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*Article*

# International Open Innovation Strategies of Firms in European Peripheral Regions

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**Abstract:** The involvement of companies in different open innovation activities, through knowledge outputs and inputs, has become increasingly important for the success of companies. However, the existing literature on open innovation is scarce concerning the internationalization process of companies. The internationalization of companies is fundamental in the continuous search to increase the performance of companies externally. The objective of the present research is to explain the strategic processes in the internationalization of companies located in peripheral regions at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of dynamic capabilities. The sample used for this research is composed of seven Portuguese companies. The methodology of qualitative nature is exploratory and uses a case study approach. Regarding the foremost modes of operation in international markets and strategies, we find that (1) companies have partnerships with local distributors or appoint exclusive importers/distributors, and (2) companies prefer to place their products in the market through their brand, "co-branded" projects with retailers, or "private label" projects. Of the seven companies under study, six use a standardization strategy, and one opts for a configuration-coordination strategy. Our findings clarified the literature on export and internationalization strategies in a peripheral country, allowing a closer incept of the organizational and dynamic capabilities and an overview of the supporting tools these companies have to compete in the global market. Our study is original because few articles study the internationalization strategies of companies at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and in peripheral regions of Europe.

**Keywords:** open innovation; internationalization; strategies; open innovation strategy; export; dynamic capabilities; peripheral regions

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## 1. Introduction

The era of globalization has highlighted the importance of companies internationalization, leading them to accelerate its implementation [1,2]. Furthering globalization, the economic crisis faced by developed countries between 2007 and 2016 led companies to search for more dynamic and growing foreign markets to combat the weak domestic demand. Such fragile demand in the domestic markets was caused by the lack of available credit, consequent to the growth of unemployment and the contraction of the construction sector [3,4]. These difficulties were accentuated in peripheral regions [5] and island regions. Island regions constantly suffer from structural problems due to peripherical, economic, and social-environmental issues [6,7], which further complicates the internationalization of companies based in these areas' regions.

These difficulties can be overcome by converging efforts not only in innovation but also in open innovation. However, for companies to maintain high levels of competitiveness, it is essential to evaluate the perspectives and determinants that can influence and enhance economic growth through open innovation [8]. It can be stated that open innovation is fortified by increasing volumes of globalization in innovations, new technologies, and research, which are fostered through new information technologies, communication, as well as new models and forms of organization [9,10].

Thus, open innovation strategy consists of the use of knowledge outputs and inputs that come from international markets to accelerate the internal innovation and expand the company to others for external use of innovation [11]. Firms, when using an open innovation strategy, integrate knowledge networks, which may contemplate international partners. International relationships typically support knowledge-intensive firms to adapt their internal structures more quickly in the quest to succeed in external markets [12]. It also allows faster and easier estimation of the identification of opportunities in international markets and the development of international relations capital. An open innovation strategy allows attracting new flows of knowledge from anywhere in the world, and any new service, process, or product can potentially be applied in all geographical contexts [9]. As a rule, companies that have an open innovation orientation can create better network capabilities, which are very convenient for the international expansion process [13,14].

Recently, we have been facing a global health crisis (COVID-19), which led to a new economic crisis. Thus, the companies' international business policy had to be adjusted because most countries implemented protectionist and containment measures, including import tariffs, export bans, and border closures, to control the economic effects of COVID-19. Companies were strongly affected by the increasing commercial and tacit knowledge communication costs [15].

In such an environment, exports growth causes companies to increase their performance and achievement, which positively influences the economic growth of the regions where they operate. Exporting is the best way for companies/regions to grow in the short term. The export and internationalization of companies cannot be seen as a temporary fix in times of crisis. Instead, it should be promoted as a first level of strategic orientation. In some specific sectors, export is seen as a complementary solution [4]. Nevertheless, businesses should be oriented to promote international markets regardless of the moment companies are going through. Companies that perform in such a manner will accelerate their development, competitiveness, and specialization, which allows them to compete in better environments, making them more solid [16,17].

In this context, it is pertinent to investigate the differences in international performance regarding the survival and growth of companies [18,19]. Thus, to respond to the challenges of internationalization and formulation of strategies, it is important to consider factors such as the entrepreneurial vision, international experience of managers, and the ability to identify opportunities [20,21]. From the perspective of resources and capabilities, the analysis of the internationalization process is a theme that companies have been neglecting. Whenever companies spread their international activities, they gather skills, such as receptivity to change, learning, and cultural adaptability, which they use when connecting with other companies in different countries [18]. The success that companies have in the global market does not depend only on the portfolio of capacities and resources that they have but also on their ability to adjust and reconfigure repeatedly, taking into account the fluctuations and contingencies that are more and more frequent in international markets [21–23].

According to Ali and Selvachandran [24], several approaches have been employed to explain the internationalization of companies: (1) organizational learning approach, which is gradual expansion to the international market (e.g., Dikova, et al. [25]; Lord and Ranft [26]; Ruigrok and Wagner [27]); (2) entrepreneurship approach, which is entrepreneurial behavior (e.g., Sommer and Haug [28]; Sundqvist, et al. [29]; Zeng-Nan and Seunghoon [30]); and (3) transactional cost approach, which is discovering and exploiting economic opportunities (e.g., Kausar and Viswanathan [31]; Paulin and Ferguson [32]; Teece [33]). Nevertheless, the approaches mentioned above do not address the growing dynamism of the international business environment and the dynamic capabilities of managers/owners/CEOs. It is important to investigate the internal experience, gradual learning in internationalization, and the operations of companies [34]. This regards companies' capacity to become more competitive [24,35].

In this perspective, internationalized companies need to have dynamic capabilities to adapt to different environments, prosper, and survive [36,37]. Sometimes, the internationalization of companies is related to factors that the managers/owners/CEOs of companies cannot observe directly. Such elements are based on dynamic capabilities, making it pertinent to investigate the relationship between internationalization/exportation and dynamic capabilities [24,38].

As such, the objective of the present research is to explain the strategic processes in the internationalization of companies located in peripheral regions at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of dynamic capabilities. To comply with the proposed objective, the authors prepared a case study based on seven interviews conducted in companies located in the Portuguese territory. Six of the companies are located on the mainland, and one is on the island of Madeira.

With the present research, the authors expect to clarify the existing literature on the subject under investigation. It is also intended to leave some suggestions for companies located in peripheral regions to implement internationalization strategies more accurately and based on knowledge, thus reducing the risk of failure. To increase the success rate of internationalization of companies, managers/owners/CEOs must be able to identify the resources and capacities necessary for internationalization and the best way to aggregate them to improve the company's performance.

