



## Master of Arts

## Master thesis

## from Emerging Economies from a Network Perspective

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## Table of Contents

|                                                                                                     |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Figures.....</b>                                                                                 | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Tables .....</b>                                                                                 | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Abbreviations .....</b>                                                                          | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Abstract.....</b>                                                                                | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>Introduction .....</b>                                                                           | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Theoretical Background: Internationalization from EE .....</b>                                   | <b>3</b>  |
| Theoretical Classification of the Study in Internationalization Research Domain .....               | 3         |
| The role of Social and Business Networks in Internationalization .....                              | 5         |
| EE SME Internationalization .....                                                                   | 6         |
| <b>Theoretical Framework of the Thesis.....</b>                                                     | <b>8</b>  |
| Philosophical Foundation.....                                                                       | 8         |
| The Business Network Internationalization Process Model.....                                        | 9         |
| Introduction .....                                                                                  | 9         |
| Business Network Internationalization – Variables and Assumptions .....                             | 10        |
| Critical Analysis and Relevance to Artisan Firm Internationalization.....                           | 13        |
| <b>Structured Literature Analysis: EE SME Internationalization from a Network Perspective .....</b> | <b>16</b> |
| Approach and Method.....                                                                            | 16        |
| Definition of Search Terms .....                                                                    | 17        |
| Literature Search .....                                                                             | 18        |
| Sample Reduction .....                                                                              | 18        |
| Structured Analysis .....                                                                           | 21        |
| Approach.....                                                                                       | 21        |
| Relevant Types of Relationships in EE SME internationalization.....                                 | 21        |
| Knowledge Opportunities .....                                                                       | 22        |

|                                                         |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Network Position.....                                   | 23        |
| Relationship Commitment Decisions .....                 | 24        |
| Learning, Creating, Trust-Building .....                | 24        |
| IAEE Internationalization .....                         | 25        |
| Synthesis of the SLA .....                              | 26        |
| Research Gap and Rationale for our Research Study ..... | 27        |
| <b>Methods.....</b>                                     | <b>29</b> |
| Research Design and Approach.....                       | 29        |
| Reflexivity and Positionality of the Researchers .....  | 31        |
| Informed Consent.....                                   | 34        |
| Preliminary Interviews .....                            | 35        |
| Data Collection: Expert Interviews.....                 | 36        |
| Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection .....       | 40        |
| Sample Size Rationale.....                              | 43        |
| Data Analysis: Hybrid thematic analysis.....            | 43        |
| <b>Results.....</b>                                     | <b>49</b> |
| Overview of Themes .....                                | 49        |
| Challenges.....                                         | 51        |
| Overview .....                                          | 51        |
| Language Barriers .....                                 | 52        |
| Communication and Trust-Building Differences .....      | 52        |
| Differences in Education and Business Practices .....   | 54        |
| Differences in Institutional and Market Contexts .....  | 55        |
| Different Cultural Perceptions of Design.....           | 55        |
| Power Dynamics.....                                     | 56        |
| Adapting to Differences .....                           | 57        |
| Synthesis .....                                         | 58        |

|                                                                               |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Network Orchestration .....                                                   | 59 |
| Overview .....                                                                | 59 |
| Context-Dependent Relationship Commitment Decisions .....                     | 61 |
| Intermediary Activities .....                                                 | 64 |
| Capability Development .....                                                  | 66 |
| Active Network Positioning .....                                              | 67 |
| Synthesis .....                                                               | 69 |
| Network Orchestrating Actors .....                                            | 70 |
| Overview .....                                                                | 70 |
| Advocacy Organizations.....                                                   | 72 |
| Commercial Market Intermediaries .....                                        | 74 |
| Mission-Driven Individuals.....                                               | 75 |
| Synthesis .....                                                               | 75 |
| Advocacy Motives and Effects.....                                             | 76 |
| Overview .....                                                                | 76 |
| Motives – Poverty Alleviation and Charity .....                               | 77 |
| Motives – Arts and Aesthetics.....                                            | 78 |
| Motives – Ethnic Solidarity or Support of Specific Communities .....          | 78 |
| Motives – Fair Trade Activism.....                                            | 79 |
| Motives – Promoting Craft Culture and Traditional Techniques .....            | 79 |
| Effects – Advocacy-driven Network Orchestration .....                         | 80 |
| Effects – Economically and Socially Balanced Commitment Decision-Making ..... | 80 |
| Synthesis .....                                                               | 81 |
| Synthesis of the Four Main Themes.....                                        | 82 |
| Validation through Expert Triangulation .....                                 | 85 |
| Conclusion.....                                                               | 87 |

|                                                                              |            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Discussion .....</b>                                                      | <b>89</b>  |
| Summary of Key Findings.....                                                 | 89         |
| Integration and Comparison of Results with Current State of Literature ..... | 90         |
| Novel Findings.....                                                          | 91         |
| Social Motives and Internationalization .....                                | 91         |
| The Role of Digital Platforms on Internationalization Processes .....        | 92         |
| A Plethora of Actors Involved in Internationalization .....                  | 93         |
| Limitations.....                                                             | 94         |
| Limitations of the SLA.....                                                  | 94         |
| Limitations of this Empirical Study .....                                    | 95         |
| Contributions .....                                                          | 98         |
| Theoretical Contributions .....                                              | 98         |
| Practical Contributions.....                                                 | 100        |
| Future Research Directions .....                                             | 101        |
| <b>References .....</b>                                                      | <b>105</b> |
| <b>Appendix .....</b>                                                        | <b>119</b> |
| Overview of Appendices .....                                                 | 119        |

## Figures

|                                                                                                                                                              |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Figure 1</b> Overview of relevant research streams and theoretical contributions for the research objective.....                                          | 4  |
| <b>Figure 2</b> The Business Network Internationalization Process Model (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009, p. 1424) .....                                             | 11 |
| <b>Figure 3</b> A theoretical framework for IAEE internationalization from a network perspective, based on Johanson & Vahlne (2009).....                     | 15 |
| <b>Figure 4</b> PRISMA flow-chart for the systematic review, detailing the database searches, screenings and number of studies included in the analysis..... | 20 |
| <b>Figure 5</b> Overview of main themes.....                                                                                                                 | 50 |
| <b>Figure 6</b> <i>Network Orchestrating Activities</i> .....                                                                                                | 61 |
| <b>Figure 7</b> Interplay of the Four Main Themes .....                                                                                                      | 82 |

## Tables

|                                                                                          |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Table 1</b> Overview of research items .....                                          | 17 |
| <b>Table 2</b> Overview of Preliminary Interviews, Phase 1-3, Validation Interviews..... | 31 |
| <b>Table 3</b> Researchers Profiles of this Study .....                                  | 32 |
| <b>Table 4</b> Experts of the Four Preliminary Interviews .....                          | 35 |
| <b>Table 5</b> Overview of Experts of the Interviews .....                               | 40 |
| <b>Table 6</b> Phases of the Hybrid Thematic Analysis.....                               | 44 |
| <b>Table 7</b> Codebook utilized in the Hybrid Thematic Analysis.....                    | 46 |
| <b>Table 8</b> Overview of research items .....                                          | 50 |
| <b>Table 9</b> Types of Network Orchestrating Actors.....                                | 71 |

## **Abbreviations**

|        |                                                |
|--------|------------------------------------------------|
| B2B    | Business-to-Business                           |
| B2C    | Business-to-Customer                           |
| CBI    | Centre for the Promotion of Imports            |
| CEO    | Chief Executive Officer                        |
| EE     | Emerging Economies                             |
| IAEE   | International Artisans from Emerging Economies |
| IB     | International Business                         |
| INV    | International New Venture                      |
| ME     | Mature Economies                               |
| NGO    | Non-Governmental Organization                  |
| NOA    | Network Orchestrating Actors                   |
| NPO    | Not-for-Profit Organization                    |
| SE     | Social Entrepreneurship                        |
| SLA    | Structured Literature Analysis                 |
| SME    | Small and Medium-sized Enterprise              |
| UN     | United Nations                                 |
| UNHCR  | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund                 |
| WFTO   | World Fair Trade Organization                  |
| WTO    | World Trade Organization                       |

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study investigates how international artisan firms from emerging economies (IAEE) internationalize from a network perspective, examining the roles, mechanisms and relationships that shape their entry into mature economy markets.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The explorative research employs a qualitative methodology based on 20 semi-structured expert interviews conducted in three phases, analyzed through hybrid thematic analysis.

**Findings:** The study reveals that IAEE internationalization is systematically orchestrated by mission-driven organizations and individuals rather than purely market forces. Four interconnected themes emerged: (1) unique challenges extending beyond traditional concepts of psychic distance, (2) structured network orchestration through intermediary activities, capability development, and active network positioning, (3) diverse network orchestrating actors including advocacy organizations and commercial intermediaries, and (4) social missions fundamentally shaping IAEE internationalization processes.

**Theoretical implications:** The findings offer insights that may contribute to network internationalization theory by suggesting how non-commercial actors and social motives could influence internationalization processes. The study provides empirical observations on how artisan enterprises might leverage different types of network relationships for market access.

**Practical implications:** The research provides guidance for artisan enterprises on leveraging network orchestrating actors for market access, while offering insights for policymakers and development organizations on structuring support programs. Commercial intermediaries and digital platforms with social ambitions can benefit from understanding how to balance social missions with market objectives.

**Originality/value:** This explorative study examines IAEE internationalization through a network perspective, providing initial insights into how different types of actors, relationships and motives may shape market entry processes for IAEE.

## Introduction

In recent decades, the accelerated pace of global economic integration has prominently elevated the role of emerging economies (EE) in global markets (Luo & Tung, 2007). Amidst this transformation, the artisan sector in these economies has emerged as a vital economic engine, providing employment for more than 10% of the labor force and serving as a custodian of cultural heritage (aspen, 2018; Grobar, 2019). Despite their significant socio-economic contributions, artisan enterprises often operate on the fringes of the formal economy and face substantial barriers in accessing international markets (Dassouli et al., 2024; Gupta et al., 2021; Tiwari & Korneliussen, 2022). Given these considerations, the internationalization of artisan enterprises is not solely an economic imperative<sup>1</sup>, but also a developmental, offering a pathway to mitigate the “precarious, fractured, and marginalized existence” of a large number of artisans (Scrase, 2003, p. 449).

This thesis explores the internationalization processes of artisan enterprises from emerging economies through a network perspective, focusing on the intricate roles, mechanisms, and relationships that facilitate their entry into mature economy markets. The relevance of this study is underscored by the current academic focus, where existing literature in International Business (IB) and predominantly highlights large corporations from mature economies. (Kiss et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2005). While the Business Network Internationalization Process Model (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009) has proven to be valuable for understanding how firms utilize networks for internationalization, its empirical basis stems from the investigation of large ME corporations. The model’s emphasis on relationship development and network positioning makes it particularly relevant for studying artisan enterprises, which rely heavily on informal networks and socio-cultural ties for international market access (Rutashobya & Jaensson, 2004). Additionally, current literature indicates the extent to which IAEE and other EE Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) rely on informal networks and resource constraints in their internationalization efforts (Narooz & Child, 2017; Zhou et al., 2007). However, empirical research specifically examining the process of internationalization of small and medium artisan enterprises remains scarce

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<sup>1</sup> Constituted in United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No. 8, which emphasizes 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' (United Nations, 2023).

(Kazungu, 2023). As the artisan sector presents unique characteristics that extend beyond typical SME challenges, including deep cultural embeddedness, traditional production methods, and operation at the periphery of formal economies (Dassouli et al., 2024; Tiwari & Korneliussen, 2022). These distinct attributes, coupled with the sector's significance to EE and development, necessitate dedicated research examining how artisan enterprises navigate international market entry through network relationships. By delving into the distinct dynamics of artisan enterprises and networks, this research aspires to offer new perspectives and extend existing literature by illustrating how smaller entities with limited resources manage international growth.

The thesis is structured as follows: chapter 1 provides a theoretical background on internationalization and network theories, situating the study within the broader academic discourse. The current state of research is elaborated through a structured literature analysis (SLA) in chapter 2, which subsequently forms the basis for deriving the research gap. In chapter 3, the design of the empirical research study is outlined, detailing the approach to data collection and analysis. In chapter 4, the empirical findings are presented, which are subsequently discussed in chapter 5 in light of existing literature to assess their implications for theory and practice. The final chapter concludes the study with a summary of findings, relevant implications and suggestions for future research.

This structured approach not only aims to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and strategies pertaining to the internationalization of the artisan sector but also seeks to contribute valuable insights to both academic and practical fields, facilitating the internationalization process of AIEE.

## Theoretical Background: Internationalization from EE

### Theoretical Classification of the Study in Internationalization Research Domain

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for examining IAEE internationalization by reviewing and synthesizing relevant literature streams. Beginning with a broad classification of the study within internationalization chapter introduces theoretical arguments on how personal and business networks shape internationalization processes. The chapter concludes by examining the specific context of EE SME internationalization, which provides the immediate theoretical background for this study. Through this progression, the chapter develops a theoretical lens appropriate for investigating the unique characteristics of IAEE internationalization.

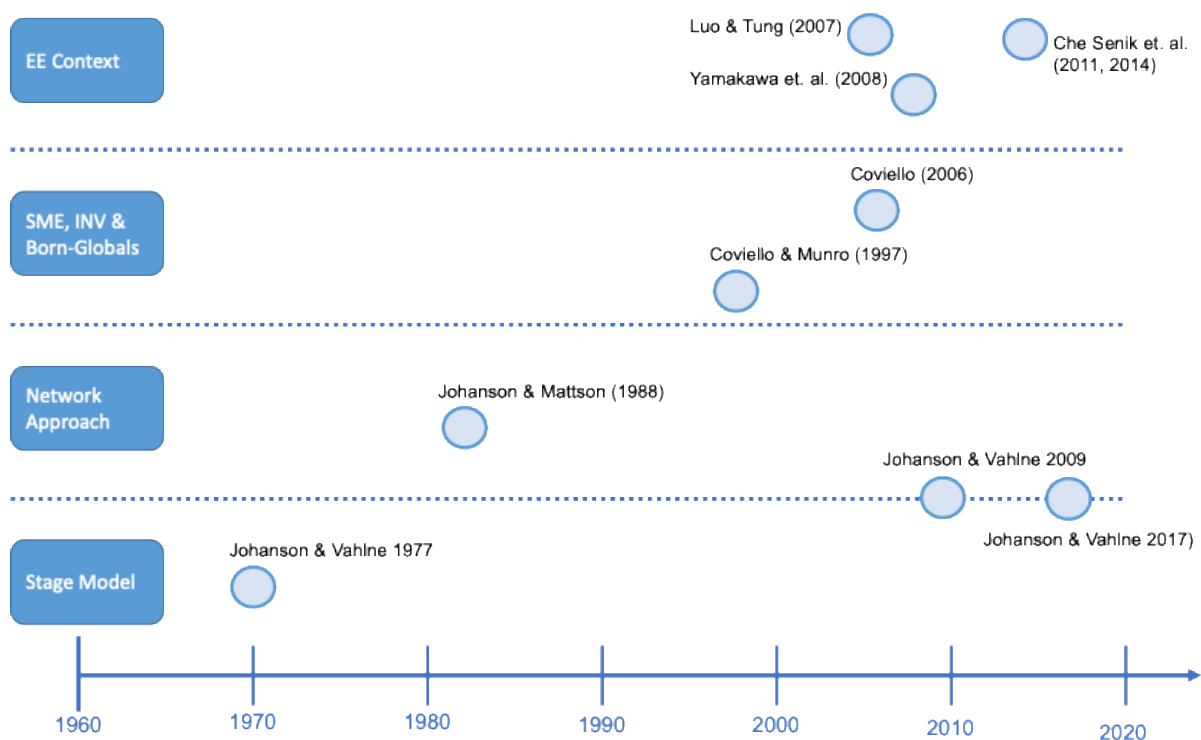
For the last century, the internationalization of firms is a prominent subject to research and has developed diverse research fields encompassing a multitude of analytic streams and perspectives. In the early era of internationalization research, studies primarily focused on international economics and the development of models based on foreign trade statistics. However, over the last five decades, there has been a shift towards considering cultural, social or institutional next to economic contexts as well as shifting from country level to firm level and to international business networks (Rugman et al., 2011). **Figure 1** displays relevant research streams and theoretical contributions for the research objective.

Johanson & Vahlne's (1977) *Uppsala Model* created a pathway for the diversification of the research field by explaining how firms initially enter familiar markets and expand into more distant markets, whereby distance is defined by the authors as compromising cultural, social and political differences, and is described as "*psychic distance*". Consequently, they proposed that firms would enter more distant markets over time through market knowledge gained from experience, which is why this model is known as the "stage" model of internationalization (Coviello & Munro, 1997). Subsequent studies challenged the conception of psychic distance as a subjective and unmeasurable factor by providing evidence that firm specific business relationships into the target markets moderated the psychic distance (Coviello & Munro, 1997; Johanson & Mattsson, 1988). This provides an explanation as to why

some, especially small or early-stage firms (Knight & Liesch, 2016; McDougall et al., 1994; Zhou et al., 2007), decide to expand into more psychic distant markets in preference to those that are closer. The consequences of this realization were twofold. Firstly, a field of research emerged which is dedicated to researching the internationalization of young, as well as SME (Coviello & McAuley, 1999; McDougall et al., 1994). Secondly, a network perspective was developed which examined internationalization on the basis of relationships (Coviello & Munro, 1997; Johanson & Mattsson, 1988). Both developments are fundamental to the research subject of this thesis, which is why they are introduced in more detail below.

### Figure 1

*Overview of relevant research streams and theoretical contributions for the research objective*



This classification has demonstrated how various theoretical perspectives have evolved to address different aspects of internationalization, setting the stage for examining how social and business networks fundamentally shape internationalization processes in the following chapter.

## The role of Social and Business Networks in Internationalization

According to Johanson & Mattsson (1988), the network perspective in International Business (IB) was developed by a group of Swedish researchers in the time span of 1982 – 1986 in the context of international industrial systems. The authors propose that firms establish, develop, and maintain enduring business relationships through networks, wherein each organization's position is defined by its direct and indirect relationships. These relationships involve mutual resource commitments, knowledge exchange, and adaptations that create interdependencies between actors. The number and quality of relationships to relevant firms, which the authors define as *network position*, determines the firms' options for and performance of internationalization to a large part. Having access to knowledge through networks is vital for internationalization, as it exposes firms to new opportunities (Baron, 2006; Chetty & Blankenburg Holm, 2000; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009) and helps to mitigate risks induced from operating in unknown environments (Coviello & McAuley, 1999; Madhok, 1997).

In addition to delineating the advantages of operating within networks, other researchers such as Johanson & Vahlne (2009) demonstrate how networks facilitate a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of internationalization. These authors highlight the dynamic process of internationalization as being determined by the network position, which provides opportunities to establish relationships that, in turn, affect the network position.

The business network internationalization literature was enriched by studies in the international entrepreneurship field which investigated the specific characteristics and roles of entrepreneurs as actors in the internationalization of early-stage small firms. Coviello (2006) for instance revealed in her study that smaller and young firms in particular rely on personal contacts of the founders, such as friends, family members or contacts from previous work experience in their internationalization process and transferred these insights to the business network literature. In accordance to IB literature from Welch & Welch (1996) and Johanson & Vahlne (2003), Coviello asserts that "the way in which network relationships provide the basis for future growth is more important than the actual path of internationalization" (2006, p. 727) and thereby moves

the entirety of internationalization-relevant relationships into the focus of IB research, especially research on SME and young ventures.

Apart from entrepreneurs or individuals within the internationalizing firm, the role of individuals described as “agents” (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, p. 24f) or “intermediaries” (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009, p. 1412) are repeatedly highlighted in the network internationalization literature. According to Ellis et. al.’s (2000) study on foreign market entries in Hong Kong, the majority of business relationships are facilitated by intermediaries. As posited by Peng & York (2001), intermediaries in internationalization processes possess relevant market knowledge, negotiation capability, and cross-cultural understanding, through which they facilitate internationalization processes. In recent years, empirical studies illuminated the critical role of intermediaries in catalyzing network internationalization by facilitating access to more psychic distant markets (Ahn et al., 2011) and access to resources for internationalization (Andersson & Sundermeier, 2019), promote international relationship building (Schepis, 2020), provide market knowledge (Gao et al., 2021) and international opportunities (O’Gorman & Evers, 2011).

Adopting a network perspective reveals a distinctive comprehension of internationalization processes. From this perspective, internationalization emerges as a complex phenomenon that is not solely driven by economic considerations. Instead, it is profoundly shaped by social contexts and dynamics and is often significantly influenced by influential actors within and beyond the focal firm. From this theoretical point of view, networks are not just driving factors in the internationalization process; rather, they constitute a fundamental prerequisite and core mechanism. The peculiarities of internationalization from a network perspective for SME from EE are elaborated in the following chapter.

## **EE SME Internationalization**

International Business Research was primarily concerned with the study of multinational firms in ME until 1989. However with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of transition economies, the focus of internationalization research shifted towards EE (Meyer, 2001). This development led to the emergence of a distinct field of scholarly inquiry, namely the investigation of the internationalization of firms from EE (Meyer & Gelbuda, 2006; Wright et al., 2005).

