanisms underpinning the internationalization process of firms; mechanisms they suggest are pertinent across firm type. We revisit their theorizing as it relates to firms that had only begun to emerge when Johanson and Vahlne published their award-winning paper: born digitals, i.e. firms that are digital from inception. We address how technological affordances, especially direct engagement with stakeholders, automation, network effects, flexibility and scalability, affect the internationalization of born digitals. While describing these new mechanisms, we do not take the position that Johanson and Vahlne’s arguments are inconsistent with born digital firms because we believe the nature of internationalization is that no one theory or set of arguments is fully explanatory. We use our arguments as a platform to develop a future agenda for international business research on born digital firms.

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