This research is arranged as follows: in part one, an introduction based on the problem under analysis is carried out. In part two, the literature on dynamic capabilities and internationalization processes is reviewed. In the third part, the entire methodological process is detailed. In part four, we present the results of the interviews and a discussion of the results. In the fifth and last part, we elaborate on the main conclusions of the research.

## 2. Literature Review

Nowadays, the external environment of companies, which they do not control, influences more and more the development and growth of the business. This uncertain environment makes it increasingly difficult for companies to innovate. For the development and growth of the business, the concept of open innovation has been assuming more and more importance [39]. Open innovation has come to define a new and more complete innovation paradigm. Open innovation implies that companies cannot only consider their internal environment in R&D processes [40–42]. Through open innovation, companies can access a new typology of assets (external) and simultaneously discover new solutions that are possible to implement, monetizing other assets (internal) that would otherwise go to waste [8]. With open innovation, companies have to leverage their R&D in internal and external sources and use external and internal paths to market, as it is a process of international importance for the company's growth [9,39].

External public and private entities supporting internationalization plays a fundamental role in international expansion [43]. They provide important information to identify the target markets for internationalization, knowledge about potential foreign customers, market failures, help in assessing the risks and costs of internationalization, and provide consulting services (international image creation, the definition of marketing strategies, promotion, and dissemination of trade fairs, among others) [43,44]. On the other hand, these entities have financing programs that boost their international presence, namely financial assistance [45].

Thus, we can formulate the following proposition:

**Proposition 1.** *The greater the external incentives to the internationalization process, the greater the international expansion of companies.*

Expanding a company to the foreign markets requires an accurate decision-making process, as many aspects influence this internationalization process. Certain matters, such as the factors that motivate, stimulate, or slow down intentions of internationalization; support for their promotion; aspects that influence the selection of the countries of destination; people who intervene in the internationalization and decision process; the typology of information and relevant know-how to this decision making; the importance of the information generated on the internet in the decision to internationalize; the strategies of penetration in international markets; the strategies of international marketing; and the organizational processes and capacities that facilitate internationalization, assume fundamental importance [9,39]. In this sense, we may assume that export incentives are the factors that influence a company to start, develop, and maintain export operations.

In a broad interpretation, they provide the driving force needed to push the company to the road of internationalization [46]. In addition, these factors may be affected by certain antecedent forces derived from three main sources: (a) individual characteristics, (b) organizational characteristics, and (c) environmental characteristics.

The individual characteristics are related to the perceptions of the decision maker on the opportunities that arise from the international market. Amongst them, the following can be mentioned: personal characteristics, international orientation, leadership style, management competence, and expectations of the same management. Regarding the individuals involved in the decision making on the company's internationalization, the leader receives the greatest attention. It is generally accepted that the international experience of these persons is a determining factor in the impetus that drives a company to go international [47].

However, not all those who choose internationalization have the same degree of international experience. It is possible to find a great diversity of scenarios and contexts where these decisions are going to, such as the commercial or marketing departments, sales director, the person in charge of the geographic area under analysis, the export team, the international department, or the general management.

Based on the notion of limited rationality, the information, and the relevant know-how needed for internationalization decision making, recent research suggests that managers do not base their decisions on a careful assessment of all the available information in a given instance. Instead, they have heuristics that can reduce the cognitive effort in the decision making, ignoring some probable information. Specifically, heuristics are learned rules, conscious and unconscious, that individuals apply to their decision-making and meaning-making processes instead of deliberately thinking and processing large amounts of information [48].

To these authors, heuristics are especially useful in circumstances where decisions are made under conditional information, processing capacity, and limited time. In addition, they argue that heuristics allow effective decision making in unfamiliar environments, providing direction and coherence [49]. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this skill depends on the previous managerial experience of a certain situation. Recent research has also verified this link, showing that companies develop idiosyncratic heuristics for their operations through the experience process and that negative results may improve learning [49]. Ultimately, experience is considered central to understanding how heuristic-based decision-making works and progresses.

Thus, we can formulate the following proposition:

**Proposition 2.** *The personal characteristics of company managers influence international expansion.*

As for organizational characteristics, the following stand out corporate objectives, availability of resources, the nature of products, and the company's differentiating advantages. These are aspects associated with financial, production, research and development, and marketing resources. Institutional support for exports is mainly provided through measures, instruments, specialized institutions, and programs to carry out exports and investments. Export promotion programs cover various services, from building the economic image (including promotional events and advocacy) to export support services (including regulatory compliance, commercial, financial, customs information, etc.), marketing support (including trade fairs and export support missions), market research, and publications [50]. Companies with accumulated know-how in internationalization processes through experience in international markets and contact with international suppliers favor the effect of individual and global corporate mindset on internationalization [51].

Thus, we can formulate the following proposition:

**Proposition 3.** *The organizational know-how about the international expansion process influences internationalization of the companies.*

Finally, environmental characteristics are configured by the country's location, availability of raw materials for production, prevailing economic conditions, infrastructure facilities, and government policies to support internationalization [52].

Thus, we can formulate the following proposition:

**Proposition 4.** *The international environment in which the company operates conditions its international expansion.*

Therefore, in selecting a destination country for the desired internationalization, the arguments presented contribute significantly, in terms of the individual characteristics of the decision-maker and the organizational characteristics, the environmental characteristics, or the institutional support that is provided, to aiming the intents of strategic destinations.

As for the penetrating strategies in international markets, they can be divided into three major groups according to the generic options that a company has at its disposal to compete beyond the domestic market: (a) supplying the foreign market through commercial transactions (exports); (b) transfer knowledge to the destination country through a contractual agreement; or (c) moving productive or commercial capacities, providing capital through foreign direct investment (FDI) either jointly (joint venture) or on its own (wholly owned subsidiary) [53]. These entry modes fall into two broad categories: non-capital entry modes (including exports and contractual arrangements) and capital entry modes (including FDI modes). This classification is based on the degree of control [54]. Due to the characteristics of each alternative, FDI implies a better control of operations abroad and greater profit potential but at the expense of binding more resources and consequently at greater risk [53].

Thus, we can formulate the following proposition:

**Proposition 5.** *Companies prefer to approach international markets with internationalization strategies that involve lower costs and lower risks.*

One of the most important decisions is associated with the marketing mix. By developing an appropriate marketing mix, organizations can satisfy the needs of their target market and achieve their organizational goals and improve performance. Therefore, products entering a new market for the first time should be adapted to the characteristics of such a country since it is unlikely that a single strategy will be able to satisfy all consumers when considering the existing heterogeneity of the markets [55].

In the current literature, there are three major perspectives of international marketing strategy. Perhaps the most influential perspective is standardization, which projects the company with a global marketing strategy, regarding especially its product offering, promotional mix, price, and sales channel structure [56].