The theoretical discourse on EE internationalization is largely centered upon the specific context from which EE firms operate and the manner in which this context affects the internationalization process. The context under question can, as suggested by Welter (2011), be defined as “circumstances, conditions, situations, or environments that are external to the respective phenomenon and enable or constrain it”. The context in which EE firms operate can be characterized by weak institutional environments and economic or market constraints (Che Senik et al., 2014; Luo & Tung, 2007; Manolova et al., 2010; Meyer & Gelbuda, 2006), even though authors such as Acemoglu et al. (2005) argue that the former is causing the latter. In their seminal work, Luo & Tung (2007) posit that the internationalization of EE multinational firms can serve as a means of mitigating their reliance on these constraining institutional and market context. In recent years, the International New Venture (INV) research has expanded its scope to encompass the study of firms from EE internationalizing into ME, a field that had previously been largely overlooked (Yamakawa et al., 2008). In the last decade, a number of researchers highlighted the importance of networks for the EE SME internationalization by providing evidence that the strategic reliance on network relationships can become a means to overcome institutional and economic constraints resulting from the challenging environments in which these firms emerge (Bai et al., 2021; Che Senik et al., 2011; Gil-Barragan et al., 2020; Narooz & Child, 2017; Zhou et al., 2007). Considering the peculiarities of the EE SME internationalization, this thesis applies a theoretical framework to study the internationalization of IAEE as a sub-group of EE SME from a network perspective.

These insights into EE SME internationalization provide crucial context for understanding how IAEE might navigate their specific internationalization challenges through network relationships. Having introduced the theoretical field of research and distinguished it from alternate theoretical approaches, the following chapter will present a comprehensive theoretical framework. This framework establishes the foundation for the study and serves as a guiding structure for organizing and interpreting the data in subsequent stages of the research.

## **Theoretical Framework of the Thesis**

### **Philosophical Foundation**

This research is conducted from a social constructivist perspective based on Berger & Luckmann's (1990) theory of knowledge. Their fundamental premise that "all human 'knowledge' is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations" (p. 15) contains important implications for the content and methodological approach of this thesis. Regarding the topic of internationalization, the process of knowledge development and sharing is therefore vital to understand the research subject. In conducting empirical research, the researchers take part in the construction of knowledge and therefore must reflect on the process and their own role within it. Berger & Luckmann further theorize that „Reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always embodied, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality" (1990, p. 134). This suggests that through data analysis, researchers develop definitions of social realities that are inherently shaped by both their own social context and the contexts of the data source, i.e. the interview partners. This requires careful consideration of how the created knowledge and definitions might translate to or remain viable in other social contexts - particularly relevant when studying internationalization processes that span different cultural and institutional environments. To meet this expectation, the authors of this thesis have endeavored to provide the utmost transparency regarding the methodological and geographical origin of the database of the thesis.

Moreover, Berger & Luckmann (1990) conceptualize social orders not as fixed entities but as products of human activity that are continuously produced and reproduced through ongoing processes. Applied to this research, this means that internationalization can only be understood by examining the dynamic processes that drive it - the continuous interactions, knowledge exchanges, and relationship building that occur through networks. This process-oriented view informs both the theoretical framework and methodological approach, leading the researchers to focus on how internationalization knowledge and practices are created, shared, and institutionalized through network relationships over time.

The social constructivist foundation shapes this research in several ways: it guides the researchers to examine how internationalization is constructed through network interactions, directs attention to the processes through which firms build and maintain network positions, and requires to remain reflexive about the researcher's own role in constructing understanding about the phenomenon of IAEE internationalization throughout the research process.

In order to apply the social constructivist perspective to internationalization processes, this study builds on Polanyi's (2010) assertion that markets are constructs of social interactions, which are considered as "unique political-cultural constructions" (Fligstein, 1996, p. 656) of their respective societies. Consequently, internationalization is approached in the sense of processes through which firms, influenced by their home market's institutional and cultural environment, navigate the distinct complex landscape of their target markets. This philosophical foundation shapes both the theoretical framework and methodological approach of the study, ensuring alignment between epistemological assumptions and research methods.

## **The Business Network Internationalization Process Model**

### ***Introduction***

The theoretical framework is adopted for this thesis on the premise that its implementation will yield benefits with respect to the structure, acquisition of knowledge, and transferability to the current state of research from a multitude of perspectives. According to Maxwell (2012), theoretical frameworks provide coherence and direction to research and can improve the quality of analysis and interpretation. According to Maxwell (2012), theoretical frameworks provide coherence and direction to research and can improve the quality of analysis and interpretation. The later improved analysis and interpretation is also stressed by Ravitch & Riggan (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012) who describe how the conceptual framework helps to position the research within the broader academic conversations they seek to enter and contribute to. The decision to utilize a conceptual framework was made for reasons of eligibility and relevance: The framework should be well suited to exploring the phenomenon under investigation using the chosen social constructivist perspective. Furthermore, the terminology of the framework should enable the elements to be examined, coded, and structured in a meaningful way. In order to contribute to broader academic

conversations, the decision was made in favor of a well-founded framework that enjoys central relevance in academic discourse.

The *Business Network Internationalization Process Model*, also known as the Revisited Uppsala Model (Forsgren, 2016) or Business Network Model from Johanson & Vahlne (2009), is derived from empirical research following the authors' 1977 model. The impetus for this "revision" was the realization that markets can be conceptualized as networks of relationships, which in turn led to an expansion of the unit of analysis from the individual firm to the business network as a whole. A further crucial revision concerns the conceptualization of knowledge creation. While the original model assumed that the knowledge relevant to internationalization is gained through the focal firm's business experience in the target market, the business network model focuses on the construction of knowledge within networks. While challenged in recent years, the business network model is shaping the scientific discourse to this day (Yamin & Kurt, 2018).

For two reasons, the Business Network Internationalization Process Model can be considered as in line with the fundamental principles of social constructivism. Firstly, 'knowledge' is not described as an objective product generated, but as a continuously evolving context-specific result of social interactions. The authors describe how "markets are networks of relationships in which firms are linked to each other in various, complex and, to a considerable extent, invisible patterns" (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009, p. 1411). Secondly, the process of internationalization is no longer presented as a combination of resource expenditure and experience gain, but as an inherently social process in which insidership is created through the development of relationships, and "relationships are basically socially constructed." (2009, p. 1414).

To fully understand how this model can be applied to IAEE internationalization, it is essential to examine its core variables and underlying assumptions in detail. These elements will be covered in detail in the following chapter.

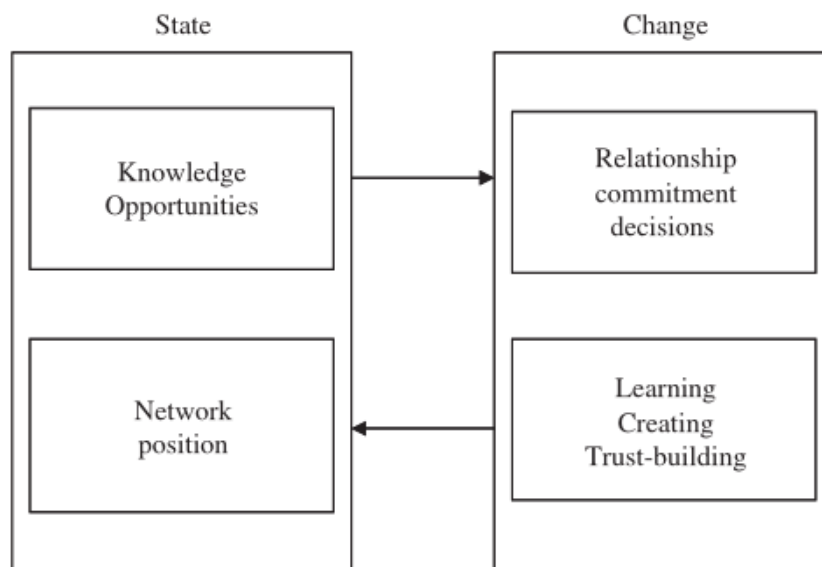
### ***Business Network Internationalization – Variables and Assumptions***

The core assumption of the network model is that internationalization is primarily driven by a firm's position within a network of business relationships, rather than, as previously assumed, by country-specific advantages or firm-specific resources alone

(Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 2009). The model comprises four variables that are in a state of dynamic interplay (see **Figure 2**).

## Figure 2

*The Business Network Internationalization Process Model (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009, p. 1424)*



The state variable "network position" describes the focal firm's position within relevant business networks. This position is determined by several factors, including the strength and number of network relationships, the level of trust and commitment within the respective relationships, and the access to network resources and knowledge that these relationships provide. In the case of IAEE, the network position as a variable provides an opportunity to gather further evidence on the qualitative components that constitute the relationships of other network partners and the resulting advantages.

Johanson & Vahlne consider "opportunities to be the most important element of the body of knowledge" (2009, p. 1424) and thus present "knowledge, opportunities" as the second group of state variable. The concept of knowledge which the authors draw upon is broad and includes capabilities and knowledge about other existing networks. The recognition or creation of opportunities is described as "subset of knowledge" (2009, p. 1424) and is considered an entrepreneurial process, in which

market knowledge functions as a necessary but not sufficient condition. It requires further types of knowledge, such as capabilities and strategies to recognize existing opportunities or create new opportunities within networks.

By setting the change variables proposed by Johanson & Vahlne (2009) as scopes for their empirical research, the research team engages in the investigation of concrete evidence pertaining to the IAAE internationalization processes within networks. The change variable "learning, creating, and trust-building" describes the way activities within networks serve to reinforce relationships, thereby leading to an enhanced network position. The efficacy of these processes depends on the existing body of knowledge, trust, and commitment (2009, p. 1424) as well as the initial attractiveness of the relationship opportunities, which is represented in the "relationship commitment decisions" variable. This variable describes the decisions of network partners to increase or decrease their commitment to relationships, which can also be conceptualized as a resource allocation choice of all actors involved in a relationship. The trajectory of the internationalization process is therefore intimately tied to the decisions of individual network actors, who can increase, reduce or terminate their commitment, which subsequently affects the network position and the further internationalization of the focal firm.

The *psychic distance*, which was a central concept in the original Uppsala Model from 1977, persists in the business network model but is reduced in its explanatory power to the role of an indirect influencing factor. Psychic distance is defined as "the sum of factors preventing the flow of information from and to the market" (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, p. 24) or as "(...) factors that make it difficult to understand foreign environments" (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009, p. 1412) with examples relating to culture, language, business practices and economic conditions. Because of the (potential) prevention of understanding and information flow, *psychic distance* is conceptualized in the model as an influencing factor on relationship commitment decisions and the processes of learning, creating and trust-building. *Psychic distance* is also intertwined with the *liability of foreignness*. The liability of foreignness refers to the additional costs faced by firms entering new markets, requiring them to offer a specific advantage to compensate for their lack of local knowledge. Johanson & Vahlne (2009) expanded the concept into the liability of outsidership, in the sense of 'not being part of relevant networks'. To get access to relevant networks, the focal firm must provide specific

advantages to establish initial relationships and improve its network position into a position of insidership, necessary for successful internationalization. While psychic distance can sophisticate the establishment and development of relationships, being an insider in (psychic) distant networks through already existing relationships is largely causally related to successful internationalization. Formulated in simple terms this means that while psychic distance as well as the liability of foreignness can be an obstacle to establishing insidership, existing relationships can help to overcome these obstacles. By relating the four variables to each other and considering the influencing factors *“liability of outsidership”* and *“psychic distance”*, a comprehensive understanding of the process of internationalization can be developed using a network perspective.

As discussed in previous chapters, the unique context of IAEE requests special consideration when investigating internationalization endeavors in this sector. Operating under this premise, the Business Network Internationalization Process Model is critically investigated in the following chapter.

### ***Critical Analysis and Relevance to Artisan Firm Internationalization***

The Business Network Internationalization Process Model is selected as the foundation of the theoretical framework for two reasons. First, it provides suitable categories and terms for examining the internationalization of IAEE from a network perspective. Second, the model is relevant for identifying and incorporating literature about the study. Considering that the empirical basis for the model is primarily based on studies of large companies from ME, it is necessary to undertake a critical analysis to determine the suitability of the model and its categories for examining the internationalization of small or medium-sized companies from EE.

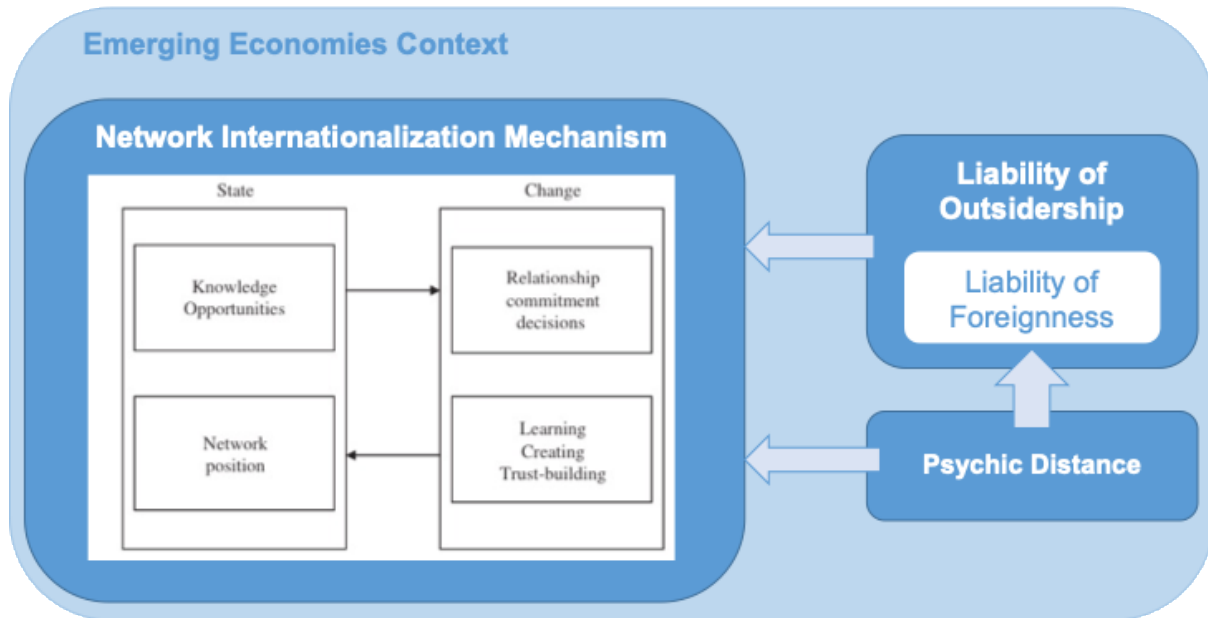
Regarding the internationalization of small companies, the work of Coviello and Munro (1995) provides valuable insights by focusing on smaller companies, or on INV and born globals, which operate internationally at an early stage or from the foundation. Coviello's research yielded the conclusion that young firms rely on informal relationships based on the personal connections of individual entrepreneurs or managers for internationalization, which then become more formal as the company grows. It can thus be posited that to understand SME internationalization, personal relationships must be considered in addition to business networks. The work of Che

Senik et al. (2011, 2014) contributes to the understanding of the applicability of the business network model to the internationalization of EE SME. Building on the early works of Johanson & Vahlne (1977, 2003), their findings indicate that the networks in which EE SME engage in internationalization encompass personal relationships, business relationships, and relationships with governmental agencies. They posit that EE SME are subject to various constraints that compel them to act flexibly in networks to bridge or circumvent these constraints. Finally, further studies that have examined IAEE internationalization underscore the significance of personal and business relationships for the process of internationalization (Shafi et al., 2019; Tiwari & Korneliussen, 2022).

Building on the theoretical contributions to the EE SME internationalization, the theoretical framework which is applied in this thesis includes the general mechanism for network internationalization presented by Johanson & Vahlne (2009) but includes personal relationships as part of internationalization networks (see **Figure 3**). The framework further highlights *psychic distance* and the *liability of outsidership* as well as the included *liability of foreignness* as influencing factors to the internationalization mechanism. It further emphasizes the weak institutional and economic context which is conceptualized as EE Context with the purpose of contextualizing all findings to it. This critical analysis highlights both the utility and limitations of the model for understanding IAEE internationalization from a network perspective, thereby informing the development of our research approach.

**Figure 3**

*A theoretical framework for IAAE internationalization from a network perspective, based on Johanson & Vahlne (2009)*



Having presented the theoretical foundation of the thesis and introduced the Business Network Internationalization Process Model as the primary framework, the SLA is examined in the next chapter.

## **Structured Literature Analysis: EE SME Internationalization from a Network Perspective**

### **Approach and Method**

The following chapters begin by establishing a comprehensive understanding of the current state of research on the internationalization of EE SME through a systematic literature analysis (SLA). These findings are then compared with the fragmented empirical evidence on IAEE internationalization to identify key research questions for an exploratory empirical study.

The identified corpus of empirical research on the internationalization of IAEE is marginal. Thus, to create a literature-based foundation for empirical study, the literature research scope had to be expanded to include EE SME in general across all sectors. While EE SME internationalization cannot be described as a prominent field of research, several empirical studies nonetheless provide evidence on the role of networks on EE SME internationalization. A SLR is carried out to compile the results of these studies. The topic of the literature analysis is:

*EE SME internationalization from a network perspective*

The collected network factors are then compared with the few existing studies on IAEE internationalization to derive a basis for empirical investigation.

The conducted SLR followed the extensive guide by Okali (2015), which covers the entire SLR process in detail, from planning to reporting. Although the guide focuses on standalone reviews, the author argues that the results of the SLR can also serve as a starting point for working with primary data. SLR as a method is subject of criticism, especially the tendency of being overly rigid and mechanistic, potentially limiting creativity, critical engagement with literature, and the development of novel insights (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015). The authors attempt to fulfill both the scientific rigor and the demand for critical examination of the literature by using SLR primarily as a search and selection method in enabling extensive engagement with a selected number of studies.

## Definition of Search Terms

The search topic involves four main search items, namely the subject (SME), their context (EE), the process (internationalization) and the influencing factors (network factors), each of which is described in the scientific discourse through various search terms. Four secondary search terms have been added to specifically address topics related to network factors in the context of EE SME.

The rationale for the selection of search terms was to conduct a general search for studies related to EE SME network internationalization, which explains the search topics a1 – a4 (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1**

*Overview of research items*

| No. | Topic                     | Search term formulation                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| a1  | SME                       | "SME" OR "small and medium" OR "small business" or "Medium-sized" OR "Born Global*" or "International New Venture" OR "INV*" OR "emerging" OR "developing" OR "transition econom*" OR "BRIC*" OR "Global South" OR "Frontier Market" |
| a2  | EE                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| a3  | Internationalization      | "Internationalizat*" OR "market entr*"                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| a4  | Network perspective       | „network*" OR "relation*" OR "business network" OR "social network" OR "**formal network"                                                                                                                                            |
| b1  | Network types             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| b2  | Network capabilities      | "Network capabilit*" OR "Network competence"                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| b3  | Liability of Outsidership | "outsidership" OR "foreignness"                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| b4  | Psychic distance          | "psychic distance" OR "cultural distance"                                                                                                                                                                                            |

A preliminary literature screening revealed that different terms were used to describe each topic, which is why these search term formulations have been chosen. As outlined in the theoretical background chapter, the body of research on smaller, younger firms evolves around the topics of *INV* and *born globals*. Consequently, these terms were included as search terms. The purpose of the secondary search terms was

to narrow the focus further into both the internationalization and the network perspective topics. The search terms *network types* and *network capabilities* were selected with the intention of gathering insights into relevant networks within the context of EE SME internationalization, as well as the characteristics of the actors associated with these networks. As outlined in the theoretical background chapter, the concepts of *psychic distance* and *liability of outsidership* have been identified as being of particular relevance to the IAEE internationalization process. Consequently, these topics were highlighted in the SLA.

### ***Literature Search***

The article search was conducted on the Social Sciences Citation Index (WoS-SSCI) database, utilizing the topic search and including all search results. In the first steps, a search with all primary search terms  $a_n$  was conducted with a total of  $n = 269$  results. In a second step, four searches  $a1 + a2 + bn$  were conducted with a total of  $n = 128$  results. Through this process, a total of  $n = 397$  studies with 11.727 citations (all databases) were identified. In an automated screening of all results,  $n = 24$  duplicates were found, decreasing the total number of considered results to  $n = 373$ .

### ***Sample Reduction***

To limit the scope of the search results to a manageable number, the sample was reduced in two stages (see **Figure 4**). First the **relevance reduction (I)**, followed by the **eligibility reduction (II)**. In the initial stage of the process, all searches comprising the terms  $a1 + a2 + bn$  were sorted according to their relevance, and all articles with fewer than 20 citations were excluded. Consequently, the total number of results was reduced to  $n = 123$ . As all results were published within the last 25 years, a reduction in the number of samples based on recency was not required. For the second step, all articles' abstracts were scanned, and articles that were not empirical research ( $n = 11$ ) were excluded, reducing the sample for eligibility screening to  $n = 112$  articles. Three exclusion criteria have been developed to ensure the eligibility of the search results for the topic of the SLA to apply in the second sample reduction stage.

i. Does not address EE SME (n = 44)

Studies focusing on companies classified as large-scale or based in regions not classified as emerging or transition economies by the classification of the International Monetary Fund (IMF, n.d.). The large number of exclusions for i. (n = 43) is due to the fact that a significant proportion of studies address the internationalization of ME firms into EE, which therefore match the search terms but are not eligible for this research as it pursues the opposing perspective.

ii. Extraneous to the search topic (n = 38)

Studies that do not address internationalization or address internationalization without considering the effect of networks in empirical study or study results.

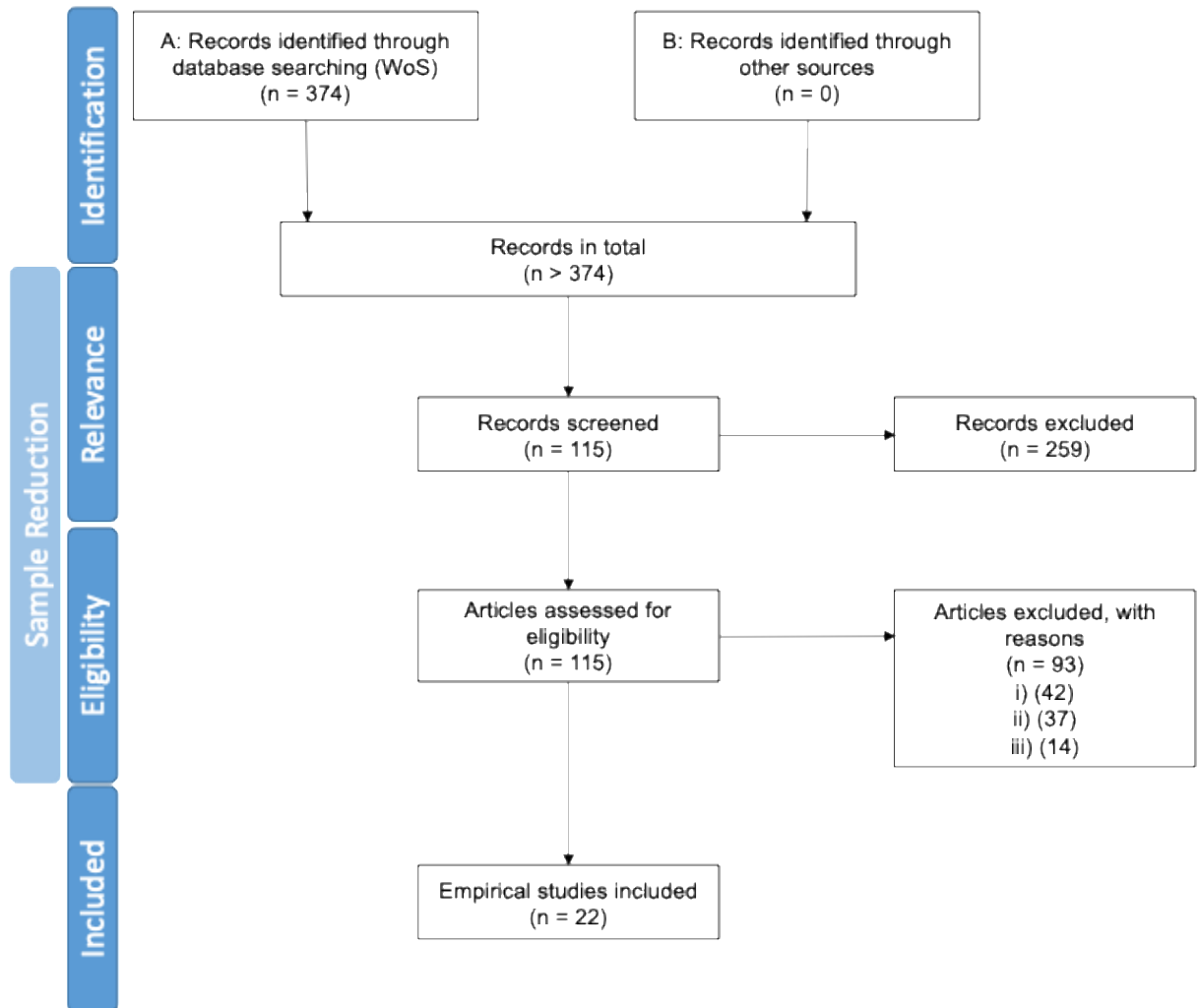
iii. Over specified research field/ limited transference potential (n = 13)

Studies that investigate firms from highly specific sectors with limited transferability to the artisan sector. Studies excluded under criteria iii. addressed firms in the IT/software sector (n = 7), the high-tech sector (n = 3), and the health tech sector (n = 2), as well as firms from the tourism sector (n = 1).

Through the two stages of sample reduction, the study results have been reduced to n = 22 empirical considered as most relevant and eligible to provide evidence on the research topic. In the next step, these studies were analyzed in detail.

**Figure 4**

*PRISMA flow-chart for the systematic review, detailing the database searches, screenings and number of studies included in the analysis*



The search process yielded a comprehensive initial dataset, which was subsequently refined through a sample reduction process to produce a focused collection of highly relevant studies for detailed analysis. The defined search terms provided a systematic foundation for identifying and analyzing literature, ensuring a targeted approach that maintained a focus on network perspectives in EE SME internationalization.

## Structured Analysis

### *Approach*

For the structured analysis all studies were screened to identify the empirical method (type or research design, sample size, sample country) as well as their main results (see **Appendix 1**). The systematic analysis of the employed methodologies revealed that a multitude of approaches were utilized, encompassing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods techniques. However, it is notable that most of the studies employed a quantitative methodology.

Moreover, the studies encompass a broad geographical range. A comparison of the countries from the examined samples with the current population figures of the corresponding continents (see **Appendix 2**) reveals that all regions of the world are represented, with studies from Latin America exhibiting a clear overrepresentation (9,94% absolute divergence) and studies from Africa demonstrating an underrepresentation of 4,49% (see **Appendix 3**). A significant proportion (31,81%) of studies investigate the internationalization of Chinese firms.

The results of the screened studies are described below in terms of their significance for the subject of the EE SME study from a network perspective. The theoretical framework was used to structure the results in terms of their significance for relevant relationships in IAEE internationalization and for the individual variables of the Business Internationalization Process Model. Having established the analytical approach, the next section delves into the various types of relationships that emerge as particularly significant in EE SME internationalization research.

### ***Relevant Types of Relationships in EE SME internationalization***

The analysis of the studies reveals that different types of relationships are relevant for internationalization: business relationships, personal contacts and relationships with government agencies. Relevant business networks included relationships with customers and suppliers (Liu & Park, 2021) or geographically related firms (Haddoud et al., 2019) as well as financial networks (Manolova et al., 2014). Personal relationships addressed in the results relate to relationships of individuals in the focal firm gained through prior international or work experience (Ahmed & Brennan,

2019; Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021; Tiwari & Korneliussen, 2018; Zhou et al., 2007). Government agencies potentially facilitate access to resources and information that can mitigate the risk associated with internationalization (Narooz & Child, 2017), especially regarding psychic distance (Yan et al., 2020). In EE, institutional contexts are often described as weak (Gil-Barragan et al., 2020; Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021) and/or difficult to access (Narooz & Child, 2017), causing EE SME to rely heavier on other resources such as networks for their internationalization (Gil-Barragan et al., 2020; Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021).

The literature further indicates that it is not necessarily only relationships in the target country but also domestic networks that are used for internationalization. For instance, Indian SME have been observed to leverage their domestic networks to secure access to financial and other scarce resources for international expansion (Elango & Pattnaik, 2007; Manolova et al., 2014). Similarly, Algerian SME were found to align themselves with state-sponsored export promotion programs or form export partnerships for resource sharing in the internationalization (Haddoud et al., 2019). A study on Chinese SME also indicates that domestic social networks can be utilized to establish further relationships in the target country (Zhou et al., 2007) while another study shows how domestic networks can reduce psychic distance (Yan et al., 2020).

To assess the results regarding the mechanisms of EE SME internationalization, the four variables 'Knowledge Opportunities', 'Network Position', 'Relationship Commitment Decisions' and 'Learning, Creating, Trust-Building' of the business model internationalization process model are perceived as providing a frame to structure relevant insights and therefore are introduced in greater detail in the following sections.

### ***Knowledge Opportunities***

The variable 'Knowledge Opportunities' describes the firm's recognition and understanding of business possibilities in foreign markets based on their network position, which is illustrated in the screened studies on a plethora of examples. SME from Bangladesh profited from financial and marketing support, especially in early stages of internationalization (Faroque & Takahashi, 2015), Ghanaian firms leveraged their network to increase supply chain resilience and gain operational support (Asamoah et al., 2020) and Chinese and Iranian SME increased international

legitimacy through their network (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2007). African SME from Ghana and Algeria were observed to utilize networks to share resources in the internationalization (Asamoah et al., 2020; Haddoud et al., 2019). The most prominent phenomenon within the search results was access to market knowledge (Elango & Pattnaik, 2007; Shafi et al., 2019; Tiwari & Korneliussen, 2018; Xiao et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2007), which was described as linked to the development of market opportunities (Bai et al., 2021) and innovation (Shafi et al., 2019). Elango & Pattnik (2007) elaborate on how learning through networks could provide a means to overcome a lack of market experience.

A few studies address the prerequisites required to access opportunities to networks. EE SME must incorporate adaptive strategies to adequately react on and exploit network opportunities (Kujala & Törnroos, 2018). Furthermore, managerial resources and dynamic capabilities are required to recognize and exploit opportunities (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021). Ahmed & Brennan (2019) explain in their study on Bangladeshi SME, that the founders prior experience facilitates opportunity identification & exploitation and even enhance the 'quality' of opportunities, e.g. by obtaining investments or grants on better terms. The findings of the study demonstrate that SME across the globe are able to leverage their networks to gain access to crucial knowledge and opportunities that are vital for their internationalization efforts. For early-stage SME, in particular, this access to knowledge can have a pronounced impact on the success of their internationalization endeavors.

### ***Network Position***

The study results shed light on the peculiarities of how EE SME' personal relationships shape their network position. According to Narooz & Child (2017), EE SME rely heavier on personal relationships, especially as initial business network foundations. Zhou et. al. (2007) show how EE SME develop an initial network position through personal domestic relationships and thereby increase their internationalization performance. This aligns to the findings of Su et. al. (2020) that network reliance is high for newly founded ventures but decreases over time. They argue that resource constraints still limit firms to develop further despite the support they get from their network. In essence, the extant literature indicates that a strong network position, characterized by horizontal and vertical relationships, is conducive to

internationalization. However, networks pose also challenges and risks such as relationships with competitors, which, according to Shafi et. al. (2019), harbor risks of knowledge theft.

### ***Relationship Commitment Decisions***

The next variable 'Relationship commitment decisions' describe strategic choices about increasing or decreasing commitment to relationships with network partners in foreign markets. According to the study results, an active management of relationships is necessary for successful internationalization of EE SME. While in early stages, the cultivation of personal and domestic networks facilitates the establishment of an initial network position from which opportunities for international business relationships can derive (Nyuur et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020; Tiwari & Korneliussen, 2018; Zhou et al., 2007). Furthermore, it has been observed that organizations build relationships in an act of 'bridging', purely for the purpose of gaining access to other actors through which they hope to gain advantages or opportunities. For example, personal relationships are used to overcome institutional voids, or domestic relationships are established to gain access to foreign players (Narooz & Child, 2017; Nyuur et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2007).

Various studies show how the capabilities and experience of individuals within the firm such as founders or managers positively influence the capability to actively cultivate and strategically manage relationships to facilitate internationalization from a weak network position (Ahmed & Brennan, 2019; Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2020). Further results show that the commitment to internationalization positively influence relationship building (Faroque & Takahashi, 2015). However, it must be noted that in total, the present studies provide relatively limited detailed insights into specific relationship management practices or strategies. Most findings focus on general principles rather than specific management techniques or practices.

### ***Learning, Creating, Trust-Building***

The terms 'learning, creating, trust building' relate to the ongoing processes of gaining experience, developing new knowledge, and establishing reliable partnerships through network interactions. Ahmed & Brennans (2019) study on Bangladeshi SME indicates that strong relationships create an opportunity for learning in new

environments which is especially relevant for small firms entering competitive markets. Zhou et. al. (2007) conceptualizes a process of “referral trust and solidarity” which implies that organizations might begin their relation on an elevated level of trust which was created through references from mutual acquaintances. Shafi et. al. (2019) elaborate in greater detail how different network partners contribute complementary forms of knowledge for Nepalese handicraft firms. They describe how suppliers provide industry-embedded knowledge, customer relationships offer market-relevant insights and ties to designers offer the opportunity for co-creation and innovation. However, this is the only study that differentiates between different relationship partners in terms of the types of knowledge they offer. After analyzing the results through the lens of the four variables of the Business Network Internationalization Process Model, the results are compared with the identified body of literature regarding the internationalization of IAEE. Through this process, a preliminary assessment of the applicability of the EE SME internationalization state of research to the context of IAEE is intended.

### ***IAEE Internationalization***

Regarding the specific subject of this thesis, only a few studies have been identified that provide specific evidence regarding the network factors which impact the internationalization of IAEE. Shafi et. al. (2019) portray the craft sector, especially small crafts firms, as EE creative industry firms which contribute significantly to income and employment generation. According to the authors, IAEE suffer from typical EE constraints such as resource limitations and weak institutional environments and infrastructure as well as sector-specific challenges such as market competition and short product life cycles. The empirical study on Bangladeshi IAEE provides evidence for the significance of market knowledge gained through networks with customers, suppliers and designers for product and process innovation (Shafi et al., 2019). The results comply with earlier studies on craft firm-designer cooperation (Suntrayuth, 2017; Tung, 2012). In a study on Nepalese IAEE micro firms, Tiwari & Korneliussen (2018) conclude that the Entrepreneurs’ experiential market knowledge gained through prior work experience positively impact internationalization and enable rapid internationalization, Entrepreneurs leverage social networks for knowledge and resource access and international trade fair attendance significantly stimulates network opportunities. A recent study, which was excluded for not yet complying with the SLA relevance criteria, corroborates the assertion that the significance of entrepreneurs’

networking capabilities for internationalization is not only evident in microenterprises but also in small firms (Tiwari & Korneliussen, 2022). These insights align with Johanson & Vahlne's (2009) conceptualization of knowledge & opportunities as a central pillar of internationalization processes. A further, hitherto overlooked study lends additional weight to the argument that social, business and institutional networks play a significant role in the internationalization of small artisan firms, demonstrated through a case study investigation conducted in Tanzania (Rutashobya & Jaensson, 2004). The study also mentioned digital resources as accessible and low-cost market knowledge. Shafi et. al. (2019) argue that collaboration might be the upmost significant network factor to encounter pressing market-related challenges such as competition from craft substitutes by the means of product and process innovation. I.e. IAEE might differentiate their products from industrially made competition by developing product and process innovations through collaboration with designers, customers and suppliers.

### ***Synthesis of the SLA***

To gain insight into the current state of research on the internationalization of EE SME from a network perspective, the authors of this thesis conducted a systematic literature analysis (SLA) of 22 empirical studies. The findings were then compared with several studies examining the internationalization of IAEE. The analysis created insights for the formulation of several conclusions, as well as the identification of significant gaps in the current state of research.

The network perspective on internationalization, which was developed from the study of large European companies, is also applicable in analyzing the internationalization of EE SME. Further, the study results confirm the assumption underlying the theoretical framework that internationalization mechanisms of EE SME can only be understood by considering personal and institutional relationships in addition to business networks. This is because young firms, in particular, with restricted resources and a weak network position, are compelled to identify alternative methods to gain initial market access. Contacts from previous experiences, as well as those from one's personal and professional networks, in addition to institutional support, all might contribute to the initial internationalization efforts. Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrates that during the initial stages of internationalization, a well-developed

domestic network can serve as a crucial foundation for firms to gain initial access to knowledge, opportunities, and resources. Moreover, it can facilitate the establishment of trustworthiness, which is essential for the development of further relationships.

In summary, the evidence suggests that the internationalization of EE SME is consistent with the essential mechanisms of the business network model. However, it also indicates that the process is considerably more complex due to the numerous limitations, barriers, and constraints that these firms face. In their pursuit of internationalization, EE SME are compelled to continually explore alternative strategies and navigate circuitous trajectories. They must adeptly navigate the intricacies of their relationships and respond quickly to emerging opportunities. Low-threshold institutions and individuals that facilitate access to networks can prove instrumental in enabling the growth of particularly young EE SME.

### ***Research Gap and Rationale for our Research Study***

The SLA results also reveal significant gaps in the current state of research. It is important to consider that all studies are based on samples from individual countries. This makes it challenging to generalize the results, given the differences in environmental and institutional contexts of the respective regions. Consequently, several scholars have called for more studies on SME internationalization across different EE (Haddoud et al., 2019; Manolova et al., 2014; Narooz & Child, 2017). And while the different studies assert the impacts of different types of networks and actors on specific aspects of EE SME internationalization across various world regions, the insights lack granularity and qualitative explanatory power. Questions about the impacts of different actors, the distinction between types of networks or relationship decisions remain largely unanswered. This gap in understanding, however, is crucial for deriving implications for active relationship management, which could be of practical value to managers, institutional leaders and network designers. Ultimately, there is a deficiency in sector-specific research (Zhou et al., 2007). Given the substantial employment prospects of the artisan sector and its relevance for many EE, further studies in this specific industry could prove instrumental in harnessing its potential for economic development and growth.

The authors of this thesis intend to address this gap by conducting a qualitative, explorative study that examines the mechanisms of internationalization of IAEE across

countries based on the experience of diverse internationalization experts from the artisan sector. While the aspiration is to obtain more versatile evidence through this approach, the authors are cognizant that the insights derived are inherently context-specific and by no means will constitute universal truths. These research aspirations, combined with the evident importance of networks in EE SME internationalization and the economic significance of the artisan sector, provide a clear rationale for our research question:

***"How do international artisan firms from EE internationalize from a network perspective?"***

By addressing this question, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of networks in the internationalization of a specific and economically substantial segment of EE SME: the artisan sector. The aim of the study is to generate knowledge to inform the development of internationalization theories and provide practical insights for supporting the growth and development of the artisan sector in EE.

The SLA has revealed both the current state of knowledge regarding EE SME internationalization and significant gaps in understanding the specific dynamics of IAEE internationalization through networks. While existing research provides valuable insights into general patterns of network utilization in emerging economy contexts, the unique characteristics and challenges of artisan enterprises remain underexplored. To address these gaps and advance understanding of IAEE internationalization, the following chapter presents the applied methods for conducting empirical research that specifically examines how AIEEs leverage networks in their internationalization processes.

## Methods

### Research Design and Approach

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the study, designed to address the research question: ‘How do IAEEs internationalize from a network perspective?’. It details the applied methods of data collection and analysis processes, focusing on key aspects such as the purposive snowball sampling strategy and the use of hybrid thematic analysis to ensure a systematic and credible approach to the research.

Selecting an appropriate research design is pivotal to ensuring the validity and reliability of any academic study. Research methods are broadly categorized into qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches, each of which aligns with distinct research objectives and philosophical paradigms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative research methods, which focus on numerical data and statistical analysis for hypothesis testing and emphasize objectivity (Babbie, 2020), contrast with qualitative methods that explore subjective experiences and meanings (Denzin et al., 2024), while mixed-methods approaches integrate these to enable understanding of complex research problems and a comprehensive triangulation (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Qualitative research is recognized for its ability to explore the processes, content, and dynamics of networks (Jack, 2005), as well as to address phenomena arising in response to complex societal challenges (Swift, 2022). The internationalization process of IAEEs is a complex subject embedded in social, economic, and cultural contexts. This research adopts the notion that markets are constructs of social interactions (Polanyi et al., 2010), and networks are viewed as socially constructed interactions among members. Consequently, a social constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes “processes of interaction among individuals” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 52), is adopted. The paradigm acknowledges the existence of multiple realities shaped by various social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This stance informed the researchers' decision to employ qualitative methods, focusing on exploring subjective experiences, interpretations, and meanings. Among the four

basic types of qualitative data collection - observation, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) - interviews were deemed appropriate for capturing network interactions (Lechner & Dowling, 2003). The decision to conduct an empirical study with interviews was made because interviews focus on practitioners' experiences and perspectives and allow for in-depth exploration of rich, nuanced insights and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Gläser and Laudel (2010) argue that expert interviews are particularly suitable for reconstructing social situations or processes, as researchers often study contexts they are not directly part of (2010, p. 12). Although expert interviews are widely used in sociological research, they are not without critique. Expert interviews can be highly interpretative (Bogner et al., 2009), overly structured through pre-designed guides leading to restrict natural flow of conversation and limit the depth of insights gained (Gläser & Laudel, 2010) or providing selective knowledge filtered by interest of the expert (Flick, 2018). Despite these challenges, expert interviews remain valuable for studying social phenomena, especially accessing insider perspectives on complex systems or networks (Döringer, 2021), making them particularly suitable for examining the network processes of IAEE internationalization in this study.