Defenders of standardization believe that the world markets are in the process of homogenization due to advances in communication and transportation technology. Increasingly, customers in distant regions of the world tend to exhibit similar preferences and demand the same products. Therefore, an important source of competitive advantage in the global market is producing high quality at a low price. For those who support this strategy, the main benefits of standardization include economies of scale in production, consistency when dealing with customers [57], and the ability to explore worthy ideas on a global scale [58].

A second pronounced perspective in the global marketing strategy focuses on the configuration and coordination of the valued company's chain activities. According to this view, the global marketing strategy allows a company to exploit local-specific comparative advantages through specialization. Thus, the main aspect of this configuration is the degree of concentration. Because different countries have unique comparative advantages, the concentration of value chain activities in some parts of the country can be performed most efficiently allows a company to maximize efficiency [56].

A third perspective in the global marketing strategy is the vision of integration. It focuses on how the company's competitive battles are planned and carried out in the international markets. According to this vision, the key to the success of global marketing is the involvement in the main world markets to gain competitive leverage and effective integration from the competitive campaigns in those markets [56]. In the global industries, operations in different countries are interdependent. A company should subsidize operations in some markets, with resources generated in others, and respond to competitive attacks in one market while countering in others. Consequently, in the perspective of integration, the essence of the global marketing strategy is to integrate the company's competitive movements in the world's main markets.

Regarding the organizational processes and capacities that facilitate internationalization, there are no doubts about the series of repeated actions over time that allow managers to perform some business tasks [59]. Common processes include acquisitions, alliances, product development, and internationalization [18]. Companies can temporarily gain some performance benefits by selecting the processes with the most attractive opportunity flows and executing such processes effectively.

Thus, we can formulate the following proposition:

**Proposition 6.** *Integrated marketing-mix strategies in international markets impel the internationalization process of companies.*

Following this concept, it is possible to observe that dynamic capacity definitions involve efforts to attain changes and innovation; determination related to search, creation, integration, renovation, recreation or reconfiguration, selection, and implantation of resources [60]; skills and competencies [33]; or capabilities [61]. The results of these efforts range from the identification of needs or opportunities for change; creative ideas; and development of new products, services, and processes superior to those of competitors till the introduction of disruption, to create dynamism in the market [33]. These are reactions and sequences of actions that allow companies to enter into new businesses, extend their business base, or be more profitable and grow consistently [60,62].

Thus, we can formulate the following final proposition:

**Proposition 7.** *The greater the dynamic capabilities of companies, the more consistent their international corporate business models and the greater their economic performance.*

## 3. Research Context and Methodology

The present research is an exploratory case study approach, as it provides the clarification, development, and modification of ideas and concepts [63] amongst the internationalization of companies.

The case study is appropriate when the objective is to investigate a rare phenomenon and/or an in-depth phenomenon whose information is not easily accessible and where the contextual conditions surrounding the phenomenon are seen as relevant to understanding it [64,65]. A case study can also describe a phenomenon occurring inside real companies, consequently making it easier to explore specific problems for which there is no robust theoretical framework. It can explain why the phenomena are occurring in a certain manner and not in a different one, allowing new theories to emerge from this new information [65,66].

The exploratory case study is a qualitative method that is recommended to expand the scope of the investigation, thus allowing the emergence of specific patterns of the context under analysis [67]. The present study is based on seven interviews with Portuguese companies operating in the market for more than twenty years, whereby part of the revenues is the consequence of their internationalization (at least 10%). The companies under study have diverse approaches to branding, marketing, purchasing, and product design due to a multichannel distribution strategy implemented in its internationalization activity and disseminated in several increasingly dynamic and fragmented markets. Therefore, this is a qualitative study with a non-probabilistic sample for convenience, increasingly used in different disciplinary areas [68,69].

The semi-structured interview guide was composed of thirteen open questions, which were adapted from the study of Frasquet et al. [70]. The questions inquired in the interviews are related to the internationalization process to understand the specific dynamic capabilities of internationalization. Interviews were conducted in April/May 2020 and November 2021 using the Zoom conference platform. The interview time each was approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. All respondents were aware of the company's internationalization processes. Table 1 shows the general information of the companies presented in the study.

**Table 1.** International profile of firms interviewed.

| Company | Foundation | Annual Turnover (2019) | Number of Employees | % of Export Sales | Number of Exporting Countries | Product Portfolio | Interviewed | Interview Date | Company Location in Portugal |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Company A | 1872 | 50,000,000 € | 242 | 10% | 20 | Soft Drinks and Beers | Management Assistant | 21 May 2020 | Islands |
| Company B | 1842 | 15,000,000 € | 60 | 75% | 72 | Wines | Export Department Director | 30 May 2020 | Mainland |
| Company C | 1999 | 54,665,025 € | 126 | 35% | 50 | Cereals, Vegetables, and Industrialized Fruits | Sales Director | 1 April 2020 | Mainland |
| Company D | 1965 | 14,500,000 € | 400 | 60% | 45 | Porcelain, Earthenware and Stoneware, and Other Household Products | Marketing Director | 3 April 2020 | Mainland |
| Company E | 1993 | 3,000,000 € | 10 | 10% | 10 | Pharmaceutical Articles, Medical-Surgical Instruments and Devices, and Hospital Equipment | International Department Director | 11 May 2020 | Mainland |
| Company F | 1917 | 234,000,000 € | 1400 | 60% | 55 | Civil Construction, Industry, and Anti-Corrosion Protection | Director of export department | 17 November 2021 | Mainland |
| Company G | 1986 | 7,000,000 € | 76 | 76% | 4 | Construction and Repair | CEO | 19 November 2021 | Mainland |

After the interviews, the data analysis process was performed in six phases, as suggested by Michel-Villarreal et al. [71]. In the first phase, the interviews were transcribed, allowing them to become familiarized with the data and establishing an introductory perception of the patterns from the collected data. In the second phase, data encoding was performed in Microsoft Excel 2016. This encoding allowed a better understanding of the phenomena under study. Regarding the third phase, the codes were categorized using the emerging study themes. In the fourth phase, the identified codes and themes were revised and refined to form an easily interpretable and coherent pattern. In phase five, the designations were assigned to the embracing thematic. The fundamental aspects of the represented data were taken into account. In phase 6, the writing and synthesis of the individual cases that gave rise to point 4 of the present study were performed.

## 4. Results and Discussion of Results

In general, the internationalization of companies involves a high degree of risks. These risks are even more pronounced in companies with very limited resources to deal with adverse situations and may occur in the expansion process [72]. In this context, companies face obstacles that hinder their internationalization or even make it unfeasible [73]. These obstacles can refer to strategic restrictions, operational and process situations, and the lack of adequate information about the markets they intend to enter [74,75].