Exploratory interviews were conducted to gather insights about the complex and insufficiently researched internationalization process of AIEEs, rather than comparing data or acquiring standardized data, as seen in systematizing and theory-generating expert interviews (Bogner & Menz, 2009; Stebbins, 2001). Semi-structured interviews were selected as the preferred approach because they balance structure with flexibility, enabling the exploration of predefined themes while allowing participants to introduce new perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Robson, 2011). This method is well-suited for investigating the dynamics of social networks due to its ability to capture detailed accounts of participants' interactions and decision-making processes (Lechner & Dowling, 2003).

The interviews were conducted in phases, starting with preliminary interviews (n=4), continuing with the core data collection within three phases (phase 1;2 n=5; phase 3 n=10) and ending with validation interviews (n=2), as shown in the following **Table 2**.

**Table 2***Overview of Preliminary Interviews, Phase 1-3, Validation Interviews*

| Preliminary | Phase 1 | Phase 2 | Phase 3 | Validation |
|-------------|---------|---------|---------|------------|
| P1          | I1      | I6      | I11     | V1         |
| P2          | I2      | I7      | I12     | V2         |
| P3          | I3      | I8      | I13     |            |
| P4          | I4      | I9      | I14     |            |
|             | I5      | I10     | I15     |            |
|             |         |         | I16     |            |
|             |         |         | I17     |            |
|             |         |         | 18      |            |
|             |         |         | 19      |            |
|             |         |         | 20      |            |

By adopting this research methods, the researchers aim to capture the complexity of themes in the internationalization processes of IAEs. The focus is on selected subset of themes, acknowledging that these are not objective truths, but rather intersubjective understandings shaped by the experiences and contexts of the experts interviewed (Burr, 2015). This approach ensures a focused analysis of emerging patterns and recurring themes relevant to practitioners within a defined theoretical framework, rather than offering a comprehensive overview of all themes related to the internationalization of IAEs.

By establishing a robust research design, this study sets the foundation for gathering in-depth insights into the complex dynamics of internationalization, paving the way for the detailed discussion on reflexivity and positionality of the researchers in the subsequent subchapter.

### **Reflexivity and Positionality of the Researchers**

The researchers of this empirical study engaged in continuous reflection on their evolving positionality, acknowledging how their identities, backgrounds, and social contexts influenced the research process. This reflexivity ensured transparency and contextualized findings (Holmes, 2020).

The research team consists of three members enrolled in a master's program in Sustainable Entrepreneurship. The team included one White cisgender male, one White cisgender female, and one Brown cisgender male. Members brought diverse cultural backgrounds (Germany, Moldova, Sri Lanka), linguistic skills (German, English, Spanish, Russian, Tamil), and experiences in EE through cultural roots, countries of birth, professional engagements, and extended travel. While the team primarily identified as German, these diverse experiences influenced their understanding of the research context in a broader cultural understanding as shown in the following **Table 3**. For instance, the researchers' experiences in EE (e.g., Sri Lanka, Panama, Chile, Moldova) provided valuable insights into cultural nuances in business relationships, power dynamics between emerging and ME, and the intricate role of diaspora networks in internationalization processes. This dual perspective enabled a more nuanced analysis of the data, incorporating viewpoints from both mature and emerging markets.

**Table 3**

*Researchers Profiles of this Study*

| Cultural Background                                                                     | Experience in EE                                                                                                                      | Professional Experience                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Researcher 1 (female, 29 years)                                                         |                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Born in Moldova, grew up mostly in Germany, fluent in German, Russian, English, Spanish | Lived first 5 years in Moldova, volunteered 1 year in Chile, travelled Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia | Bachelor in Real Estate Management (Germany), Experience in Project and Investment Management in Real Estate, Volunteer (Chile)                                    |
| Researcher 2 (male, 28 years)                                                           |                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Born in Germany, grew up in Germany, fluent in German, English, Spanish                 | Volunteered in 1 year Panama, worked 3 months in Uruguay                                                                              | Bachelor in Business Administration/Sustainability Sciences (Germany), Experience in Project Management, Mobility Infrastructure, Chamber of Commerce and Industry |

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|                                                                                                             |                                                |                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                             |                                                | (Uruguay), Volunteer<br>(Panama)                                                                                                                                             |
| <hr/>                                                                                                       |                                                |                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Researcher 3 (male, 25 years)                                                                               |                                                |                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <hr/>                                                                                                       |                                                |                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Born in Germany, grew up in Germany, Sri Lankan Tamil cultural background, fluent in German, English, Tamil | Regular travels to family members in Sri Lanka | Bachelor in Sustainable Development (Germany), Experience in Sales Management with direct-trade coffee, Volunteer in a Diaspora Development Cooperation (Germany, Sri Lanka) |

Their academic foundation in Germany's higher education system influenced their research perspectives, potentially affecting their interpretation of expert responses and practices. The team's professional experience spanning project management, real estate, development cooperation and mobility provided multiple analytical perspectives. However, their positioning within a ME with stable socio-economic conditions - acknowledged as a privilege - potentially created limitations in fully understanding the challenges faced by experts in EE (Muhammad et al., 2015).

To address these limitations, the team balanced personal involvement with analytical rigor, and continuous reflection by discussing how their lived experiences intersected with the research topic. This approach included examining power dynamics in researcher-participant relationships and engaging in critical bias reflection (Finlay, 2002).

A major advantage of the team-based research approach was the continuous exchange of theoretical and practical insights. This collaborative process facilitated reflection and reinterpretation, changing and validating from different perspectives, thus enhancing the quality of the research. Transformation occurred through dialogue, where individual perspectives were collectively examined, allowing for ongoing triangulation of insights. To maintain reflexivity, the team used research diaries and held daily update and weekly discussion meetings to shape the development of the

study and the interpretation of findings (Ortlipp, 2015). The researchers engaged in peer discussions and continually challenged their assumptions throughout the research process. By consciously reflecting on their socio-cultural positions, the researchers acknowledged inherent biases and aligned their interpretations with the study's epistemological framework. This process resulted in adjusting the research question from the initial "What viable network factors influence the internationalization of IAEE into mature economies?" to a more refined version which captured the internationalization as a perspective rather than an accumulation of factors leading to the final research question: "How do IAEE internationalize from a network perspective?". According to Agee (2009) this process of reshaping the research question, which initially feels like a step back, is a common occurrence during data collection or analysis and is part of a "dynamic, reflective qualitative inquiry process" (p. 445).

The transparency and reflexivity in handling researcher biases not only strengthen the credibility of the findings but also inform the ethical considerations outlined in the next subchapter on informed consent.

## **Informed Consent**

Throughout the research process, ethical principles in qualitative research, such as informed consent and confidentiality were adhered to (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). During the initial contact with the experts, the research team provided a clear explanation of the purpose of the study and invited participants to voluntarily attend the interviews. At the beginning of each interview, the purpose of the study, the use of the data and the storage procedures were reiterated. Each participant was explicitly asked for permission to record and transcribe the interview and to use the data for research purposes. Additionally, participants were informed that their names, as well as the names of their current or former employers, companies, or brands, would be anonymized in any potential publication of the thesis to ensure confidentiality. Anonymity was the default, unless explicit permission was granted by the interviewee to disclose their identity. Each participant received an information sheet, which included a detailed data protection consent form compliant with General Data Protection Regulation regulations (see **Appendix 4**). These measures ensured

compliance with ethical research standards, promoted transparency and participant confidence.

### **Preliminary Interviews**

Prior to the core data collection phase of this research study, four preliminary expert interviews were conducted with experts in the field of IAEE. The four experts were interviewed individually in online meetings via Microsoft Teams, with each interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes and involving all three researchers. As these interviews were not part of the final data collection, the exploratory interviews were not audio-recorded and transcribed. However, the interviews were protocolled and discussed afterwards within the research team.

The experts for the four exploratory interviews were recruited through the research team's professional extended network. Meetings were arranged in advance via email or social communication channels. The participants were selected to represent a wide range of professional experience in different roles and forms of employment within the craft sector. All experts have several years of professional experience (>10 years) in the field. The experts represent female and male genders, different countries of birth, cultural backgrounds and current locations in order to include different cultural perspectives and to represent both emerging and developed economies within the sample. Further details about the experts cultural and professional background are displayed in **Table 4** (for detailed profiles see **Appendix 5**). The selection of four participants was intended to balance the need for different perspectives with the practical constraints of time and resources, in line with Van Teijlingen & Hundley's (2002) recommendations for qualitative pilot studies. The purpose of these preliminary interviews was to develop a first shared understanding of the research topic as well.

**Table 4**

*Experts of the Four Preliminary Interviews*

| No. | Role        | Organization (location)                          |
|-----|-------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| P1  | CEO/Founder | Online Retailer (Switzerland)                    |
| P2  | Consultant  | Development Cooperations (Germany/International) |
| P3  | CEO/Founder | Online Retailer (Germany)                        |

The semi-structured and exploratory interviews aimed to narrow the research field, consolidate the research question, inform the research design and test an interview guide open to emerging themes. Moreover, the research team sought to validate their preliminary research scope with practitioners to sharpen the research purpose and derive a research question that was relevant and feasible for the field of AIEE. This approach proved fruitful as the research team was able to extract relevant information and gain validation for the relevance of the research question. The questions during the preliminary interviews were structured around three categories:

- i) Problem (e.g. "How do you frame the problem of market access for IAEEs?")
- ii) Causes (e.g. "What conditions can you detect for the problem?") and
- iii) Solutions (e.g. "What solutions can you identify?").

The interviews revealed that market access for IAEEs is complicated through various peculiarities, in particular the prevalence of personal relationships as a precondition for internationalization and the challenge of establishing long-term business relationships due to 'one-time orders'. Based on these findings, the research team further explored theoretical concepts surrounding the internationalization process of artisans, with a particular focus on 'one-time orders' as a significant barrier for IAEEs.

### **Data Collection: Expert Interviews**

This subchapter elaborates on the execution of expert interviews, describing the phased approach and techniques used to capture the nuanced perspectives essential for analyzing the internationalization of artisan enterprises. The rationale for the sample size and participant selection are discussed in the subsequent chapters.

To collect the data for this study, the researchers employed a three-phase structure with 20 expert interviews:

1. 5 expert interviews for exploration of relevant themes
2. 5 expert interviews focused on selected relevant themes

3. 10 expert interviews for in-depth exploration of identified context specific themes and phenomena

Prior to each interview, comprehensive background research was conducted on the experts' current and previous professional function, companies, and brands using multiple data sources (corporate reports, LinkedIn profiles, company websites, and social media platforms). This preparation enhanced understanding of each expert's perspective, which is influenced by their cultural background, country of birth, location, organizational context, and personal/professional experiences in EE.

The interviews were primarily conducted by one consistent research team member across all sessions, enhancing data consistency and comparability. Online meetings were selected based on both practical considerations and the aim to conduct interviews in a setting that was natural and comfortable for the interviewees (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were scheduled in advance via email or social communication tools.

The exploratory approach of semi-structured interviews was applied across all three phases. An interview guide was developed to cover topics relevant to i) the experts' professional experience and functions, ii) their current or previous employer/brand, and iii) their attitudes and experiences toward professional networks involving IAEE. At each phase of the data collection process, the interview guide was refined to make the questions more relevant and practical, and to determine whether they elicited the experts' perspective on the particular topic (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide of phase 1-3 is shown in detail in (**Appendix 6, Appendix 7, Appendix 8**). Due to the inherent flexibility of semi-structured interviews, each conversation reveals slightly different thematic focuses, shaped by the expert's unique perspective and experience. Open-ended questions are employed to capture new central dimensions of the intended conversation themes. The interview guide's structure consistently follows a pattern of initial open questions, followed by questions narrowing down to specific themes or theoretical concepts and closing with reflections.

The first phase (I1-5) of the research study, is of a divergent nature, with the aim of exploring a wide range of issues with the primary aim of identifying variations in perspectives in relation to the functions of experts (Stebbins, 2001). Inquiry is guided by questions such as, 'Can you describe the artisans or partners you collaborate with?'

and ‘Who are your main customers?’ This approach is designed to unveil personal or organizational stances, also showing whether experiences are predominantly influenced by a developed or EE perspective. Additionally, the investigation of “one-time orders” through questions like ‘Can you tell us what experiences you have had with one-time orders so far?’ is intensified to explore this phenomenon identified in preliminary interviews. This initial phase is central in establishing a foundational comprehension of the different roles, diverse perspectives, and the challenges encountered during the internationalization process. It facilitates the identification of a broad spectrum of thematic areas relevant to practitioners. After conducting the first interviews, the research team discussed the empirical findings, emphasizing the adequacy with which significant themes could be addressed during the interview, resulting in a higher comprehension of different perspectives through the research team. However, the breadth of the inquiry results at times in a detraction from the intended themes, leading to occasionally superficial responses. This recognition necessitated a deeper refinement of the interview guide, considering alignment of the findings to date with the theoretical framework. This iterative process underscored the adaptive nature of qualitative research methodologies in response to emergent data.

Building on the findings of the initial phase, the second phase (I6-10) worked convergently to narrow the focus to key themes that reflect the findings from initial phase in line with the theoretical framework, resulting in a wide range of theory-driven questions like ‘How important have personal or professional networks been in identifying, establishing and maintaining your cooperation with the artisans?’ (theory-driven question on network types) or ‘Can you describe how information or resources are shared between partners?’ (theory-driven question on dynamic capabilities). In addition, the questions moved away from the problem (“one-time orders”) and towards the desired state by focusing on “long-term cooperations by/with IAEEs” with questions like ‘What factors do you think have influenced the success or challenges of these cooperations?’ Compared to the first interview guide, fewer themes were addressed, allowing for deeper exploration of successful cooperations from a network process perspective. After reflecting on and discussing the empirical findings from phases one and two, the team recognized, among other things, that the questions now strike a desired balance between guiding and allowing space for emerging themes. Further, the interview guide was once again sharpened to draw attention to the specific theme focusing on the role and functions of intermediaries in the internationalization process.

The third phase (I11-20) deepens the specific theme identified in the previous phases and provided a detailed and nuanced exploration of the intermediary function with questions such as ‘Which skills or qualities have you found most crucial as an intermediary?’ The interview guide focused on a limited number of theory-driven questions grouped into four main areas: social embeddedness, network position, trust building, and knowledge opportunities. This contrasts with the broader set of questions in previous phases, narrowing down to the perspectives of buyers/designers, artisans and intermediaries, allowing for a once more granulated analysis of their roles and a deeper understanding of themes within their context-specific experience. The higher number of 10 interviews at this stage allowed for a comprehensive analysis.

To validate and corroborate the findings from the prior interviews, two additional expert interviews were conducted. This was done to ensure a triangulation of the findings as recommended in qualitative research. Engaging experts who can provide additional or contrasting viewpoints enhances the data's credibility and reliability (Morse, 2015). This phase of triangulation (Flick, 2018) seeks to confirm that the conclusions are robust, incorporating feedback that reflects the experts' experiences. As a result, the experts' validation was overall confirmatory, while the research team recognizes it as indicative feedback.

In execution, the online meetings were recorded through the online communication tool Microsoft Teams, later converted from a video to an audio file, which are accessible in **Appendix 9**, and transcribed through the tool MacWhisper in the first draft. As the next step, the transcription file was double-checked for transcription errors or misinterpretations of the dialog through a research team member. The final transcriptions (see **Appendix 10**) were later used for the coding process. The transcription follows a simple transcription system as proposed by Dresing, Pehl, & Schmieder (2015). Interviews were conducted in English and German, while DeepL Translator<sup>2</sup> was utilized for German interviews. This thesis follows the guidelines of the APA 7th edition.

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<sup>2</sup> AI-based, information security certificated translator (ISO 27001)

The presented data collection process ensures a comprehensive dataset, providing a solid basis for later thematic analysis. The sampling strategy and criteria for participant selection are detailed in the following section.

### Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

The study employed expert interviews following Meuser and Nagel's (2002, 2009) conceptualization of experts as individuals who hold responsibility for developing or implementing solutions and policies within organizations. This choice was guided by the need to ensure high validity and reliability of findings through data collection from individuals with substantial domain expertise (Littig, 2009). The role(s) of the interviewed experts and their organizations are displayed in the following **Table 5**.

**Table 5**

*Overview of Experts of the Interviews*

| No. | Role                   | Organization (location)                             |
|-----|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| I1  | Researcher             | Academic Project (Germany)                          |
| I2  | Researcher             | Research Agency (International)                     |
| I3  | CEO/Founder            | Online Retailer, NPO (Armenia)                      |
| I4  | Researcher             | University (USA)                                    |
| I5  | Researcher             | Academic Project (Germany)                          |
| I6  | CEO                    | Online Retailer (Germany)                           |
| I7  | Designer/Brand Founder | Fashion Brand (International/Hong Kong)             |
| I8  | Designer/Brand Founder | Fashion Brand (Denmark)                             |
| I9  | CEO/Founder            | Online Retailer (Germany)                           |
| I10 | Researcher             | Academic Project (Germany)                          |
| I11 | CEO/Founder            | Digital Platform/Marketplace<br>(USA/International) |
| I12 | Consultant             | Government Agency (Netherlands)                     |
| I13 | CEO/Founder            | Digital Services (Sweden/International)             |
| I14 | CEO/Founder            | Digital Platform (UK/International)                 |
| I15 | Designer/Brand Founder | Carpet Brand (Germany)                              |
| I16 | Employee               | IAEE (Peru)                                         |
| I17 | CEO/Founder            | IAEE (India)                                        |

|     |                   |                                                        |
|-----|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| I18 | CEO/Founder       | Digital Platform (Austria/Romania)                     |
| I19 | Brand Founder/CEO | jewelry Brand (Italy)                                  |
| I20 | CEO/Founder       | Digital Platform/Marketplace<br>(Sweden/International) |

*Note.* I1 and I17 was conducted with two interviewees, both representing the same role. Platforms focus on interaction or content sharing, while marketplaces are a subset of platforms that support transactions and B2B/B2C commerce (Täuscher & Laudien, 2018).

A dual sampling approach was implemented, combining purposive and snowball sampling strategies to optimize both the depth and breadth of expert perspectives (Noy, 2008; Patton, 2010). The initial participant recruitment began through the research team's professional network, followed by a systematic snowball sampling process where interviewed experts recommended additional qualified participants. In addition to the snowball technique, suitable experts were researched based on predefined criteria and contacted by the research team. In total, approximately 130 experts or organizations were approached via mail and approximately 40 were contacted through other social media channels like Instagram or LinkedIn.

The following expertise-based selection criteria were established to identify qualified participants from the artisan sector in developed and EE:

1. Minimum of five years of professional experience in the artisan sector
2. Leadership position/function (e.g. holding C-level or founder)
3. Active involvement in organizations operating within the artisan sector
4. Demonstrated expertise in cross-cultural business relationships or comprehensive understanding of the artisan sector

This approach to participant selection evolved parallel with ongoing data analysis, allowing for iterative sampling that addressed emerging themes and knowledge gaps (Schreier, 2018). Following Suri's (2011) recommendations, this dynamic sampling strategy enabled the deliberate selection of participants whose

expertise could either provide novel insights or deeper elaboration of focused themes and phenomena.

The experts were selected based on thematic orientation of each of the three phases indicated in the previous chapter:

**Phase 1** (I1-5): Initial interviews were conducted with a focus on academic researchers to validate the theoretical framework underpinning the study, next to a practitioner perspective of an (IAEE) organization to ensure alignment between theoretical constructs and practical sector knowledge.

**Phase 2** (I6-10): This phase focused on experts from online retail platforms and designers from both perspectives, emerging and developed economies, aiming to incorporate practical insights from professionals actively engaged in the field.

**Phase 3** (I11-20): The final phase primarily engaged intermediaries, supplemented by additional IAEE representatives and designers. This phase served to deepen understanding of intermediary roles and capture diverse perspectives across the network.

The final participant sample (n=20) achieved gender parity with an equal distribution of male and female participants. Geographical distribution analysis revealed that participants' organizations were predominantly based in Germany (75%), with additional representation from Asia (10%), North America (10%), and South America (5%). This distribution showed a notable concentration in ME (85%), a limitation that is addressed in the discussion section.

The age distribution of participants indicated that the majority (65%) were between 36 and 60 years old, with the remaining participants (35%) falling within the 25-35 age bracket, reflecting a considerable amount of professional experience. While gender and age data were based on research estimations, organizational locations were verified through desktop research.

## **Sample Size Rationale**

This subchapter provides a rationale for the sample size chosen in this study, explaining how it balances depth of inquiry with breadth of perspectives in exploring the internationalization processes.

The sample size of 20 is based on a combination of methodological considerations and practical constraints, allowing for in-depth exploration and sincere exchanges (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). This sample size strikes a balance between the need for diverse perspectives and the depth of insight required to explore complex phenomena and follows scientific practice for qualitative expert interviews in research (Guest et al., 2006). Drawing on the concept of information power, which suggests that high information density within the sample can enable saturation at a moderate sample size (Malterud et al., 2016). The number of experts selected for this research study thus allows for meaningful analysis.

The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation and remained flexible throughout the data collection process, allowing for additional interviews if new insights continue to emerge, or fewer if saturation is reached earlier (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017). A saturation was detected after 119/20, resulting in the closing of the data collection.

## **Data Analysis: Hybrid thematic analysis**

Hybrid thematic analysis, as outlined in this subchapter, represents the chosen method of data interpretation, blending deductive and inductive approaches to uncover patterns within the qualitative data, and will be discussed in detail.

Among others, the social psychologist Boyatzis (1998) laid the groundwork for the structured approach to qualitative data analysis by bridging theory and practice and emphasizing the development of codes and themes. He introduced a framework for thematic analysis that can integrate both deductive (theory-driven codes) and inductive (data-driven coding) approaches, positioning him as a precursor to later methodological discussions led by scientists such as Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006) and Braun & Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis was chosen due to its advantage of being suitable to be applied within a range of theoretical frameworks and research

questions dealing with people's experiences and construction of particular themes in special contexts (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Compared with other forms of analysis like narrative analysis, which examines *how* the story is constructed (Riessman, 2008), or content analysis, systematically quantifying large amounts of content (Krippendorff, 2019), the thematic analysis identifies and interprets themes across the database while focusing on shared meanings and ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A hybrid thematic analysis approach was adopted, integrating both deductive and inductive coding strategies (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This choice allowed for the systematic application of theory-driven a priori codes derived from existing theoretical frameworks, while maintaining the flexibility to incorporate emergent themes through data-driven a posteriori codes. This balanced approach enabled an analysis that was both theoretically grounded and responsive to novel insights emerging from the empirical data. The hybrid thematic analysis followed an iterative, multi-phase process rather than a linear progression (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The analytical procedure, detailed in **Table 6**, incorporated recursive movements between phases to ensure thorough data interpretation and theme development.

**Table 6**

*Phases of the Hybrid Thematic Analysis*

| No. | Phase                                 | Description of the Process                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Create a priori codes                 | Create theory-driven codes in alignment with research aim and question.                                                                                                         |
| 2   | Familiarizing yourself with your data | Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.                                                                                   |
| 3   | A priori and a posteriori coding      | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each a priori code, while generating a posteriori codes. |
| 4   | Searching for themes                  | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.                                                                                     |
| 5   | Reviewing theme                       | Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set                                                                                 |

- (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
- |   |                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6 | Defining and naming themes | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.                                                                                       |
| 7 | Producing the report       | The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. |

For this study 11 a priori theory-driven codes were generated. The codes are derived from the insights of the SLA and the main theoretical framework (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 2009), of this study. According to Boyatzis (1998) codes are "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (p. 63).

The codebook (codes and descriptions) was drafted by one researcher, then discussed within the entire research team and adjusted iteratively. This process of collaborative refinement, ensured a shared understanding of the code's meaning and applicability, enhancing consistency and reliability of the analysis (MacQueen et al., 1998). In alignment with the coding procedure of Swain (2018), each interview was screened for each code, and suitable snippets of the transcript assigned to the referring code, while certain snippets could also be referred to multiple codes (see **Appendix 11**). In order to ensure a common understanding of each snippet within the research team, each snippet was contextualized in written form immediately below the snippet that was assigned to a code. This approach was fundamental to the collaborative development of a posteriori codes and the clear distinction between snippets to be assigned to the codes and those not, resulting in the identification of gaps in the code assignment of certain interviews. Because the a posteriori codes were developed during the process of coding and all codes were adjusted several times during the process, the coding was executed various times, ensuring all codes to be applied in all

interview transcriptions and resulting in a distillation of suitable codes. During the coding process, which was done by two researchers in an iterative process, 4 posteriori codes were derived inductively, resuming in a total of 15 codes as seen in the following **Table 7**.

**Table 7**

*Codebook utilized in the Hybrid Thematic Analysis*

| No. | Code                               | Description of the Codes                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Objective Knowledge                | Knowledge gained from "studying" available data (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977)                                                                                                                                |
| 2   | Experiential Knowledge             | Knowledge gained from experience, i.e. working with/ in the target market (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977)                                                                                                      |
| 3   | Knowledge Opportunities            | The body of knowledge and opportunities (as part of knowledge) which drive the internationalization process (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009)                                                                    |
| 4   | Learning, Creating, Trust-Building | Dynamic processes of developing market capabilities while building mutual trust with relationship partners (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009)                                                                     |
| 5   | Network position                   | The cumulative strength and quality of relationships within relevant mature market networks. (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009)                                                                                   |
| 6   | Relationship Commitment Decisions  | Strategic decisions about investing in and developing network relationships for long-term market presence. (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009)                                                                     |
| 7   | Liability of Outsidership          | Challenges emerged from not being part of relevant networks (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009)                                                                                                                    |
| 8   | Business Associates                | Inter-firm relationships (Che Senik et al., 2011)                                                                                                                                                        |
| 9   | Personal Relations                 | Personal relations of entrepreneurs or managers which effect internationalization. Includes relationships with relatives, friends, colleagues, and previous employment contacts (Che Senik et al., 2011) |
| 10  | Government Agencies                | All type of government agencies involved in internationalization networks (Che Senik et al., 2011)                                                                                                       |

|    |                                |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 11 | Psychic distance               | factors preventing the flow of information, which include barriers in language, education, business practices, culture or industrial development (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977)        |
| 12 | Psychic distance bridging      | Activities or mechanisms to overcome the limited flow of information related with psychic distance                                                                                |
| 13 | Networking Preconditions       | market readiness, If IAEE business practices keep up with the expectations of the market (professional standards). Can be influenced through learning, training, experience, etc. |
| 14 | Intermediary, Agents & Enabler | individuals or organizations that facilitate relationship-building, including their roles, tasks, characteristics                                                                 |
| 15 | Non-economic motivations       | Motives for actions related with internationalization, especially relationship commitment decision-making which cannot be reduced to pure economic or business interests          |

According to Boyatzis, themes are “a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (1998, p. 161). To detect common themes, main themes of each code were extracted, making it feasible to see common patterns among the codes. Afterwards it was possible to draw connections between themes and detect overarching themes and phenomena as displayed in the maps in **Appendix 12, Error! Reference source not found..**

As defined by Creswell and Poth, phenomena in qualitative research are “the central concept being examined by the qualitative researcher [...] the key idea, event, happening, or situation that the researcher wishes to explore” (2018, p. 326). In this context, a phenomenon refers to a distinct fact, event, circumstance, including recurring patterns of behavior, unique challenges, innovative practices, or notable trends that shape the internationalization process of IAEE. These phenomena serve as focal points for in-depth exploration, guiding the iterative process of data collection and analysis to uncover nuanced themes influencing internationalization to matured economies in the IAEE context. The identification and examination of these

phenomena and emerging themes allow for a rich, contextual understanding of the complexities inherent in international business networks.

By iteratively aligning the identified emerging themes and conflicting data with the theoretical framework, this research analyzed outliers to provide new insights and contribute to the scientific discourse (Miles et al., 2019). This approach not only enhances the credibility of the findings by addressing practical explanations and evidence but also deepens the understanding of the internationalization process of IAEE. In the following chapter, the results and contributions of the research study are presented in detail.

This chapter has methodically outlined the research design, participant selection, and analytical approaches, establishing a robust framework for the investigation of artisan enterprise internationalization from EE. Moving forward, the next chapter will present the results, translating the meticulously gathered and analyzed data into meaningful insights that aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on internationalization of AIEE.

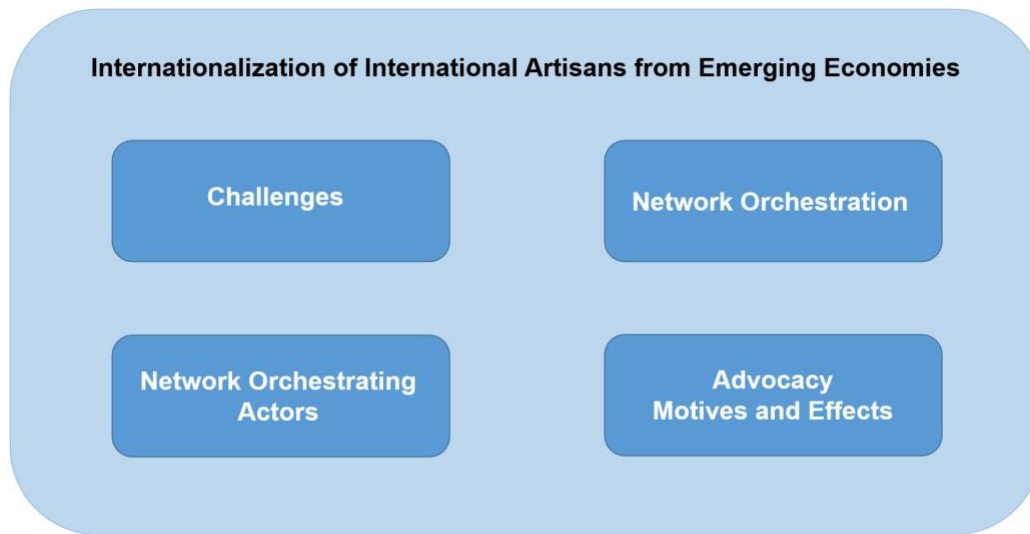
## Results

### Overview of Themes

The findings of the thematic analysis of 20 expert interviews are presented in this chapter. The analysis revealed four interconnected themes that shed light on observed components of IAEE internationalization from a network perspective. This section provides an overview of the four main themes which will be elaborated in detail in the following chapters:

1. Challenges
2. Network Orchestration
3. Network Orchestrating Actors
4. Advocacy Motives and Effects

The theme 'Challenges' describes the challenges and adaptation faced specifically by IAEE in cross cultural collaborations during the internationalization process. 'Network orchestration' refers to the process and types of activities involved in the formation and management of internationalization networks. The theme 'Network Orchestrating Actors' (NOA) addresses the identified types of key actors involved in the process of internationalization of IAEEs. 'Advocacy Motives and Effects' describes the distinct motives of actors who influence the internationalization process and their outcomes. The main themes are illustrated in **Figure 5**.

**Figure 5***Overview of main themes*

These four themes incorporate various subthemes which were clustered through the thematic analysis as shown in **Table 8**.

**Table 8***Overview of research items*

| No.                   | Theme | Subtheme                                            |
|-----------------------|-------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Challenges            |       |                                                     |
| 1                     |       | Language Barriers                                   |
| 2                     |       | Communication and Trust-Building Differences        |
| 3                     |       | Differences in Education and Business Practices     |
| 4                     |       | Differences in Institutional and Market Contexts    |
| 5                     |       | Different Cultural Perceptions of Design            |
| 6                     |       | Power Dynamics                                      |
| 7                     |       | Adapting to Differences                             |
| Network Orchestration |       |                                                     |
| 1                     |       | Context-Dependent Relationship Commitment Decisions |
| 2                     |       | Intermediary Activities                             |
| 3                     |       | Capability Development                              |
| 4                     |       | Active Network Positioning                          |

| Network Orchestrating Actors |                                                                |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                            | Advocacy Organizations                                         |
| 2                            | Commercial Market Intermediaries                               |
| 3                            | Mission-driven Individuals                                     |
| Advocacy Motives and Effects |                                                                |
| 1                            | Motives - Poverty Alleviation and Charity                      |
| 2                            | Motives - Arts and Aesthetics                                  |
| 3                            | Motives - Ethnic Solidarity or Support of Specific Communities |
| 4                            | Motives - Fair Trade Activism                                  |
| 5                            | Motives - Promoting Craft Culture and Traditional Techniques   |
| 6                            | Effects - Advocacy-driven Network Orchestration                |
|                              | Effects - Economically and Socially Balanced Commitment        |
| 7                            | Decision-Making                                                |

The following chapters will examine each theme and its associated subthemes in detail, providing a comprehensive analysis of IAEE internationalization through a network perspective.

## **Challenges**

### ***Overview***

The theme “Challenges” addresses distinct challenges and barriers faced by IAEE in establishing and developing relationships as part of the internationalization processes. The emerged challenges encompass language barriers, communication and trust-building differences, differences in education and business practices, differences in institutional and market contexts, different cultural perceptions of design as well as power dynamics. The final sub-theme contains insights into the required adaptation processes from IAEE and their (potential) relationship partners, highlighting the elevated commitment necessary to make IAEE internationalization possible.

A repeatedly found topic in the interview data was the wide disparity between IAAE and their relationship partners from ME and how these differences can turn into barriers for relationship processes. I8 formulates this succinctly: *“their style is so different to ours. There’s also like two worlds clashing, but you still have like a really nice communication about it”*. While some of the identified differences and barriers fall under the category of psychic distance, the data show differences and barriers unique for emerging-mature market relationships and the artisan sector. The particular EE-ME barriers that have been identified indicate, that the concept of psychic distance might not be sufficient to be applied in the EE-ME internationalization context.

### ***Language Barriers***

A recurring theme in numerous interviews was the issue of language barriers (I1, I9, I17, I18, I19). The ability to communicate preferences, expectations, quality issues and ideas successfully is of paramount importance in the artistically oriented arts and crafts sector. The limited flow of information associated with language barriers can impede also the building of a trustworthy and intense relationship across different cultural contexts. I17 indicated that the endeavor to establish international operations in Germany was significantly influenced by the absence of German language proficiency. They state: *“The challenges that we had was that time I could not speak German...In Germany, opening a business, this means that you have to be there 100%”*. The significance of effective communication in business relationships within the artisan sector was evidenced by the observation that the use of English as a common foreign language facilitated communication but did not entirely eliminate language barriers: *“Within the companies we work with, the bosses all speak English, but it’s better to communicate with them in Nepali”* (I9). Another strategy to overcome language barriers was the employment of language translators (I6, 18, 19), which hinders direct information flow as well and requires further commitment. In essence, language barriers are common barriers for internationalization, which might be mitigated through using a common foreign language or employing translators. However, they remain a significant obstacle to fully overcome.

### ***Communication and Trust-Building Differences***

Apart from the language, different patterns and cultural behaviors were found to also effect communication and consequently relationship processes. A common theme

in the data is the different levels of directness in communication that occurred especially between European/ US actors and Southeast Asian IAAE: *"is also very culturally conditioned, because even in Nepal, you would rarely or never get the answer that something doesn't work or that something is difficult or that it's just a different form of politeness and actually everything always works and everything works, but when you get there, you realize that it's not like that"* (I15). The different levels of directness can create a significant barrier to building relationships because in the matured economies of Europe, direct communication is associated with transparency, which in turn forms the basis for trust-building: *"And you have to be able to be transparent... European buyers, they prefer that you mention it... trust is very important in business"* (I12).

In addition to impeding the processes of trust-building, divergent communication styles can also influence the level of commitment required for initiating and strengthening relationships. This is particularly evident when one partner feels the need to invest more time on-site to monitor processes, foster trust and a mutual understanding: *"You have to be on site and you can write a thousand emails and you can also call, you can't make any progress, but she was down there for three or four weeks"* (I10), *"In Germany, opening a business, this means that you have to be there 100%"* (I17).

The existence of language barriers and disparate communication patterns can have a detrimental impact on the decision-making processes associated with relationship commitment. The restricted flow of information that results from these factors makes it more challenging to assess potential opportunities, thereby increasing the likelihood that relationships fail or do not materialize at all: *"There may also have been communication problems, I'll say now, in the broadest sense between buyers and producers... so I somehow remember stories like what should be done or the buyers made a request that couldn't be realized at all because the buyers somehow lacked the expertise for production (...) and on the other hand, it also came out afterwards that they somehow canceled some order because they actually wanted some other color or some other pattern and then didn't even ask for it and then afterwards it came out, so, oh yes, we could have done that and then this order didn't come about."* (I1).

The data demonstrated that linguistic and communicative barriers that extend beyond language pose a considerable barrier to the creation and success of relationships in IAEE internationalization, as they require further commitment into different relationship processes.

### ***Differences in Education and Business Practices***

A recurring theme that emerged from the interview data refers to differences in education and business practices that characterize the relationship between IAEE and their business partners. The theme cannot be reduced to different levels of formal education; rather, it reflects the distinctive professional realities of the actors who engage in relationships within IAEE Internationalization. Still, in the eyes of ME actors, deficiency in formal business practices of many IAEE represents a significant obstacle for their internationalization, as one digital platform/ marketplace CEO articulates: *"But of course they are pipeline... there is a massive universe of makers around there that can make it on our platform. They are not formal enough. They are not. The product is not good enough. They are not professional enough"* (I11). Platform operators and artisan support organizations offer learning and capacity development programs to elevate their business practices and thereby create new access to international opportunities (I2, I4, I9, I11, I12, I13). On the other hand, a lack of knowledge about craft processes and techniques can be a challenge for the internationalization of artisans, when customers enter business relationships with unrealistic expectations: *"so I somehow remember stories like what should be done or the buyers made a request that couldn't be realized at all because the buyers somehow lacked the expertise for production"* (I1). I7 exemplified how different levels of knowledge on business and design requires an increased level of commitment into learning processes to reach a mutual level of understanding: *"artisans sometimes from developing countries are working like you know I mean this is what I mentioned, sometimes it's just the business knowledge or even the business of the knowledge of like the designs that you need to spend more time here in Sri Lanka to teach them"* (I7).

Not being able to actively communicate and align the type and channel of communication to potential relationship partners can produce a great barrier for IAEE internationalization: *"I think actually that's one of the hurdles is like how do you get in*

*touch with like a small niche artisan that's somewhere you know you will never go. You'll never be able to reach them. Maybe they don't have the same ability to contact you through the net" (I8). While digital communication channels might facilitate the access to relevant networks, overcoming the liability of outsidership and addressing potential target groups require high levels of commitment: "It requires an extremely high level of marketing, branding and product understanding... because ultimately, I think this is the only way to get attention" (I5).*

### **Differences in Institutional and Market Contexts**

The interview data indicated that the institutional environment plays a significant role in the internationalization of artisans. For artisans operating from weak institutional environments, appeared to be more challenging to establish international relationships and operations: *"in Asia, everything is easier because infrastructure is better... In Africa, in order to make it as an African producer, you have to work extra hard... it is harder in each and every way. There is more corruption. Many of the countries are landlocked. A lot of logistics are extremely expensive"*(I12). The quote shows the recurring theme, which was at first addressed in the orientational interviews, that international competition between artisans seems to be highly subjected by institutional environments, especially between Asian and African regions. While strong institutional environments facilitate IAEE internationalization through the creation of opportunities, access to finance, and other factors (I2, I12), weak institutional environments present risks for potential ME partners, thereby impeding the establishment of relationships. During the interviews, various advocacy organizations were identified as striving to enhance IAEE's international market opportunities from within weak institutional environments through their activities. These institutions are discussed in greater detail in the theme 'Network Orchestrating Actors'.

### **Different Cultural Perceptions of Design**

The analysis revealed significant disparities in how design is perceived and valued across different cultural contexts. This becomes particularly evident in the interview with the carpet trade firm owner I15 who articulated her exchange with Nepalese artisans regarding product colors: *"Colors that are not anchored in the culture and thus not dyed with plants, because especially in Nepal, strong colors represent wealth and happiness and are therefore very positively associated - like a*

*strong red, a strong yellow - there was really no understanding for [alternative approaches]."* This cultural disconnect extends to broader design preferences and market understanding (I7) which requires openness and cultural sensitivity from all relationship partners (I6).

### **Power Dynamics**

A prominent topic that arose in numerous interviews was the examination of the power dynamics at the core of the relationship between the IAEE and ME actors. In interview I4, for instance, it became evident that a large US trade firm had the capacity to incentivize a Peruvian artisan enterprise to overhaul its operational procedures. While this illustration pertains to a constructive advancement of the artisan enterprise, the multifaceted power dynamics were already subjected to scrutiny in the orientation interviews, and numerous interviewees also explicitly highlighted this theme critically. I6 states: *"the mindset is that mostly Westerners are coming into these relationships with preconceptions and very colonial thinking"*. This preconceived attitude can result in adverse effects on IAEE internationalization. For instance, a lack of understanding may lead to the imposition of unattainable requirements or disadvantageous contractual conditions. This phenomenon, which has been previously identified in the preparation for this thesis, is described as 'lightning strike orders'. Lightning strike describes large quantity orders placed by large firms with artisan firms and are often created under challenging conditions and can only be managed by the artisan firms with significant resources. Furthermore, the relationships that emerge from these orders are frequently characterized by a lack of empathy and contractual uncompromisingness: *"We had a big American Armenian and they did it... they wanted tens of thousands of each of them. And we failed to deliver on five and they gave up on us. That's the kind of lightning strike that I don't want"* (I3).

A further barrier that IAEE were potentially facing due to ME-EE power dynamics is a level of prejudice regarding their entrepreneurial capacities: *"If you are based in the global north, so easy to make the assumption that...in the global south, they are just makers and artisans"* (I20). Despite the existence of a discrepancy between reality and the preconceived notions, these prejudices can persist: *"I would have said that 20 years ago, but that's not the case anymore. There are entrepreneurs*

*and designers in India, in Africa, all over the world that are able to meet those standards" (I14).*

In essence, different levels of economic and institutional power seem to be a challenge and potential risk factor for IAEE internationalization. These power dynamics could also be related to different institutional contexts, as IAEEs enter inexperienced contexts in internationalization where they are structurally disadvantaged to local relationship partners and dependent on their goodwill.