Subsequently, we will summarize the responses of the seven companies under investigation regarding their internationalization facts. The results are divided into three parts. The first part, "development of internationalization", includes the answers to questions number one to eight; the second part, "international marketing strategy", encompasses the replies to questions nine and ten; and the third part, "main organizational processes and capabilities for international operation", is focused on the answers to questions from eleven to thirteen.

### *4.1. Internationalization Development*

The development of an international expansion process is influenced by several factors, which should be attained before starting such a process, thus ensuring greater success for the company. Expanding to the foreign markets requires an accurate decision-making process, as many aspects influence this internationalization process. Certain matters, such as the factors that motivate, stimulate, or slow down intentions of internationalization; support for their promotion; aspects that influence the selection of the countries of destination; people who intervene in the internationalization and decision process; the typology of information and relevant know-how to this decision making; the importance of the information generated on the internet in the decision to internationalize; the strategies of penetration in international markets; and the strategies of international marketing and the organizational processes and capacities that facilitate internationalization, assume fundamental importance [9,39].

The internationalization of a firm can be expensive and slow due to the high levels of uncertainty, risk, and lack of knowledge about foreign markets [34] as well as insufficient financial resources [76]. Thus, greater support from entities (public and private) specializing in internationalization can motivate the international expansion of companies and their greater success in achieving their goals established for foreign markets [43,44].

As for the role of support entities for promotion and internationalization, Company A indicated that support from different entities is very important. However, it is not sufficient given the unique specificities of the peripherical where the company is located. Despite receiving subsidies (which are not enough), the price of goods transport between the Portuguese mainland and the islands is one of the most serious difficulties that the company has and often eliminates the possibility of being competitive (concerning competitors located in Mainland), often leading the company to lose businesses. The company also mentioned another type of support, such as participation in international fairs and delegations. Companies B and C indicated that the entities promote national products and raise international consumers' awareness of their quality and origin, promote fairs, and organize and support meetings with buyers/companies. Company D claims to work in close partnership with the different institutions dedicated to this commitment, such as AICEP Portugal Global and Chambers of Commerce. They also stated that these associations provide relevant information about each market and potential opportunities and threats, which are important in the internationalization process. This information is cross-checked with other information from international partners as well as from the marketing department. In turn, Company E said that the main thing that the entities provide them is legislation since medical materials require special attention. They reported that the company has grown on a large scale due to the current pandemic (COVID-19), which allowed them to export in large quantities. Company F informed that the "Agência para o Investimento e Comércio Externo de Portugal" (AICEP) has an important role in the promotion of the Portuguese image in foreign markets and the support on the export activity of Portuguese companies. AICEP provides several internationalization support services through its Export Stores, included in the Agency for Competitiveness and Innovation (IAPMEI) network. Company E also mentioned that Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) helps SMEs in the internationalization process by making available more than 3000 experts in more than 60 countries to advise on EU legislation and standards as well as facilitating access to European funding programs. On the other hand, Company G mentioned that the role of organizations on the promotion and internationalization support goes further by clarifying the reality present in countries where internationalization is intended (pros and cons of the new market). They also advise on the opportunities in new markets and help in the file preparation to introduce the company to new markets.

We can conclude that, in Portugal, there is a set of entities (AICEP, Portugal Global and Chambers of Commerce) that favor the internationalization process of the Portuguese companies interviewed. These entities offer advice on foreign markets in terms of economic, political, and exchange risks; clarify doubts about the ways of operating in foreign markets and advise companies on ways of entering the markets [43,44]; provide grants to support internationalization; and participate in the presence at international fairs and meetings between buyers and provide legal support to clarify legal issues. In this way, external incentives (economic, organizational, and consulting) favor the internationalization process of companies, confirming Proposition 1.

When considering the choice of country, the selection is influenced by the motivation of the firm [77], international experience, the firm's characteristics, the host country environments, and risk preference, all of which may have a substantial impact on the success of firms' international operations [78].

The personal characteristics of decision makers in the international expansion process influence the internationalization of companies, and their international experience is a decisive factor [47]. Regarding the people who intervene in the decision process to enter or not enter a new market, Company A indicated that the decision always passes through the commercial department, CEO, and sometimes the board (usually when the attribution of exclusivity for a country is under discussion). In Company B, the decision maker is responsible for the geographic area under analysis and commercial direction and administration. In Company C, the export team intervenes in the entire process, the final decision being made by the sales director and the administration. At Company D, the commercial and marketing department prepares a proposal with a visit plan presented to the executive management for approval. The company's CEO makes the final decision. In Company E, it is the director of the international department and CEO who decides. In Company F, all top directors take part in the decision-making process for entering a new market. However, it is the CEO who makes the final decision. Regarding Company G, it stated that "the decision is taken exclusively by the company's management".

We can conclude from the interviewed companies that the international decision process is very centralized at the top management level. Despite the participation of several department heads (commercial, marketing, logistics), the final decision is made by the company's CEO. Thus, the decision to expand internationally is highly dependent on personal characteristics, international orientation, the CEO's leadership style, management competence, and the expectations of the company's management [47,79,80]; that is, the personal characteristics of company managers influence the internationalization processes, encouraging or retraining them, validating Proposition 2.

The literature describes that several researchers have noticed that managerial attitudes influence the direction of the export of a company [81], leading to an organizational export commitment [82]. In this way, organizational characteristics can positively or negatively influence the internationalization of companies.

Regarding what information and know-how are used to decide to enter a new market, Company A said it is always through a partnership with a distributor, usually with some historical background. The company always performs market analysis, realizing the distributor's positioning, their selling brands, and prices. Therefore, the company indicates that it can effectively meet the potential needs of the distributor. In Company B, they use market developments and demand, the history and profile of the potential customer, the customer's financial condition, customer's portfolio, and distribution capacity. Company C claims that they essentially assess customer history. If interesting, an in-depth study of the market is carried out, namely legislation and labeling. This way, the company checks whether it meets the conditions to enter a new market and adjusts its strategies. Company D gathers information on the socioeconomic characterization, consumption profile, main industries in the market, main players, and current legislation. The company requests information regarding promotion and internationalization support to the appropriate entities in line with its strategy to attract new customers, namely (1) domestic segment (tableware), including large retailers, importers, and department stores; (2) hotel segment (hotel ware), including wholesalers, importers, catering companies; and (3) roasting segment (intermediaries in businesses established, namely in the foreign market). The agents identified in the three segments are very important to attract new business and manage customer relationships. These are indispensable partners with good contacts, market knowledge, and excellent ways to enter new businesses. Company E analyzes the total population of the prospective country, number of hospitals, prices that are practiced in the market, and number of competitors. In Company F, the decision to enter a new market is based on market studies, which include surveys of consumers in the destination markets, identifying their needs and consumption patterns, as well as benchmarking tests on competing products. Knowledge of the competition is vitally important, namely the number of competitors, their strengths and weaknesses, reputation/image in the market, products, and prices, as it will allow evaluating their ability to respond to a possible entry of a new competitor. The company also uses information provided by various official bodies on the country's demography, economic situation, and trade relations. Trips are also carried out to the countries under analysis in order to provide direct contact with the reality of the market. Concerning Company G, it stated that "we accepted the invitation of a well-known company that was looking for labor for civil construction; thus, it was possible to take advantage of better-paid labor, making the business profitable". Company G also claims that after being in the Belgian market, they were able to demonstrate the work carried out, which allowed them to gain the trust of other companies

We conclude that the information collected by the companies interviewed about international markets influences the decision to expand internationally, confirming Proposition 3. This information is obtained through in-depth market analyses to assess the economic, legal, political, cultural conditions, and demographics, among others; the competition; the distribution capacity; and potential customers.