### ***Adapting to Differences***

The discrepancies between IAEE and relationship partners from ME are multifaceted and encompass elements that will persist in longer-term relationships, such as disparate institutional and economic contexts. There is no rationale for assuming that these discrepancies can be resolved in relationships; however, the data demonstrated that business partners can adapt to each other under certain conditions, thereby enabling the formation of successful enduring relationships (I6; I7; I8; I15; I18).

A common theme that emerged from the research was the importance of investing additional time in the relationship process for building successful business relationships: *So in that respect it was a very lengthy process... so they took me on a journey with them and I thought that was great" (I15).* As previously outlined, the presence of communication or language barriers can impede the establishment of trust. In this regard, I6 posited that the fostering of a long-term commitment can facilitate the development of trust: *"like if you have a long-term relationship, you are able to build trust and respect. And that's the basis of any relationship that you have with anyone. And that is also the basis of a business relationship in my eyes".* Despite possibly higher initial commitment, collaborative learning and creating lead to more intensive, successful relationships which foster knowledge creation: *"you have to find a way of creating together and sort of like passing on the knowledge of what the market in which you want to sell the products actually needs and then listening to the artisans about what their skills and abilities are" (I7)*

Nevertheless, the term "adaptation" can also be understood to imply an acknowledgment of the respective expertise of the relationship partners and the identification of strategies for leveraging it in a complementary manner: *"sometimes*

*they know how to make stuff like better than you, because they just always doing it... you are also coming to them. And they are the masters in this situation"* (I17). The necessity for collaboration in partnerships, particularly between parties with disparate areas of expertise, was repeatedly underscored. For instance, the IAEE and designers had to align their respective interests: *"it's I think artisans and designer the collaboration and the bond between them, it's much stronger when they are working towards one goal and a product"* (I17), as well as a high level of flexibility in the relationship building: *"Flexibility and openness... So, somehow this perspective, the flat hierarchy"* (I18). The process of learning, creating and trust building and the increased need for communication as illustrated by I6: *"So like, you have to find a middle way, you have to find a way of creating together and sort of like passing on the knowledge of what the market in which you want to sell the products actually needs and then listening to the artisans about what their skills and abilities are and then start thinking about how to match those two things. And that really is it's a process. It can only work with collaboration. And there's a lot of communication during that process."*

## **Synthesis**

The thematic analysis revealed that the relationship building and the challenges and barriers to relationships stood out as a prominent theme. This finding aligns with the theoretical framework, which posits the formation and evolution of relationships as a central mechanism of internationalization. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the dynamics of relationships and the environments in which they evolve are of paramount significance. The concepts of psychic distance and liability of outsidership address some contextual factors that emerged in the interviews, such as differences in language or business practices within the framework. However, the model does not address the dynamics that arise from different positions of power. These factors appear to be significant with regard to IAEE internationalization, given that IAEE entities from disparate regions with varying institutional contexts exist in a competitive environment. As evidenced by the interview data, this competition, coupled with the existence of unilaterally stronger network positions and economic conditions, gave rise to one-sided power relations in relationships. In such relationship constellations, IAEEs are dependent on the goodwill of their relationship partners, which can prove beneficial or detrimental to the IAEE depending on the structural conditions that prevail. It is therefore recommended that greater emphasis be placed on the process of weighing

up the balance of power and the objectives of potential relationship partners as a topic of relationship commitment decisions in IAEE internationalization.

The findings provide a additional aspects on the IAEE's internationalization process. From a network perspective, it is evident that relationships are a fundamental aspect of internationalization. As evidenced by the interview data, the ability to navigate the barriers hinges on the attitudes and objectives of the individuals and entities engaging with the IAEE during the process of internationalization. Conversely, the multitude of actors involved in IAEE internationalization can be attributed to the aforementioned barriers, as they offer solutions to navigate these challenges. The findings regarding the actors are outlined in the 'Network Orchestrating Actors' theme, while the "Network Orchestration" theme delves into the services and activities. Notably, both themes are explicable only in light of the barriers elucidated in this theme.

## **Network Orchestration**

### **Overview**

The findings reveal that IAEE internationalization emerged through deliberate orchestration by mission-driven organizations and individuals rather than primarily through market forces or entrepreneurial action. The processes and activities, which the authors conceptualize as network orchestration are elaborated in this section. In this context, network orchestration can be defined as:

*A systematic approach where artisan internationalization is actively managed and coordinated rather than being driven by market forces or entrepreneurial action alone. Network orchestration involves structured processes of intermediary activities, capability development, and active network positioning, shaped by context-dependent relationship commitment decisions of orchestrating actors.*

The data revealed three distinct yet interrelated orchestration modes through which this process operated, namely intermediary activities, capability development, and active network positioning. These modes were fundamentally shaped by context-dependent relationship commitment decisions made by NOA, which included

advocacy organizations, commercial market intermediaries, and mission-driven individuals. These orchestration modes were often observed to be interlinked or facilitated by the same actor. To illustrate, intermediary activities such as cultural translation and market access facilitation established the foundations for capability development, which in turn enabled more strategic network positioning. The interconnected sub-themes are displayed in **Figure 6**.

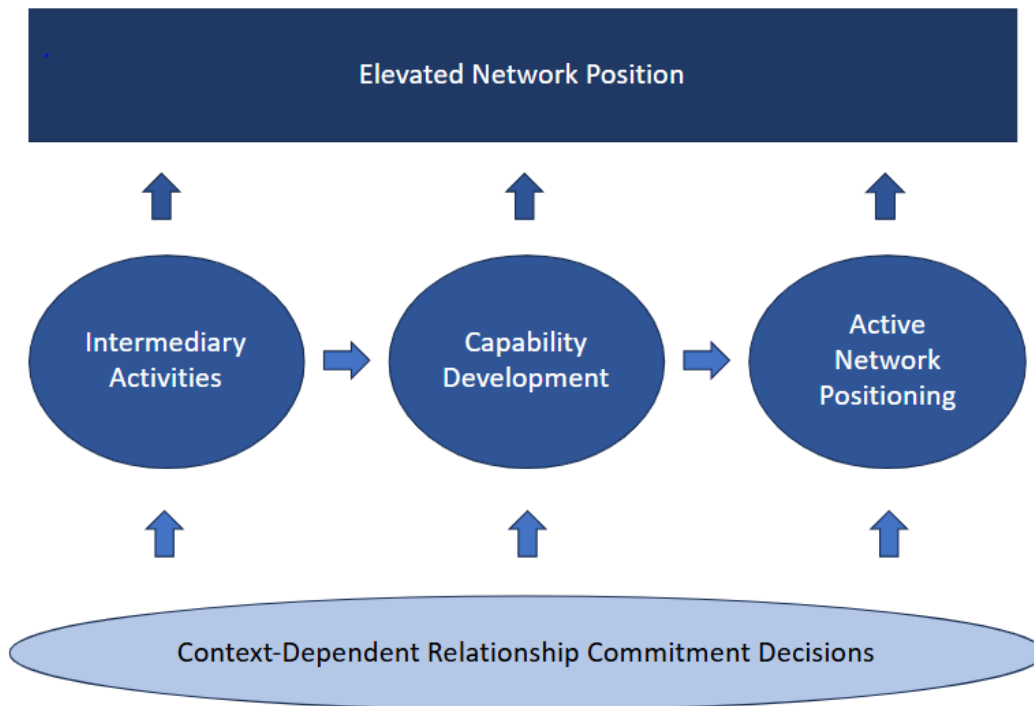
This was evident from the example of an advocacy organization and an IAEE, in which the advocacy organization mediated a business opportunity which laid the foundation for a profound capability development program (I16). This progression was further exemplified by the approach of a digital platform/marketplace to IAEE development. The platform initially connected IAEE to potential buyers through their digital marketplace and provided essential cultural-business translation services. As relationships developed, the digital platform/marketplace then offered structured coaching programs that build specific capabilities in brand development, e-commerce management, and B2B sales techniques. This graduated approach has enabled artisan enterprises to develop from initial market access to establishing direct relationships with high-end brands, strengthening their network position (I11, I14). The activities of advocacy organizations illustrated this interconnection between different network orchestration modes by combining capability building programs with active network positioning (e. g. through introduction of artisan enterprises to business partners on trade fairs (I16)). Each of these modes were shaped by context-dependent relationship commitment decisions, which in turn determined the manner in which orchestrating actors engage with both artisans and buyers. These decisions included the evaluation of artisans' readiness for market participation, the assessment of both parties' alignment with the organization's or individual's mission-driven goals, and the determination of appropriate resource allocation for relationship development (I3; I11; I12). These commitment decisions subsequently informed whether and how orchestrating actors deployed the aforementioned orchestration modes.

The relationship between these modes was not strictly linear; rather, it was iterative and mutually reinforcing. This was evidenced by the practices of a globally active government agency/ advocacy organization, which combines ongoing capability assessment with graduated market exposure (I12). This orchestrated approach seemed especially vital in light of the complex barriers between artisan enterprises and

mature markets, as evidenced in the experiences of both development organizations and commercial platforms operating across these contexts (I2, I6, I7, I8, I11, I14, I19, I20).

**Figure 6**

*Network Orchestrating Activities*



This dynamic, interrelated structured approach as visualized in **Figure 6** represents a departure from traditional market-driven internationalization models. Instead, it suggests a managed process where orchestrating actors systematically create opportunities through mediation, develop artisan enterprises' capabilities and/or strengthen network positions through measurable processes and deliberate network positioning.

### ***Context-Dependent Relationship Commitment Decisions***

The evidence revealed relationship commitment decisions as fundamental mechanisms through which orchestrating actors shaped IAEE internationalization pathways. These decisions reflected the directionality of each organizational mission. In the observed context, relationship commitment decisions emerged not only as

simple binary choices, but also as systematic evaluations that have determined initial network access, development trajectories, and orchestration approaches.

Advocacy organizations demonstrated a systematic approach to evaluating the capabilities of artisan and buyer firms and networks. A government agency systematically assessed both current capabilities and future potential, while digital platforms/ marketplaces employed formal due diligence processes to evaluate business readiness. As a government agency representative explains: *"And you have to be able to recognize ambition because you have to be ambitious to become an exporter, especially if you are working in a developing country... So in order to get through that transitional period in which you prepare yourself as a company, to the moment you get your first orders, you have to work like crazy and invest without much gains"* (I12). Similarly, the CEO of a digital platform/ marketplace demonstrates their structured evaluation approach: *"we have a due diligence process where we ask businesses before we get them onto the platform a number of questions that relates to administratively, where, who owns it and how long have they been in business"* (I11). This careful evaluation reflected a deeper understanding that internationalization requires more than just market opportunity - it demands alignment between the organization's mission and commercial viability.

The interplay between commitment decisions and orchestration modes manifested in distinct patterns across different types of orchestrating actors:

For intermediary activities, the approach of another digital platform illustrated how relationship commitment decisions shaped initial market connections. The platform organization conducted comprehensive evaluations of artisan enterprises, examining their operational reliability, communication capabilities, and professional standards before facilitating buyer relationships (I11, I14). Only after verifying these foundational requirements do both digital platforms actively engage in cultural and business translation between artisans and buyers. As the CEO of one of the platforms emphasizes: *"we have a due diligence process where we ask businesses before we get them onto the platform a number of questions that relate to administratively, where, who owns it and how long have they been in business"* (I11). Yet the evidence indicated these mission-driven decisions consistently balanced social objectives with market

viability. As one expert articulates: *"Green design or social design is not an excuse for poor design, of a poor quality. Not at all..."* (I19)

In capability development, the government agency/ advocacy organization demonstrated how commitment decisions influenced orchestration modes. The organization carefully assessed both current capabilities and future potential through structured evaluation frameworks, considering factors like management commitment, product quality, and growth ambition: *"Some people just want to get rich. That does not work... you have to have a love for products. The love for the handwork, the fine handwork, the quality of the finish. So you have to love your product also"* (I12). This evaluation determined whether and how the agency invested in capability building programs. Their approach reflected a deep understanding that successful internationalization required sustained commitment: *"And you have to be able to recognize ambition because you have to be ambitious to become an exporter, especially if you are working in a developing country... So in order to get through that transitional period in which you prepare yourself as a company, to the moment you get your first orders, you have to work like crazy and invest without much gains"* (I12).

For active network positioning, one platform/ digital marketplace exemplified how commitment decisions shaped visibility and legitimacy building. The platform evaluated artisan enterprises' market readiness through formal verification processes, examining their product quality, operational capabilities, and business maturity (I11). The digital platforms verification programs served to exclude IAEE that did not possess the capabilities to serve the demand of the platforms clients. Their selective approach ensured that platform presence genuinely enhanced network position: *"But of course they are pipeline... there is a massive universe of makers around there that can make it on our platform. They are not formal enough. They are not. The product is not good enough. They are not professional enough"* (I11).

Through these layered commitment decisions, orchestrating actors created structured pathways for IAEE internationalization while maintaining the integrity of their missions. These decisions emerged not just as filtering mechanisms, but rather appeared to shape how orchestrating actors engaged their resources and capabilities in supporting IAEE internationalization.

### ***Intermediary Activities***

The data revealed patterns in how intermediary activities contribute to network orchestration. These activities appear to manifest primarily through EE relationship barriers that bridge gaps between artisan enterprises and mature markets.

Intermediaries addressed multiple layers of translation needs, ranging from basic language barriers to bridging complex business cultural differences. While language translation formed a foundational requirement, as evidenced by development organizations consistently employing local translators: *"We always had a translator who had to communicate with us"* (I18), the more critical translation function involves bridging deeper cultural-business understanding gaps.

Organizations such as the interviewed online retailer and government agency demonstrated how effective translation requires deep familiarity with both artisan and mature market contexts. Their intermediaries typically possessed significant experience in both environments, enabling them to navigate complex cultural dynamics (I6, I12), as one expert claims: *"if it's not a project based...relationship between businesses and artisans, then you have to have individual people who have worked with artisans before and who have also worked in the mainstream business before. So they understand the differences"* (I6). This dual context understanding proved particularly crucial when communication patterns jeopardize business relationships, as expectations or demands are not properly clarified. For instance, in certain cultural contexts, indirect communication about production challenges can lead to significant misalignments: *"It's very culturally conditioned, because in Nepal, you would rarely or never get the answer that something doesn't work or that something is difficult"* (I15); *"There can be communication problems in the broadest sense between buyers and producers... I remember stories where something should be made or buyers made a request that was completely impossible to implement because the buyers lacked the technical manufacturing knowledge"* (I1).

Similarly, intermediaries helped bridge fundamental differences in business practices and expectations. Orchestrating actors frequently mediated between artisan production capabilities and mature market volume expectations, preventing potentially

damaging mismatches. As one expert explains: *"big brands like Louis Vuitton or whatever, cannot come to artisans and ask them to make 500 bags because it's not going to work"* (I7). Another expert reflects how opportunities based on previous mismatch experiences have been selectively rejected: *"Lightning strike orders are harmful to development of an organization... We cannot be doing lightning strikes. It drives me crazy. My worst nightmare. You know, people think my worst nightmare is not enough orders. My, my biggest nightmare is one order. That is too big"* (I3).

Beyond translation, intermediaries actively created and mediated business opportunities between artisan enterprises and mature market buyers through direct matchmaking and relationship facilitation. This opportunity mediation addressed immediate market connection needs between artisans and potential buyers. Organizations such as the US-based digital platform/marketplace demonstrated systematic approaches to opportunity mediation by carefully evaluating both parties' capabilities and requirements before facilitating connections. Their intermediaries assessed artisan production capabilities and buyer expectations, then actively mediated initial relationships where they see strong potential for successful collaboration. As one expert explains: *"we also do quite a lot to match-make... We know what they can and cannot do"* (I11). The data showed how development organizations and platform providers took active roles especially during initial phase of establishing business relationships. Rather than leaving connections to chance, they systematically evaluated potential matches and facilitated appropriate introductions. For instance, when the government agency identified promising market opportunities, they actively connected qualified artisan enterprises with suitable buyers, providing hands-on support throughout the initial relationship development process (I12). This direct mediation often involves careful management of expectations and communications between parties. Intermediaries helped structuring initial conversations and negotiations, ensuring both sides understand each other's capabilities and requirements. As one platform organization describes: *"Buyers want a consistent stream of high quality, well-designed, well-priced products. And if the maker can continue to provide that, they will continue to work with them"* (I11).

These intermediary activities appear fundamental to initiating international market relationships, yet the evidence suggested these are most effective when embedded in broader orchestration efforts. While translation and opportunity mediation

can create initial market connections, IAEE internationalization seems to require complementary capability development and active network positioning. This interconnection emerged clearly in how organizations like government agencies/ advocacy organization combine intermediary activities with structured development programs (I12; I16).

### **Capability Development**

The data demonstrated capability development as a systematic process through which NOA build the professional capabilities for IAEE to improve knowledge and create knowledge opportunities. This development appeared to operate through structured programs and ongoing support mechanisms that transform initial capabilities into market-ready business practices. The evidence revealed how capability development followed a systematic progression of key business competencies. At its foundation, orchestrating actors established structured and transparent business processes. As one international business advisor observes: *"artisan workers were not tracking that information... track the time, the materials, and get the artisan workers in the habit of tracking that so that then you have a measurement"* (I4). This emphasis on systematic process development created the groundwork for sustainable business operations. Building on these foundational processes, orchestrating actors focused on developing essential digital and technological capabilities to enable effective market participation. Platform organizations and development agencies actively supported technology skill development: *"they taught artisan workers how to use spreadsheets. They helped them get computers. They taught them business principles really, which was remarkable"* (I4). This digital capability building proved particularly crucial given the increasing importance of technology in international market engagement: *"Training technology, you know, how can we get them that so they can become better at what they do and we can then better work with them"* (I11). The development process then advanced to sophisticated marketing and business development competencies through structured programs. As one platform organization describes: *"We have a coaching program...consists of one module around brand building and then marketing one module around e-commerce and one around like B2B sales"* (I20). This comprehensive approach received ongoing support through regular consultation: *"We visit again, we give consultancy on site... We try to improve what we call the enabling*

*environment"* (I12). Importantly, this capability development required careful attention to cultural dynamics and organizational readiness. Orchestrating actors demonstrated awareness that development programs must align with artisan enterprises' existing practices: *"you cannot just throw processes and systems on our artisans because they don't work with processes and systems"* (I17). This understanding shaped program implementation: *"if you feel that they are maybe not market ready, we offer them the possibility to join our coaching program... we coach them throughout these different sessions"* (I20). The effectiveness of this structured approach became evident through successful market integration, as one expert describes: *"the merchandise are directly able to work with a high-end brand in Sweden, because they they have been trained like that. Instead of me going and trying to tell them all the time, I started bringing them here showing around"* (I13).

The evidence indicated that capability development served as an important bridge between knowledge acquisition and opportunity creation in IAEE internationalization. As IAEE developed comprehensive business capabilities through structured development programs, they simultaneously deepened their market knowledge and enhanced their ability to recognize and act on international opportunities. This systematic development of both operational competencies and market understanding appeared fundamental to internationalization. By integrating technical skills with broader business knowledge, capability development enabled artisan enterprises to move beyond initial market access toward more sophisticated professional engagement in international businesses. This progression aligned with the framework's emphasis on how knowledge development and opportunity recognition reinforce each other in internationalization processes, whereby recognition of opportunities seemed to be mainly mediated through the orchestrating actors.

### **Active Network Positioning**

The evidence revealed how orchestrating actors systematically enhance artisan enterprises' network positions by providing visibility, credibility, and legitimacy in mature markets. This positioning was manifested through deliberate activities that strengthened artisan enterprises' standing within relevant business networks.

Orchestrating actors enhanced network visibility through multiple channels. Digital platforms served as a primary mechanism, with one digital platform executive

demonstrating how substantial platform reach can amplify artisan visibility: *"We have got 65,000 members, 28,000 businesses, almost every major luxury brand is on there"* (I14). Platform organizations actively leveraged this reach to showcase artisan enterprises: *"So we put them on the site. And once we have them on the site, we have the catalog... then we can begin to share that link with buyers"* (I11). Credibility building emerged through formal verification processes and quality assurance mechanisms. The activities of one advocacy organizations illustrate how systematic verification builds market trust: *"We've been working with [advocacy organization] for more than eight years. We pass every year the verification or certification... Now they're getting, expanding more and doing international fairs, presenting our products"* (I16). This established credibility enables participation in valuable industry networks, as demonstrated by fair trade organizations: *"we exchange information with all of the big importers around the world as to like what their numbers are, what their best sellers are... those are kind of things that no one in the mainstream business area would ever give away"* (I6). Legitimacy developed through orchestrating actors' established reputations and strategic market positioning. Organizations with strong market presence, such as government agencies, leveraged their established standing to validate artisan enterprises: *"we have a pretty good position there and also we have a pretty good name in the market... most people in my capacity working for [government agency], they have a network, a network of buyers"* (I12). This legitimacy building extended to reshaping market perceptions indicating they have considerable leverage in active network positioning: *"And we changed how the global north is seeing those type of products. And to kind of like reestablish the value that actually stands behind these amazing artisans"* (I20).