Environmental characteristics [52], such as the economic, political, legal, environmental, and technological environment; geographic location; logistical capabilities; and the structure of the value chain, are factors that influence companies' motivation for international expansion the speed of the internationalization process.

Considering the importance of environmental characteristics for the international expansion of companies, the approach to international markets through exports, due to its characteristics, allows mitigating some of the environmental constraints of foreign markets.

Although the individual constraints of each organization, exporting is one of the fastest and popular modes to ensure and promote an international market expansion [83]. Furthermore, internationalization expands the market size and enables firms to do business globally [84].

Thus, concerning the factors that slow down the speed of internationalization/export, several reasons were indicated, Company A indicated that the specifics of each customer as well as their economic environment influence the speed. The company also mentioned that competition and the peripherical factor often do not become more competitive. The company said that the exportation started primarily with the "Mercado da Saudade" (a typical market in Portugal) that exists due to the large number of emigrants spread out in countries like the United Kingdom, Venezuela, France, Switzerland, Australia, Canada, and Angola (for a short period). In 2015, China emerged, becoming the company's largest export market to date. Between 2015 and 2019, the company attracted customers in the USA, South Africa, Japan, Timor-Leste, Mexico, Spain, Germany, Romania, and Dubai. At the beginning of 2020, the company signed a distribution agreement with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. On the other hand, Company B stated that changes in economic conditions in certain markets, when occurring, cause occasional limitations on the available quantity of some products, initiating a slowdown in their exports. Company C said that the increase in domestic demand and the increasing rise in transport costs directly influence the speed of exports. Company D identified labor and economic policy in some areas of the globe, namely Asia. They justified that "companies in Asia are very competitive in price compared to the products manufactured in Europe, usually with better design and quality". Finally, Company E assumed that the lack of distributors to support logistics that add value to the chain slows down exports and even the entry into new markets. They also mentioned that the stock is increasingly limited to avoid potential losses. It denotes that sometimes they have too much, but the opposite also happens. Types of statements in documents and records (in other languages and very technical), as a rule, delay the whole process.

Company F indicated that the factors that reduced the speed of internationalization are related to political, economic, and cultural issues, in addition to the technical requirements and approvals required for products sold in these countries. Developing countries, particularly African ones, often have a strong policy for protectionism on the national industries, consequently imposing restrictions on imports and trade, which translate into too much bureaucracy and the payment of licenses, customs duties, and taxes, making imports expensive. or impractical. Generally, the foreign exchange reserves available in developing economies are scarce, as the currency of most of these countries is not easily converted or accepted for payment. Geographical distance and the inherent complexity of logistical services should also be considered as well as the communication difficulties caused by linguistic differences since it is a legal requirement that the technical documentation associated with the marketing of products (i.e., the forms technical data and safety data sheets exist in the official language of the country or region). Finally, Company G states that European legislation, the lack of labor, and cultural factors reduce its internationalization speed. This result is in line with that indicated by Companies E and G.

We can conclude that the speed of international expansion of the interviewed companies was conditioned by a set of environmental characteristics of external markets, such as the economic, political, and legal environment (in terms of the legislation of the destination country and the requirements and technical standards to be fulfilled to be possible to sell the company's product in that destination); the geographic distance that imposed higher transport costs and greater challenges in logistical terms and led to the restructuring of companies' value chains; the greater internal demand and the limited stocks of products that made it impossible to adequately satisfy the demand of the destination markets; and the aggressive competitiveness existing in international markets in terms of prices charged. Thus, we confirm Proposition 4, which states that the international environment in which the company operates conditions its international expansion.

Export promotion allows the uncovering of institutional voids and enables the firm's entry and expansion into foreign markets [50], thus contributing to internationalization.

Therefore, institutions must produce export encouragement programs to support firms and improve competitiveness [85]. Exporting is mainly done in two manners: direct or indirect. Direct export occurs when a firm sells its output directly to the final user, and indirect export occurs when the sales of products or services are carried out through partnerships, agents, or distributors [86,87].

Regarding the decision to enter a certain country, Company A referred that the philosophy for the markets to which they export generally happens by inverse decision: customers contact the company and request to be their partners. Nonetheless, there are some markets (few) that the company took the initiative to enter because they believed that such markets could achieve a good market share. Company B mentioned that the demand for new markets is constant as well as the search for credible partners with an adequate profile for its products. If the partners meet ideal conditions, the contact and negotiation process is initiated. Company C pointed out the importance of the perception of the markets that most consume the company's products throughout the demand shown in the actions in which the company participates, such as the most important fairs of the company's sector. On the other hand, Company D begins by collecting and analyzing all information (e.g., specific characteristics of the new market, growth potential, demand for the products they sell, competition) and decides depending on the existing customer portfolio and the mix of company products. In Company E, an intense study is carried out on the country under analysis, looking for opportunities in the market, namely hospitals, where the company can export successfully. They carefully evaluate the competition and develop a structured plan (reduce the risk of having losses) whose main objective is to have the maximum profit. Initially, Company F approached the more familiar markets, namely former colonies or territories of Portuguese administration and official language (Angola, Mozambique, and Macau). In the next phase, the approach to the European markets took place, as Portugal joined the European Union, which allowed the free movement of people and goods. The decision to internationalize resulted from the competitive advantages acquired in the domestic market as a natural consequence of the increase in export capacity, leading to the search for new markets and business opportunities, together with the brand's international recognition and exposure. Company E specified that they internationalized because they were invited by partners. The company indicated that without these partnerships, they would not be able to reach new markets and internationalize them. In these partnerships, resources and knowledge are shared.

Entering new markets requires information gathering on foreign demand and distribution channels; this information is critical to overcoming entry barriers related to market intelligence, distribution, and reputation building [88,89].

Concerning the information generated on the Internet (Google Analytics or others) and used on the decision to enter the market, Company A and B stated that the information collected on the Internet has no direct influence on decision making. Company C said it does not use any information generated on the Internet in the decision-making process. As for Company D, there is a great deal of information available on the Internet not only on the institutions' websites but also on the brands themselves (websites, social networks, other information accessible through search engines). This information can be an invaluable help in assessing the potential of a lead. For market research, tables contain the most relevant information per customer, segment, and potential. These leads are classified by relevance. Company E and F claimed to use this type of information. This information is used in the company to evaluate, plan, and structure. It allows the company to have a broader and clearer view of the market. However, they do not make decisions based only on this type of information. On the other hand, Company G mentioned that it does not take into account the information generated on the Internet when deciding to enter a new market.

Nowadays, several web analytics platforms monitor online advertising in B2B, such as Google Analytics [90], where performance is easier to measure and at lower costs [91]. Regarding the current foremost modes of operation in international markets, Company A said that the sales strategy for international markets always involves a partnership with local distributors. Company B indicated that they appoint exclusive importers/distributors. On the other hand, Company C claims to work mainly with "private label" for retailers. Company D places its products in the market through its brand, "co-branded" projects, or "private label" projects. Company E sells essentially directly to the customer through directly appointed contacts (they have no intermediaries). However, the company is currently developing an "e-commerce" project, where the forecasts indicate that the volume of sales abroad will increase. Company F operates in other markets through product licensing, joint ventures, and direct investment. However, in most markets, it is done through direct investment, where the company makes acquisitions of existing companies. Company G, on the other hand, claims that partnerships are made with other companies; however, they also resort to subcontracting local companies (in international markets). They declared that sometimes they still use temporary work companies to recruit labor, as in some markets, they find it difficult to source.

We can conclude that the entry of the companies interviewed in international markets results from a reactive strategy (companies are sought after by international customers, by credible partners, by positively evaluating a strategic partnership or alliance, or by invitation) and a defensive strategy in terms of risks (deep market study, as the information collected via the Internet is not essential for the decision), evaluation of the customer profile, geographic and cultural proximity, and structured internationalization plan [92,93]. As a result of these strategies adopted by the companies interviewed, the privileged modes of entry into international markets are partnerships with local companies and distributors, direct and indirect exports (via retailers), licensing, joint ventures, subcontracting, and e-commerce [94,95]. In this way, we conclude that the decision to enter an international market involves consideration of risks and costs by companies evidenced by the strategies they adopt in their approaches to foreign markets and by the modes of internationalization. As such, companies demonstrated that they prefer an approach to the international market that involves less risk and costs, confirming Proposition 5.

### *4.2. International Marketing Strategy*

The international marketing strategy can be seen from three perspectives (standardization, configuration coordination, and integration perspectives). This will enable us to understand the different strategic options that a multinational company can have when structuring its marketing approaches in national markets [56,96]. This point includes information on two questions from the thirteen under study.

Regarding the degree of adaptation of strategies, Company A indicated that it carries out general communication through its channels, such as on social networks and international publications. There is also a specific strategy for each market, which local partners carry out with support from the company. The partners have the autonomy to manage their communication strategy and are authorized to use the company's brand for this purpose but always under the supervision of the company. All registered trademarks, in all markets, are the company's property and never that of the partners. Company B and C said that they do not have a defined strategy for different countries. That is, they use the same strategy in all countries. Company D reported that due to the geographical dispersion of the brand, they are presented in more than 45 countries. The company uses several customer's warehouses as well as large retailers. In both cases, products are placed in the market through retail chains, such as physical stores (larger or smaller) and virtual stores (online). The role of storekeepers is more evident in the case of the hotel segment. In the domestic market, the company has a network of stores and partners that ensure the placement of its products online. Company E aims to offer something that the competition does not have, always offering the highest quality products at the lowest price. In strategic terms, the strategy of Companies E and F is the same for all markets. Company G claimed that the strategy in the domestic market is different from the international market. In international markets, partnerships with large companies in the industry are privileged. In this way, they indicated that "we aim to be as good or better than local competitors, with quality, punctuality, and seriousness". Company G also specified that it has a collaborator for each international market (resident in these markets) who is responsible for developing and implementing strategies and sales in these markets.

Regarding the international marketing strategy, we can conclude that the interviewed companies do not have a consistent strategy because most companies do not have a marketing strategy specifically defined for international markets. Companies that have an international marketing strategy reveal that it is a fragmented rather than an integrated strategy. Thus, we cannot affirm Proposition 6, which states that an integrated marketing-mix strategy impels international expansion.

Companies try to be present in markets with characteristics that are as homogeneous as possible. In very specific situations, they can make small adjustments. Before going international, the firm should choose an adequate internationalization strategy and confirm the necessary adaptation. To accomplish this, the firm needs to consider all the relevant factors that will strengthen the company's internationalization [97], thus enabling a better chance of success [98].

Concerning the possibility of the company having an international department, what its position is within the organization, as well as what profile people have to work in within the international department, Company A said that it has two sales departments located in Madeira, one on-trade channel (hotels, restaurants, cafés), and the other on off-trade channel (food channel, supermarkets). There is a common division for foreign markets within these two departments, which has two back-office employees exclusively for these markets. The company has three more (commercial) employees dedicated only to developing this market on the mainland. For the back-office employees, knowledge of foreign languages is essential. The director of the export department makes a direct follow-up of all international customers (outside Portugal). Company B has an export department. Employees in this department must know wines and languages (at least English, others if possible) and have experience in the international wine sector, availability for frequent trips, organizational capacity, high degree of autonomy, communication skills, empathy creation with the client, analysis of results, and creation of a business plans. On the other hand, Company C has an export department that works directly with customers from foreign countries. The team is made up of export managers and administrators who support import and export. Employees of this department must know languages, such as Spanish, French, and English. The export director works directly with the administration. Company D has a commercial department composed of dedicated people for the national market and another for the international market. Each market presents its specificities and segments. Employees must know about the markets in which they work and have knowledge about the hospitality sector and merchandising to offer customers customized solutions. The commercial management works closely with the marketing management, and both report to the company's CEO. Company E has an international department. The employees in this department need to have two main skills: the ability to speak several languages and the empathy to understand and respect the local culture to create strong relationships with customers. In the company, they believe that the success of the international department is based on the human relationships they manage to create with customers. Company F does not have an international department. However, the finance and export departments are responsible for the internationalization process. These departments report directly to the company's general management.