These observations indicated that active network positioning can be conceptualized as a comprehensive process through which orchestrating actors systematically strengthen the presence of artisan enterprises in international markets. Rather than allowing network positions to develop organically, orchestrating actors deliberately strengthened artisan enterprises' visibility through platforms, credibility through verification, and legitimacy through established reputations. This positioning process appeared to be founded upon the utilization of intermediary activities and capabilities, with the objective of creating enhanced network positions within the context of IAEE internationalization.

## **Synthesis**

The evidence revealed several patterns that can be examined through the lens of the Business Network Internationalization Process Model. Relationship commitment decisions extend beyond purely business-to-business considerations to encompass commitments between institutions and individuals across the network. While the model traditionally emphasized business relationship decisions, the evidence showed these decisions significantly shape how orchestrating actors engaged with artisan enterprises. This broader application of relationship commitment decisions across different types of network actors appeared fundamental to understand how IAEE internationalization develops through orchestrated processes. The intermediary activities observed in the data align with the model's concepts of psychic distance and liability of outsidership, while revealing particularly structured approaches to addressing these challenges. Knowledge development patterns in the observed context emerged through more formalized channels than the network interactions emphasized in the model. The data illustrated how orchestrating actors created structured programs for building market knowledge and capabilities, complementing the experiential learning, which was highlighted in the learning, creating trust building variable of the model. Active network positioning appeared to operate through distinct mechanisms that complement the model's focus on relationship-based network position development. The evidence suggested that orchestrating actors, which include non-business network actors, systematically strengthened market positions through formal recognition through specific standards, strategic market presence, and deliberate value communication. This appeared particularly significant in how legitimacy and credibility transfer through orchestrating actors' own network positions. These findings suggest that while the model's variables helped explaining IAEE internationalization, the processes the interviewed experts highlighted are more formally orchestrated than the model typically assumes suggesting a blind spot in the model. Rather than artisan enterprises independently pushing into international markets or buyers pulling them in directly, the process is actively orchestrated, suggesting that successful IAEE internationalization is less about entrepreneurial market entry or buyer-driven sourcing, and more about being purposefully integrated into international networks through structured processes managed by orchestrating actors. This "network pull" through orchestration, rather than "market push" as a

proactive process of foreign market entry, emerges as a distinctive characteristic of IAEE internationalization.

The observed patterns of network orchestration fundamentally reflected the mission-driven internationalization logic that shaped how orchestrating actors engaged with artisan enterprises. Rather than pursuing purely commercial objectives, orchestration approaches emerged from the distinct social, cultural, and development missions that informed different types of orchestrating actors. These missions were manifested in how policy and development organizations prioritize systematic capability building, platform organizations focused on market access standardization, and mission-driven individuals facilitate deep cultural bridging. The diversity in orchestration approaches aligned with the different capabilities and constraints of each orchestrating actor type. For instance, development organizations leveraged their institutional legitimacy to build structured development pathways, while platform organizations utilized their technological infrastructure to enhance market visibility. Importantly, these orchestration processes directly addressed fundamental relationship barriers in IAEE internationalization. Cultural and business translation activities bridged psychic distance challenges, capability development programs addressed professional standards gaps, and active network positioning helped overcome the liability of outsidership through enhanced visibility and legitimacy. This holistic approach to barrier mitigation through orchestrated processes appeared more appropriate to enabling sustainable IAEE internationalization into mature markets.

The analysis of network orchestration activities, including intermediary services, capability development programs, and active positioning strategies, reveals the deliberate and multi-faceted approaches employed to actively manage IAEE access to international markets. The following section addresses the distinct types of actors involved in network orchestration.

## **Network Orchestrating Actors**

### ***Overview***

The analysis of interview data revealed a consistent pattern of organizations and individuals who play active roles in facilitating, managing and thereby described as influential to the process of IAEE internationalization. As one expert describes: "You

*need the in betweeners... because those really big businesses, they have no idea like on both sides" (I6).* These intermediary actors range from international organizations and government agencies to commercial intermediaries and individuals, each contributing distinct capabilities to the internationalization process. Three distinct types of actors emerge from the data, each characterized by specific approaches and motivations as shown in the following **Table 9**.

**Table 9**

*Types of Network Orchestrating Actors*

| Type of Actor                    | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Examples                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Advocacy Organizations           | Advocacy organizations are mission-driven institutions that actively promote artisan enterprise development through systematic support while advocating for broader social, cultural, and economic objectives. These organizations, which include combine direct assistance with policy influence to create sustainable pathways for artisan internationalization. Their dual role of providing structured support while rooting systemic change distinguishes them from purely commercial intermediaries or individual actors in the artisan sector. | Intergovernmental bodies (UN, UNICEF), government agencies, industry associations, NGO advocacy organizations |
| Commercial Market Intermediaries | Commercial market intermediaries are professional organizations that facilitate artisan internationalization through structured market access solutions while maintaining sustainable business models. These organizations develop scalable approaches to connect artisan enterprises with mature markets.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Digital platforms and marketplaces, trade organizations, online retailers, brands, digital services,          |

|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                               |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | professional networks.                                                        |
| Individuals | Mission-driven individuals are actors who leverage their unique positioning between artisan and mature market contexts to facilitate internationalization through personal engagement and cultural bridging. These individuals, combine deep understanding of both contexts with personal commitment to artisan development. | Cultural translators, local intermediaries, diaspora entrepreneurs, designers |

### ***Advocacy Organizations***

Advocacy organizations emerged from the data as mission-driven institutions that combine direct artisan enterprise support with broader systemic change objectives. These organizations operate through different institutional structures and mandates:

Intergovernmental Organizations: International governance bodies such as the UN and its specialized agencies emerged as significant actors in the data. As one expert explains: *"the World Trade Organization and the United Nations guide how things are measured and managed"* (I14). The data shows how these organizations shape standards and create opportunities through specific programs: *"We worked really hard to create opportunities for [Online Retailer] products... we already worked with the UN Global Compact"* (I14). Their presence was illustrated through specific program implementations: *"In Nepal, a UNICEF project also contributed significantly to development"* (I9). These organizations were characterized by their ability to establish international frameworks, coordinate multi-national initiatives, advocate for the interests of specific stakeholders such as refugees, female artisans etc..

Government Agencies: National and regional government entities appeared as distinct actors, particularly through their trade and export promotion departments. As one expert notes: *"government entities... trying to facilitate this kind of market focused assistance to the artisans"* (I2). The data specifically mentioned *"Export promotion*

*agencies"* (I20) and government agencies, demonstrating how governmental bodies provide structured support for internationalization.

Industry Associations: The data showed how industry associations such as the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) and World Trade Organization (WTO) play a specific role in setting standards and facilitating market access: *"organizations like the World Trade Organization and the United Nations guide how things are measured and managed to a great degree"* (I4); *"We participate in international fairs. We participate in 10 years ago in WFTO, in first phase, there was the dynamic was social, more social... and then the movement learned that we need to present it, not only that aspect, but also a challenging product"* (I16). These membership-based organizations represent a distinct category where businesses collectively organize to establish common practices and create market opportunities.

Non-Governmental Organizations: Both international and local NGOs emerged as distinct actors in the data. Organizations such as Aid to Artisans demonstrate specialized focus on the craft sector: *"Now I contacted Aid to Artisans, they have a huge network of artisans"* (I18). Local NGOs appeared particularly active in addressing specific regional challenges, as evidenced by examples such as: *"An NGO there dealt with the legal situation"* (I18).

What distinguishes these policy and development organizations from other NOA is their non-commercial mandate and focus on systemic change. While they operated through different institutional structures, they share common characteristics of subsidized, long-term support models and coordination of multiple stakeholders. Their distinctive approach includes regulatory frameworks, policy development, and structured support programs that create the institutional infrastructure through which other network actors can operate effectively.

### **Commercial Market Intermediaries**

Commercial market intermediaries represented a distinct category of professional intermediaries that have developed business models around facilitating artisan internationalization. These take several forms, as evidenced in the data:

Digital platform organizations: One of the interviewed experts leads a major digital platform connecting artisan enterprises with international buyers in the fashion and craft sector. She describes the platform's scale and reach: *"We have got 65,000 members, 28,000 businesses, almost every major luxury brand is on there"* (I14). This indicates how digital platforms can create significant networks connecting artisan enterprises with major market players. These platforms employed formal verification processes, as another platform leader explains: *"we have a due diligence process where we ask businesses before we get them onto the platform"* (I11). Through this process, platforms assess factors such as business maturity and operational capabilities to ensure successful market relationships.

Retail firms and independent agents: The data also revealed the continued importance of traditional trade intermediaries. Wholesale distributors played a key distribution role, as one expert notes: *"Our customer is a wholesale distributor. So he sells them to everyone"* (I17). Professional showrooms and trade fairs served as physical connection points: *"When you go in a showroom, they invite you to display your products. The showroom invites the buyers"* (I19). As the direct access to EE artisan businesses was observed as an obstacle for ME business partners a representative of artisans was necessary *"they know somebody, an agent, you know, an agent then is representing others as well"* (I16); *"someone from that culture to, I don't say to be that buffer but almost like the representative of those people"* (I7) who would set up a business structure for cooperations: *"there was a guy who... established the brand the corporation I would say, and he then helped the woman to work for him... he was the face to the clients"* (I7). IAEE trading firms exemplify established market intermediaries who coordinate complex networks: *"[IAEE trade firm] received an order or promote an order or design an order and then they contact the experts, the artisan experts in Alpaca wool, or ceramics or wooden"* (I16).

What distinguishes commercial market intermediaries from other network orchestrators is their formal business structure and market-driven approach. While

digital platforms leveraged technology - *"there is a combination of technology and human intervention"* (I11) - and traditional firms relied more on established business relationships, both types operated as professional entities focused on creating sustainable market connections for artisan enterprises.

### ***Mission-Driven Individuals***

Mission-driven individuals emerged as distinct NOA, characterized by their deep personal engagement with artisan enterprises and unique positioning between cultural contexts. These included cultural translators who bridge business and artisan worlds: *"you need the in betweeners. I call them translators because those really big businesses, they have no idea like on both sides"* (I6). They often had significant experience in both contexts: *"if it's not a project-based relationship between businesses and artisans, then you have to have individual people who have worked with artisans before and who have also worked in the main mainstream business before"* (I6). Local intermediaries formed another important category of individual orchestrators: *"There are plenty of intermediaries in Bangladesh. There are brilliant entrepreneurs based there who already work with and lead these cooperatives"* (I14). These included cultural representatives who deeply understand local contexts: *"someone from that culture to, I don't say to be that buffer but almost like the representative of those people"* (I7). Diaspora entrepreneurs represented a third type of individual orchestrators: *"The Tibetans who were displaced started knitting in refugee camps... are also very Western-oriented because many Tibetans flew on and have many contacts in the West"* (I15). Their unique position allowed them to bridge cultural gaps naturally, though not always successfully: *"well intentioned ethnic Armenians wanting to help Armenia with no business experience is a very tough thing"* (I3). Designers and creative professionals made up another category of individual orchestrators who specifically connected artisan production with market demands: *"a designer founded in Vienna, then invited two pro bono people from the project, Nadia and André. Nadia did design and André did business"* (I17).

### ***Synthesis***

The identification of distinct NOA – advocacy organizations, commercial market intermediaries, and mission-driven individuals - revealed the complex multi-stakeholder nature of IAEE internationalization. Each type of actor brought unique

capabilities and positioning to the network: advocacy organizations provided institutional infrastructure and systemic support, commercial intermediaries offered professional market access solutions, and individuals bridged cultural and operational gaps through personal engagement. However, it is notable to mention that the actors were not distinguished by each other's capabilities but rather characterized by them. Based on these recurring patterns in the data, the researchers conceptualized these stakeholders as "Network Orchestrating Actors" defining them as

*Organizations and individuals who actively shape and manage IAEE internationalization through structured processes of selection, development and market integration.*

These actors took an active role in orchestrating internationalization processes, driven by both commercial and non-commercial objectives. The analysis revealed NOA who fundamentally shape IAEE internationalization in ways not fully captured by the Business Network Internationalization Process Model. While the model primarily focuses on direct business relationships and economic logic, the researchers identified actors who orchestrate networks without necessarily engaging in direct business relationships themselves - all primarily focused on facilitating relationships between other actors rather than building their own business networks. This diversity of actors demonstrates that IAEE internationalization cannot be understood as a simple binary relationship between artisans and markets, but rather includes orchestration through multiple complementary actors operating at different levels with varying functions and missions, thus creating a fertile ground for IAEE internationalization.

The classification and examination of the distinct capabilities, motivations, and approaches of advocacy organizations, commercial market intermediaries, and mission-driven individuals underscores the complex, multi-stakeholder nature of IAEE internationalization. To add another layer of complexity, the following section discusses motives other than business interests and how they affect the actions and decisions of NOA, thereby shedding light on the ulterior motives that shape network orchestration.

## **Advocacy Motives and Effects**

### **Overview**

The empirical study of IAEE internationalization revealed that the artisan sector is a sector that is influenced by a multitude of interests, ambitions, and objectives, which makes it challenging to address phenomena such as internationalization in a purely economic sense. The data obtained from the interviews indicated that the actors involved in IAEE internationalization exhibited a range of motives, which also influenced their actions. The theme 'Advocacy motives' encompassed the motives identified in the interview data and their effects on internationalization. It is defined as follows:

*A pattern of network internationalization where social missions and value-based purposes, rather than pure business logic, drive how actors recognize opportunities, build relationships, and develop commitments across borders*

The motives identified in the data encompassed the motives 'Poverty Alleviation and Charity', 'Arts and Aesthetics', 'Ethnic solidarity and support of specific communities' and 'Promoting Craft Culture and Traditional Techniques'.

### ***Motives – Poverty Alleviation and Charity***

One motive that was mentioned several times in interviews was the fight against poverty through the promotion of artisan entrepreneurship: *"I'm more driven by social impact... If you look at the whole picture, we have almost 40 million people considered to be living in slave-like conditions in the world"* (I13). Interview partners described the involvement of actors such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) which both follow the explicit objective of supporting the most disadvantaged groups in global societies (I15, I21). The objective of government agency, which was involved in the artisan internationalization is described by one expert as follows: *"The ultimate goal is poverty alleviation through job creation"* (I12). The founder of a craft product trade firm also describes how their social motives are intertwined with the firm's marketing strategy: *"Find vulnerable community in their meeting context. We, we, we try to find communities that need the help, but that also have the skill set also have the story. (...) we are looking at women whose husbands died in the recent war as a target group. The powerful story to tell, and a vulnerable community"* (I3), *"I'm 52, you know, I've spent my entire life trying to do this. I didn't go and make a lot of money or something like that"* (I15). Another business owner articulates how the social motive prevails profit interests when

collaborating with IAEE: *"I think maybe more personal than business wise is just more, you just want to be genuine... it was not just about the price... I think that was my more personal idea to, you know, and feeling more like empathy with them"* (I17). The evidence presented in these quotations demonstrates that there is a perception among many actors that the artisan sector is not primarily a business area, but rather a means of achieving social objectives such as poverty reduction: *"So I will tell you the reason where I insist on the economic empowerment, it is also because I want to help people."* (I19)

### **Motives – Arts and Aesthetics**

In three interviews, design firm founders described how their interest in the different designs and aesthetics of artisan products motivated them to collaborate with IAEE (I8, I15, I19). One designer describes: *"and it was also nice to like see the weavers come on, see how they work with it, see like the interaction with the clothes and how they see it and how they wear it. If they try it on, I think that's also really interesting because their style is so different to ours."* (I18). Design and aesthetics can be interlinked with specific techniques and product quality: *"And then I went to Nepal for the first time in 2007, because that's exactly the quality I was looking for, carpet weaving, i.e. the hand-spun thread, the wool that is not bleached and that is dyed using vegetable dyes and then linked by hand."* (I15) or with social and economic motives: *"So that is why I started to work with artists. That is why I decided to become a social entrepreneur and create the jewelry brand. It was money, passion, art, craftsmanship."* (I19).

### **Motives – Ethnic Solidarity or Support of Specific Communities**

In one of the orientational interviews, a German designer with West African roots discussed his experience of working with West African artisans as a means of supporting his country of origin. The theme of ethnic solidarity and support for specific ethnic communities persisted as a salient issue in subsequent interviews. One interviewer describes his motivation to found an artisan trade business as linked to his wish to keep active relationships with Nepal through collaboration with Nepalese Artisans: *"When I came back from Nepal for the first time in time 75 I had the desire to keep in touch with Nepal"* (I19). The data also indicated the relevance of diaspora networks for internationalization, in which members of the same ethnicity or community

support each other internationally: *"The Tibetans in exile, because they are refugees, are also very Western-oriented, because many Tibetans then flew on and also have many contacts in the West"* (I15).

### **Motives – Fair Trade Activism**

Across various interviews, the WFTO was mentioned as a relevant institution in the international artisan sector (I1, I6, I14, I16) which unites firms from 84 countries and had its roots in artisan products (WFTO, n.d.). One interviewee states the motive of the trade firm she leads as following: *"we put people before profit... we don't take on new trading partners that can cannibalize the sales"* (I6). The data suggested a generally high awareness for working conditions and fair wages and the existence of relevant institutions that inherit fair trade principles as a core motive (I1, I3, I4, I6, I11, I12, I14, I15, I17, I19).

### **Motives – Promoting Craft Culture and Traditional Techniques**

As artisanship is often deeply rooted within a specific culture and tradition, motives related to the support and preservation of craft culture and traditional techniques have been, as anticipated, one of the most prominent motives within the interview data. According to I2, there is evidence that institutional support programs follow this motive: *"programs to help kind of preserve some culture or, yeah, some cultural heritage through some of these products that the artisans make"*. Traditional artisan techniques were portrayed as a social value which is endangered by industrial development: *"I think with all going on in the world, especially like the digital side, I think I'm afraid losing like the whole artisanal aspect of fashion, which I really love"* (I8). An expert for the artisan sector even frames the connection to the craft techniques as a precondition for commercial success in the collaboration with IAEE: *"Some people just want to get rich. That does not work... you have to have a love for products. The love for the handwork, the fine handwork, the quality of the finish. So you have to love your product also"* (I12) and a design firm founder describes her mission as related to the craft preservation: *"That was also an educational mission for me or where I thought, oh, this craft must not be lost"* (I15).

The five types of emerged motives provide evidence on the multifaceted nature of NOA. The data also illustrates how the respective motives generally affect the

actions and decision-making of NAO within the IAEE internationalization. These effects are summarized as “Advocacy-driven Network Orchestration” and “Economically and Socially Balanced Commitment Decision-Making” in the following, elucidating the causal relation between advocacy motives and the characteristics of network orchestration.

### ***Effects – Advocacy-driven Network Orchestration***

The mission of actors involved in IAEE internationalization is decisive for their behavior and interference of the IAEE internationalization. As already described, NOA were perceiving the IAEE internationalization as a means to reach certain objectives: *“The ultimate goal is poverty alleviation through job creation”* and aim to influence the markets to contribute to these goals *“Companies have to train and hire more artisans”* (I12). The founder of a major artisan platform/ marketplace even articulates how social motives led her to become an entrepreneur in the artisan sector: *“Like I come from economic development and it was not at all considered, you know, people focus on education, health, you know, humanitarian support, you know, rebuild, I mean, all these things, you know, which is of course, incredibly key. But I think that the craft sector, because it's so massive and it's so filled with women, (...), if you talk about women's economic empowerment, you cannot not be in this sector.”* (I15). The active influence on IAEE was also shaped by a range of institutional social programs, as evidenced by the interview data (I1, I3, I4, I9). The support programs can lead to the development of artisan firms and foster their international orientation, as I9 exemplifies: *“In Nepal, a UNICEF project also contributed greatly to the development. They set up a production facility there with local craftsmen, but with foreign designers”*.

These findings illustrate how advocacy motives have been a relevant aspect in illustrating the current mechanisms in IAEE internationalization and that the international potential of an IAEE cannot be assessed only through the matter of business opportunities but through their capability to contribute to the missions of market orchestrating actors.

### ***Effects – Economically and Socially Balanced Commitment Decision-Making***

A further salient theme in the interview data was the influence of advocacy on decision-making processes related to IAEE internationalization. This phenomenon is

illustrated by the leader of a fair-trade trade firm: *"we put people before profit... we don't take on new trading partners that can cannibalize the sales"* (I6). In the Interview, the expert goes on to describe how their company always makes strategic decisions with the aim of promoting its IAEE partner firms: *"So our mission is their success. And we have made sure that this mission is the center of our business"* (I6). Nevertheless, as I19 describes, the artisan sector is subject to the fundamental market mechanisms of supply and demand: *"First come the product. You must have something cool, beautiful, a spark of desire"*. While publicly financed network orchestration actors are at liberty to pursue their missions within the boundaries of their financial resources and funding criteria, profit-oriented companies have been constrained by the necessity of aligning their mission with their economic objectives: *"I need to have the jewelry on time with everything that I need, with all the documents that I need, in the store, with the great packaging... Just because it is made from survivors of violence, it does not mean that my boss will forgive me if my product comes too late"* (I19). I3 explicates the amalgamation of social and business criteria in the decision making within his artisan product trade firm. This was achieved through the creation of a brand that evolves around the narratives of the economic disadvantages of artisan manufacturers. However, in order to maintain a robust commitment to the firm's social mission, it was essential to strike a balance between aligning with the firm's social mission and making decisions in accordance with market boundaries: *"But obviously, when you are looking at market entry, you need to look at is this going to settle in the market and that is a question of material and it is a question of the story behind the artisan because you need to do storytelling. You are going to need to be correct here, not correct, but marketable."*

In essence, the data revealed a multitude of heterogeneous motives affecting NOA and their behaviors. The motives served to illustrate that IAEE represented a projection surface for diverse ideals that are of social, artistic or cultural origin. However, it is imperative that these motives are not viewed in isolation, but rather represent an influencing variable on the economic mechanisms of IAEE internationalization. Because notably, the data revealed that business actors were influenced by these social motives only within their market-based boundaries.