Global expansion is a gradual and long-term process that requires the firm's accumulation of knowledge, skills, experience, and transformation of the organizational structure over time [99]. The companies interviewed have an international department or some employees (without formalization of a department) allocated to international markets. This is because companies recognize that to deal with international markets, they need human resources with certain specific characteristics, namely in terms of knowledge of foreign languages [100,101]. One of the most important skills needed is spoken languages. Firms can expand their international trade with trained staff in foreign languages and hire people with foreign language skills who are not necessarily native speakers [102]. On the other hand, commercial negotiation skills, customer empathy, good communication, and availability for international travel are also highly valued.

### *4.3. Main Organizational Processes and Capabilities for International Operation*

Organizational processes position companies during opportunity flows (e.g., new products, alliances, new markets). Therefore, organizational processes enlarge the dynamic capabilities fundamental to the company's strategy [59,103,104]. This point includes information on three questions out of the thirteen under study.

Regarding the capacities needed to manage the international operation, they are different from those required in Portugal, and Company A indicated that the capacities are different, starting with availability. There must be ample capacity for adaptation, for example, to languages, as well as great flexibility concerning the time zones of each customer. It is necessary to always have someone standing by, even at nighttime, as there may be a need to solve a customer's emergency in a completely different time zone, such as customers in Asia. Company B claimed that exports require an understanding of differences between markets. For example, a market under a "state monopoly" regime has different rules from a "free market" environment. The company and its employees are requested to have the flexibility to adapt to different types of customers and personalities. Despite the company's generic strategy for all markets, the company selects the markets according to the characteristics of its products. As for Company C, the main organizational capabilities for international operations are different from those used in Portugal, namely in terms of product and legislation adaptation for each country, such as labeling, instructions, and expiration dates. Company D mentioned that the main capability is flexibility. It is indispensable that the company can adapt to the consumer's habits of other countries. The size of the markets, aggressive competition, and the legislation in force in each country (as indicated by Company C) mean that they should always be in a constant learning process. Lastly, Companies E and F stated that the capacities needed to manage the international operation are the same as the domestic market. However, there are several obstacles in terms of language (as Company A refers) and the different cultures that must always be considered in the international operation. Although the peripherical location of the Portuguese territory (mainland and islands), the internationalization process is being developed and implemented for some time. Company G mentioned that employees responsible for international markets must have more responsibility and rigor, as they are empowered to make decisions in these markets. The company indicates that "customers are usually more demanding and not as flexible as national customers". Company G also claims that these employees have superior qualifications and experience in the market.

Nevertheless, there are still some knowledge and adaptability gaps, and these gaps are mainly related to communication, adaptability to cultures, and legislation [102,105]. On the other hand, there is no visible problem with the firms' commitment to quality. Quality overcomes borders and obstacles and proves its value in foreign markets [106,107].

Regarding whether it was difficult to acquire/develop the processes and capabilities for the international operation, Company A stated that "everything depends on the know-out that the company and its employees have, both in terms of the position they are going to handle, the sector in which the company fits, as well as the countries where the company wants to internationalize". Company B referred to the same as Company A but added that academic training is important, particularly when working for a specific sector (e.g., wines). It is necessary to have some specific training and develop new skills. They further justified that "working in the international operation, it is necessary to have more knowledge than in the national operation. The less knowledge and experience, the more difficult it is to develop processes and capabilities". For Company C, it was difficult to acquire and develop these processes and capabilities since many of the markets they operate in were underdeveloped in the food sector compared to Portugal. Company D stated that it is necessary to have knowledge and experience about the specifics of each market. This is in line with the statements from Companies A and B. On the other hand, Companies E and F indicated that the capacities needed to manage an international operation are the same as a national operation. Therefore, the company is prepared for any challenge that might arise. Company G stated that at an early stage, it was difficult to acquire and develop processes and capabilities for the international operation. It indicates that at an early stage, the choice of partners was not the most appropriate, as they were not serious "with our customers and with us". It stated that in this industry, companies must have great financial and debt capacity.

Organizational capabilities can be defined as the organization's processes that use specific resources and processes to integrate, reconfigure and create a market change [104], and provide the means to organize the firm's resources [108].

Next, we explored what was learned from the international experience and if something that was learned was communicated or taught, consequently leading to rethink any aspect of the national or international strategy. In Company A, what they learned, they were able to teach. "Sometimes, there are variables that the company is not considering in a given market. When considered, they can instigate a change or adjustment on the strategies previously outlined by the company (the company tries to use the same strategy for all markets)". Hence, the company invests in continuous training and participates in workshops as well as "trade delegations" organized by the entities that support and promote internationalization. In Company B, the director of the export department said that he learned the specifics inherent to each market as well as the knowledge of the products in each of the competitors, the creation of connections with customers, and several negotiation techniques depending on the market. He did not mention if anything was taught internally. As for Company C, they essentially learned new legislation with the help of their customers. They also mention that the Portuguese associations that assist in exports are better prepared and have a great deal of knowledge, which leads them to be members. As for Company B, they did not mention if anything was taught. Company D indicated that they learned the different consumption habits of each country and the size of the market in those countries in the sector in which they operate. They also mentioned that they know all their competitors and the current legislation in the different markets. This company stated that they adapt their strategy to the markets, that is, "it is not possible to follow the same strategy for all markets". Company E mentioned that they have learned to reconfigure pricing policy to achieve higher margins. They did not mention if anything was taught, as did Companies B and C. Company F did not mention anything they have learned from international experience. On the other hand, Company G indicated that with the internationalization process, they learned to be more rigorous and assertive, improved product quality, and learned new construction processes, which allowed them to deliver products faster to the customer.

We can conclude the capabilities to manage an international operation are different from the capabilities required at the domestic level. It takes organizational capacity to adapt to different languages, time zones, legislation, and cultures. Adapting the products to customers in the target markets and, therefore, great flexibility is required from companies that internationalize in terms of organization and their business model to be successful in international expansion. Consequently, companies integrate, reconfigure, and create market opportunities. International experience was acknowledged as the most useful method to develop global leaders. International experience was acknowledged as the most useful method to develop global leaders. However, not everyone benefits equally from international experience [109]. The roles of learning and knowledge need to be converted into a framework that covers all forms of knowledge [51] to promote its transmission within the organization. Thus, the greater the dynamic capabilities of companies, the more consistent their international business models are and the better their economic performance, confirming Proposition 7.

## 5. Conclusions

The objective of the present research is to explain the strategic processes in the internationalization of companies located in peripheral regions at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of dynamic capabilities. Our sample was composed of seven Portuguese companies from distinctive sectors, and six of these companies are located on the mainland and one on the island of Madeira. Due to the limited resources [110] and the global competition, many island economies tend to shift towards services-dominated economies [111], namely tourism. Export-oriented services, specifically tourism, are a probable advantage for small islands. Consequently, exporting or internationalization on other potential goods or services are comparatively more demanding [7] compared to their mainland counterparts.

To encompass the internationalization expansion process and its related aspects, several prepositions were formulated, leading to the following conclusions: Proposition 1 confirmed that the greater the external incentives to the internationalization process, the greater the international expansion of companies; Proposition 2 confirmed that the personal characteristics of company managers influence international expansion; Proposition 3 confirmed that the organizational know-how about the international expansion process influences internationalization of the companies; Proposition 4 confirmed that the international environment in which the company operates conditions its international expansion; Proposition 5 confirmed that companies prefer to approach international markets with internationalization strategies that involve lower costs and lower risks; Proposition 6 did not confirm that integrated marketing-mix strategies in international markets impel the internationalization process of companies; and Proposition 7 confirmed that the greater the dynamic capabilities of companies, the more consistent are their international corporate business models and the greater their economic performance.

As seen in the formulated prepositions, the motivations for exporting and internationalization of companies are mainly correlated with the necessity to increase sales and expand the brand, a large dependence on the domestic market, creation of new markets to maintain the volume of invoices, or the availability of product portfolio with high quality at competitive prices adjustable to international markets. On their journey to internationalization, the companies under study started their path through exportation. Exporting is one of the fastest and popular modes to ensure and promote an international market expansion [83].

Portuguese companies have external incentives from public and private entities that support internationalization, including subsidies, co-payment of expenses for participation in fairs and international meetings, and consultancy in terms of market studies that allow the collection of important information from the economic, political, legal, technological environment, and demographic of target markets. The know-how obtained and accumulated by companies on the target markets for international expansion influences their internationalization. Thus, we conclude that the greater the external incentives to the internationalization process, the greater the possibility of companies' international expansion [112,113].

Although business internationalization is generally linked to economic factors, Company A had a different approach regarding its internationalization. The "Mercado da Saudade", a market composed by the Portuguese community, has emigrated throughout the globe. It is estimated that the size of this market is approximately five million individuals, which is half of the population currently residing in Portugal [114]. Thus, the speed of international expansion was conditioned by a set of environmental characteristics of external markets, such as the economic, political, and legal environment; the geographic distance; the internal demand satisfaction and the limited stocks of products; and by the aggressive competitiveness existing in international markets in terms of prices charged.

The internationalization process of a company is an evolving phenomenon of great interest for researchers, which encompasses modes and strategies employed during the initial awareness, entry, exploration, and exploitation of foreign markets [115]. It seems inevitable considering how globalization processes have changed the rules of competition in recent decades [116].

When starting an internationalization process, most of our sample mentioned that the support and promotion from support entities are very important but never the adequate amount. Nevertheless, the support on fairs and commercial delegations is very important to display products and services throughout geographically and culturally distant markets or provide legislation knowledge on such markets. Firms reduce their perceived uncertainty about operating abroad mainly through a process of experiential learning entering nearby and culturally familiar markets first before conquering geographically and culturally distant markets [117]. The decision on the country to export is made after a deep analysis of the market specifics and potential, consuming habits, and possible barriers (all companies). In another company, the decision to enter a new market is based on market studies, which include surveys of consumers in the destination markets, identifying their needs and consumption patterns. The choice is normally suggested by a commercial, export, or marketing department with further validation from the CEO or management. A crucial element to ensure success in exporting seems to point out the managerial commitment [118]. Thus, the decision to expand internationally depends on personal characteristics, on the experience accumulated in terms of internationalization, on the leadership style, and the competencies at the management level of the organizations' CEOs. Therefore, the entire organization will recognize a continuing managerial commitment as a system of collective values and beliefs on the importance of exporting for success, consequently leading to an organizational export commitment [82]. To help with this achievement, employees need to have superior qualifications and experience in the market. Thus, we conclude that the personal characteristics of company managers motivate international expansion.

When looking at the decision to enter a foreign market and the impact of the information generated on the Internet (Google Analytics or others), all the companies mentioned that they use such types of information as a tool but never to decide which country to export. Nowadays, a substantial number of companies or owners have or use a Web analyzer [119].

Some companies have partnerships with local distributors or appoint exclusive importers/distributors regarding the foremost modes of operation in international markets and strategies. On the other hand, other companies place their products in the market through their brand, "co-branded" projects with retailers, or "private label" projects. Oppositely, one company sells essentially directly to the customer or appointed contacts (no intermediaries). A business internationalization can also be defined as how companies "initiate, develop, or sustain business operations in overseas markets" [120] and partake in international trade. This includes exporting, opening subsidiaries, offices, and managing operations in other countries; consequently, building bonds with foreign investors and clients; and integrating into global value chains [120]. Except for Company A, which opts for a configuration-coordination strategy, we can say that, in general, the companies under investigation use a standardization strategy. Thus, we conclude that companies prefer to approach international markets with internationalization strategies that involve lower costs and lower risks.

Regarding the international marketing strategy, those companies do not have a marketing strategy specifically defined for international markets. Companies that have an international marketing strategy reveal that it is a fragmented rather than an integrated strategy. Thus, that companies do not have an integrated marketing-mix strategy retracts international expansion.

Finally, when observing the capacities and capabilities to handle an international operation, all companies were unanimous in pointing out the adaptation to different cultures and characteristics (one company mentioned an interesting example of a market that operates under a "state monopoly" regime and another operating in a "free market" environment.), the necessity to work with different time zones, and the importance of staff with multi-language capabilities. The number of languages spoken is the key factor associated with the propensity to export [121]; a clear example is one company where its employees must know languages, such as Spanish, French, and English, to perform their international duties. Thus, the greater the dynamic capabilities of companies, the more consistent their international business models are and the better their economic performance.

Regarding the theoretical implications, our research contributed to the literature by exploring new areas of knowledge related to export and internationalization from companies in the mainland and peripheral areas (islands) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research also contributed with evidence emphasizing that unique local factors may push companies to start their internationalization path (i.e., the Portuguese market: Mercado da Saudade) as well as other key decision-making aspects, such as the importance of local management commitment to internationalization.

On the practical implications, our research is inclusive when considering practical advice to companies with a propensity for export or internationalization in different sectors and independently from the company size and sector. Moreover, this research can help managers to seek the correct competencies for their staff to support and maintain an international business, such as availability hours to match different time zones, staff empowerment for quick decisions, different cultures upfront knowledge, and error-free communication obtained by multi-language knowledge. Furthermore, the use of Internet-based tools, such as Google Analytics, may help managers in decision making for internationalization and not only for comparison purposes.

Regarding the limitations, the qualitative nature of this research did not allow the results to be generalized. Due to the current pandemic (COVID-19), it was not possible to cover a substantial sample, both on size and sector.

As for future investigations, we suggest performing this research with an enlarged sample located either in the mainland or peripheral areas (such as islands). We also suggest that the results of the present research be complemented with quantitative studies to generalize the results.

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