## **Synthesis**

The interview results indicated that the business network internationalization process model underlying the framework omits any consideration of divergent motives, assuming instead a purely business-motivated internationalization mechanism. However, the authors were able to consider the missions and individual motives of the actors involved in the internationalization process by extending the scope of the framework to include actors which do not necessarily follow merely business motives. The results can still be interpreted in a way that aligns with the framework if the term "opportunities" is not limited to "business opportunities" from a profit-oriented perspective. Instead, it can be understood as opportunities to achieve individual and organization-specific goals, values and motives. The implications of this interpretation are discussed in the following section.

In essence, the findings within this theme elucidated the rationale through which actors engaged in IAEE internationalization exert influence over market events and the internationalization processes of artisans, based on the specific missions they undertake. The types of influence are addressed by the findings within the "Market Orchestration" theme. Furthermore, the findings within this theme provide explanations for the involvement of different actors in the artisan sector and IAEE internationalization, thus contributing to the understanding of the actors described in the theme "Market Orchestrating Actors".

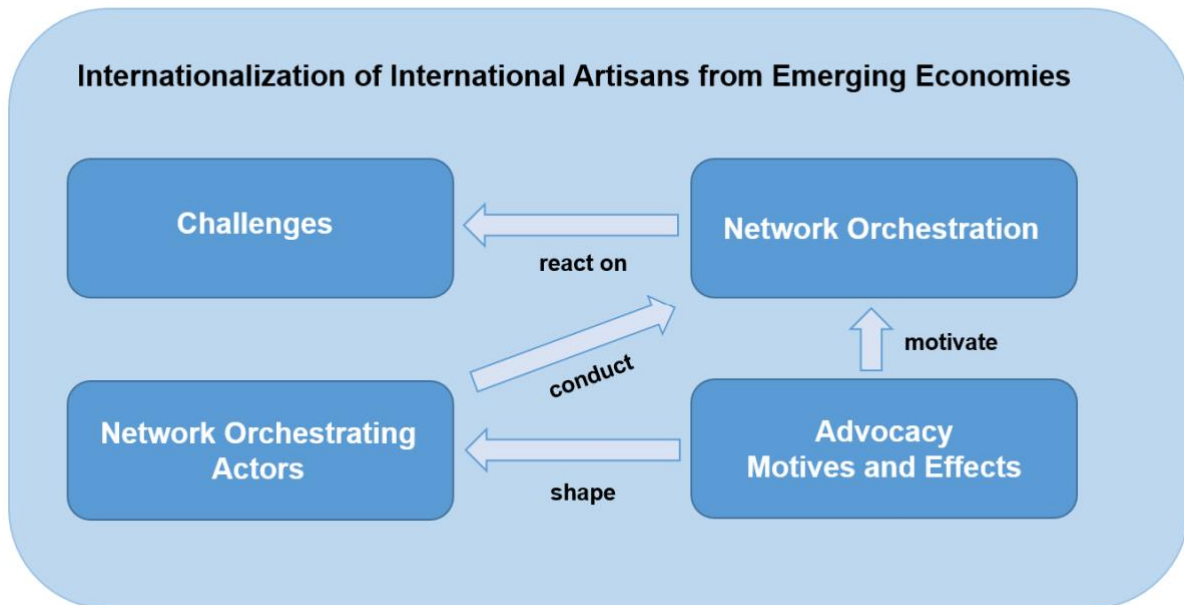
### **Synthesis of the Four Main Themes**

The hybrid thematic analysis revealed four distinct but interconnected themes which illustrate the complex mechanisms of IAEE internationalization as described by 20 industry experts. The following section will provide a brief summary of the themes and their connections.

To start with, the emerged themes demonstrate a dynamic relationship: advocacy motives shape both the NOA and the network orchestration, while simultaneously responding to and influencing the overarching challenges.

### **Figure 7**

*Interplay of the Four Main Themes*



The findings of the thematic analysis of empirical interview data shed light on the unique mechanisms of IAEE internationalization. Primarily, they provided insight into the various challenges faced by IAEEs and contributed to a richer comprehension of the obstacles in the way of IAEE internationalization. Different languages, communication and business practices as well as differing cultural relationships to craft and design separated IAEE from potential business partners and customers in ME, challenges which can be assigned to psychic distance. However, the structural disadvantage from which IAEE entered business relationships with ME actors, that seemed to be caused by outsidership and economic constraints, caused an additional challenge and risk for artisan firms. Relationship power dynamics have been a crucial factor in IAEE international relationships and require expanding the theoretical perception of outsidership and psychic distance.

NOA reacted on the challenges faced by IAEE through different types of activities to foster internationalization in ways that can be conceptually comprehended through the variables of the business network internationalization model. Conceptually, business internationalization depends on the knowledge and opportunities of a firm. By conducting capability development, NOAs aimed to elevate the knowledge level of IAEE, i.e. their attractiveness to international markets. They also created opportunities, on one hand by directly mediating IAEE to potential relationship partners in ME, and on the other hand by providing visibility and legitimacy.

This process of legitimacy and visibility providing can be conceptualized as active network positioning and delineates an intervention in the internationalization mechanism as represented by the business network model. While the network position is framed as a result of business relationships and the trust and knowledge that results from these relationships, NOAs used their own network position to link IAEE with it. In simple words: IAEE that take part in a capability development program or are displayed on a digital platform profit from the network position of the respective program provider or platform operator. The same applied to certificates or memberships that symbolize the connection between IAEE and NOA.

The described IAEE internationalization challenges can mainly be conceptualized as obstacles in developing relationships with potential ME business partners. Directly or indirectly, network orchestration aims to facilitate relationship development for IAEE by 'bridging' the gaps that stand in the way of potential business relationships. The empirical data contained examples of bridging communicative and cultural barriers, elevating IAEE business practices to match ME customer expectations, and even solutions such as dropshipping-services to overcome institutional voids. By accompanying relationships during the processes of learning, creating, trust-building, NOA also attempted to mitigate the relationship power dynamics and influence relationships in such a way that they led to economic success and not to the detriment of the IAEE.

It became clear that the influence of NOAs took place on all variables of business network internationalization, which explains the choice of the term orchestration. Nevertheless, the question of whether an IAEE was eligible for internationalization-support hinges on the decision-making and selection processes established by NOA. These decision-making processes were discussed in the sub-theme "Context-Dependent Relationship Commitment Decisions," which refers to the relationship between IAEE and NOA. This theme emerged from evidence indicating that NOAs, regardless of their type, deliberately include IAEE in their activities or not. The criteria on which the decision was based are partly visible, such as membership criteria and specifications for platform entry. However, they were also partly based on intuition and can be roughly divided into market-led and motive-led. The motive-driven assessment could be interpreted in the sense of the question "Does supporting this particular IAEE contribute to achieving my ideals?". In contrast, the market-driven

question would be, "Does the IAEE have the potential to meet the requirements of the market?". It can be assumed that the degree to which decision making is market-driven, was moderated by the NOAs dependency on the IAEE's market success, which is obvious for commercial platform providers, trade firms or professional intermediaries.

From the perspective of IAEE, the orchestration of internationalization networks can be interpreted as an opportunity, since it allowed them to turn their non-commercial "assets" such as culture, craft tradition or poverty alleviation into advantages for internationalization, given that they align with the motives of relevant NOAs. They can serve as a means to overcome institutional constraints by exploiting the opportunities which emerge out of their unique network position as a "projection screen" for socio-cultural ideals.

To test the validity of the findings created by the researcher through the conduction of hybrid thematic analysis, an expert triangulation has been conducted. Prior to concluding the findings section and the discussion chapter, the findings of the expert triangulation are briefly described.

### **Validation through Expert Triangulation**

The findings from the two triangulation interviews with experts provided additional perspectives that enriched the understanding of the identified themes. These validation interviews offered opportunities to examine how the experts' extensive experience in the artisan sector aligned with or expanded research findings.

Regarding social motives in internationalization, on expert's observations about buyer firms placing unprofitable orders to maintain transitional employment of artisans highlight how social considerations shape business decisions: *"I have also heard this from companies in the past [...] that there are also companies that are prepared to place orders that are not profitable for them, but as long as it gives them the opportunity to employ the artisans and pay them for a certain transitional period until another lucrative order comes along, they are prepared to accept such orders."* This sense of social responsibility appears characteristic of the sector, with the expert's describing how NOA maintain *"a sense of responsibility"* for the artisan enterprises they work with. The other interviewed expert expanded on this theme by noting that NOA motivations

and functions can vary significantly depending on the specific craft product and its market conditions. This product-dependent variation in social motives and market approaches represented a novel dimension not previously identified in the findings, suggesting that the relationship between social missions and market conditions may be more nuanced than initially understood.

The experts' insights on digital platforms and institutional actors revealed evolving dynamics in market access facilitation. The expert's observations about WFTOs strong decreasing and one advocacy organizations growing influence in IAEE Internationalization highlighted how digital platforms were reshaping sector support through market tailored accelerator and capability building programs: *"Nevertheless, many businesses simply find this much more valuable than having Fairtrade certification now, if it doesn't lead to any business, then the question is why am I paying for it, why am I doing it?"*. This evolution was particularly evident in his discussion of how major retail firms nowadays have been supporting this platform financially: *"Some of them are also retailers, large trading companies in this sector, which also contribute to this."* Notably, the expert observed a concurrent decline in WFTO's relevance as a NOA, describing how in his perception their certification process is losing value while their pricing policies effectively restrict access for high-value craft products. This shift indicates changing dynamics in how digital and traditional platforms influenced internationalization.

The interviews strongly reinforced the finding about the multiplicity of actors involved in IAEE internationalization. The interviewed expert characterized the craft industry as *"completely unstructured"* necessitating diverse intermediary roles. The other expert elaborated on this by describing *"these value chains, where there are always many different stakeholders or players who can contribute something."* highlighting the layers of identified gaps that had to be bridged for IAEE internationalization. The experts' observations about varying institutional approaches - from WFTO's traditional certification model to one advocacy organizations market-oriented programs - demonstrated how different actors serve distinct needs in the internationalization process.

Significantly, both experts highlighted how these multiple actors often worked in complementary ways. The expert noted that even with established social enterprises, gaps in IAEE internationalization support still emerge that required additional NOA to

address. This observation aligned with the finding that IAEE internationalization requires multiple layers of support from diverse stakeholders.

The validation interviews also revealed new dimensions to the findings, particularly regarding that buyer firms are proactive in supporting network orchestration through funding NOAs. As the interviewed expert noted regarding the advocacy organizations funding model, major retail firms are investing in capacity building for IAEE. This adds complexity to the understanding of how commercial and social motives intertwine in IAEE internationalization.

## **Conclusion**

The main finding of the analysis is that IAEE internationalization networks do not solely emerge from business relationships but seem to be orchestrated, i.e. actively managed and shaped, by different types of actors following social and cultural motives. As a result, this finding challenges the conception of internationalization as a mechanism of business behavior and decision-making. The findings further revealed that IAEE internationalization operates through systematic network orchestration rather than purely market-driven mechanisms.

From the analysis, four interconnected themes emerged. First, the themes illustrate that IAEE face distinct internationalization challenges beyond traditional concepts of psychic distance and liability of outsidership, including complex power dynamics between emerging and ME actors. Importantly, these challenges might be addressed through structured support systems. Subsequently NOA - including advocacy organizations, commercial intermediaries, and mission-driven individuals - actively shape internationalization pathways through systematic selection, development, and market integration processes. In doing so, these actors leveraged their positions to provide legitimacy and market access.

Furthermore, network orchestration is manifested through coordinated activities: intermediary services bridge cultural-business gaps, capability development programs build market-readiness, and active network positioning enhances visibility and credibility. Notably, these activities were shaped by context-dependent relationship commitment decisions. Finally, advocacy motives fundamentally drove NOA engagement, ranging from poverty alleviation to cultural preservation. These

social missions influenced how relationships are evaluated and developed, creating opportunities for IAEE to leverage non-commercial assets like cultural heritage for market access.

Moreover, the validation interviews corroborated these findings while revealing additional dimensions:

- Social responsibility shaped business decisions, with firms sometimes accepting unprofitable orders to maintain artisan employment
- Digital platforms were reshaping support mechanisms through market-tailored programs
- Multiple actors often worked in complementary ways to address different internationalization gaps
- Major retail firms were increasingly supporting network orchestration through direct funding of NOAs

This orchestrated approach to internationalization represented a departure from traditional market-entry theories, suggesting the need to expand existing frameworks to better account for mission-driven network development in EE contexts. Further, the findings display IAEE internationalization as a complex process requiring coordinated support from diverse stakeholders, driven by both social and commercial objectives. The success of this process appeared to depend on systematic orchestration rather than purely entrepreneurial action or market forces. Having established the key findings from the empirical research and validated them through expert triangulation, the following chapter examines their implications for theory and practice while situating them within the broader context of international business research.

## Discussion

### Summary of Key Findings

This thesis examines the process of internationalization of IAEE through the lens of a network perspective. To address the research aim of exploring how IAEEs internationalize, and the roles individuals and government agencies play in this process, a qualitative study was conducted. This study involved 20 semi-structured expert interviews implemented in three phases. Using a systematic coding process and thematic analysis, novel insights addressing the research gap in the artisan context were identified and captured in four main themes ‘Challenges’, ‘Network Orchestration’, ‘Network Orchestrating Actors’ and ‘Motives and Effects’.

The findings reveal four deeply interconnected themes that are essential to understand the internationalization process of IAEEs. First, IAEE face unique internationalization challenges that extend beyond traditional concepts of psychic distance and liability of outsidership, including complex power dynamics between emerging and ME actors. Second, NOA emerged as pivotal facilitators, comprising advocacy organizations, commercial market intermediaries, and mission-driven individuals who actively shape IAEE internationalization pathways. Third, these actors are driven by specific advocacy motives, ranging from poverty alleviation to cultural preservation, which fundamentally influence how they engage in network orchestration. Fourth, network orchestration manifests through systematic and interconnected activities such as intermediary activities, capability development, and active network positioning, all shaped by context-dependent relationship commitment decisions.

In the following section, the empirical findings are integrated and compared with the current state of research. Any findings that extend beyond the current state of research are discussed and integrated in the broader academic discourse in the subsequent chapter.

## **Integration and Comparison of Results with Current State of Literature**

The empirical findings both align with and extend existing research on the internationalization of firms from EE, while also revealing novel insights specific to the artisan sector. The SLA of 22 empirical studies provided a foundation for comparing the results with prior work in the following areas:

The findings confirm previous research showing that EE SME face significant barriers from weak institutional environments and economic constraints (Ahmed & Brennan, 2019; Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021; Kujala & Törnroos, 2018). However, while earlier studies primarily focused on general business barriers, this research reveals sector-specific challenges in the artisan context, particularly regarding cultural perceptions of design and craft traditions. Moreover, the identification of power dynamics as a crucial barrier represents a novel finding not emphasized in previous internationalization literature.

The SLA revealed that EE SME typically leverage two main resource categories for internationalization: social capital through personal connections and institutional support through government agencies (Che Senik et al., 2011; Narooz & Child, 2017). The findings of this research study significantly extend this understanding by identifying a third pathway: NOA driven by global social motives rather than by personal relationships or national economic interests. This provides a new understanding of internationalization support mechanisms. Previous studies emphasized how EE SME gain market knowledge through network relationships (Elango & Pattnaik, 2007; Shafi et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2007) and highlighted the importance of domestic networks as foundations for internationalization (Zhou et al., 2007). While the findings neither confirm nor neglect the relevance of domestic networks, they highlight the unique role of NOAs who systematically develop capabilities and actively manage network positions of IAEEs. This organized "network pull" mechanism differs from the more organic network development processes described in previous research.

Particularly relevant is the comparison with the limited existing research on IAEE internationalization. The findings support Shafi et al.'s (2019) observation about the significance of collaboration for product and process innovation in the craft sector. This study also confirms Tiwari & Korneliussen's (2018) findings regarding the importance of experiential market knowledge for internationalization efforts. However, this

research extends beyond existing studies by uncovering how social missions and advocacy motives fundamentally shape the internationalization process—an under-researched dimension in IAEE literature.

The contrast between the findings of this research study and existing research regarding the role of mission-driven network orchestration suggests that previous studies may have overlooked important non-commercial factors in EE SME internationalization. This gap is particularly significant given the substantial employment prospects of the artisan sector and its relevance for many EE. This comparison reveals that while the findings support many existing insights about EE SME internationalization, they also identify unique mechanisms and motivations specific to the artisan sector that warrant further investigation. The identification of mission-driven network orchestration as a key mechanism suggests the need to broaden theoretical frameworks to better account for non-commercial factors in internationalization processes.

The research revealed novel findings that diverge from the results of the studies reviewed in the SLA. The following chapter discusses three particularly compelling insights that emerged as significant contributions from the collected and analyzed data. Additionally, it explores their implications for the narrowed research focus of this study as well as their relevance to broader research fields.

## **Novel Findings**

### ***Social Motives and Internationalization***

The empirical research revealed that actors involved in IAEE internationalization pursue social motives alongside economic interests, a finding that significantly impacts the internationalization process across multiple levels. These effects range from individual socioeconomically balanced relationship commitment decisions to the comprehensive design of digital marketplaces aimed at achieving specific social objectives. Notably, this phenomenon is absent from the literature screened in the SLA, indicating a potential research gap in current research. The theoretical contextualization of this finding can be achieved through Zahra's (2014) theoretical contribution, which establishes crucial connections between Social Entrepreneurship (SE) and International Entrepreneurship research. SE research draws upon empirical

investigations of social enterprises, where organizations deliberately integrate elements of social welfare and commercial logics (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Mair et al., 2012; Santos et al., 2015). The desired social outcomes in SE research are conceptualized as "global sustainable well-being" (Zahra et al., 2014, p. 139), a concept that, in the eyes of the authors of this thesis, summarizes the motives identified in the theme 'Advocacy Motives and Effects'. The absence of these multifaceted organizational motivations for internationalization in the SLA results substantiates the existence of a research gap. This phenomenon may be particularly characteristic of the artisan sector, which, as evidenced by the results, serves as a platform for various social and cultural interests. Moreover, as discussed in the introduction, the artisan sector is recognized as a key driver for fostering human development in disadvantaged regions.

These distinctive attributes of the artisan industry may explain why internationalization research investigating other sectors has largely overlooked the social dimensions of the internationalization phenomenon. This research contributes to addressing this gap, offering new insights into how social motives and economic goals intersect within the unique context of the artisan sector. Whether, and to what extent social dimensions can be considered relevant in sectors other than the artisan sector could be subject of further research.

### ***The Role of Digital Platforms on Internationalization Processes***

The empirical findings suggest that, alongside other key actors, operators of digital e-commerce platforms wield substantial influence on the internationalization processes of IAEE. Specifically, the described digital platforms/ marketplaces serve as important gateways for IAEE to access potential global partners. By providing visibility, promoting the artisan industry as a whole, and simplifying the collaboration process, these platforms contribute significantly to international market access for IAEE.

At the same time, these digital platforms and marketplaces exert influence over the market dynamics by setting access barriers, thereby determining the conditions under which firms can engage with their network. This role, which was described as 'gatekeeping' in the result part, describes the observation that digital platforms not only facilitate internationalization but also regulate the terms and scope of international relationships (I2, I11, I14), which can have far-reaching implications for market access

and competition. While the influence of digital platforms on internationalization is not explicitly addressed in the studies included in the systematic literature analysis (SLA), a targeted review of relevant literature reveals that this phenomenon has been briefly explored in other strands of research. For example, Kabanda & Brown (2017) demonstrate the adoption of E-commerce platforms by Tanzanian SME while Patel & Shah (2016) elucidate the role of E-commerce in the development of rural artisan industry in India. The empirical findings align with these studies by confirming the relevance of E-commerce platforms in the context of IAEE internationalization. Furthermore, the research underscores that through the strategic use of digital e-commerce platforms, social goals, such as inclusivity, gender equity, and community empowerment, might also be advanced. In particular, the findings emphasize the relevance of digital platforms in the artisan sector, where these platforms not only drive commercial internationalization but also potentially serve as tools for social and economic empowerment.

### ***A Plethora of Actors Involved in Internationalization***

The empirical research has revealed a diverse array of actors involved in the internationalization of IAEE, exemplarily highlighted by one interview expert: *“I think there are these, there are many, many layers of intermediaries necessary”* (I11). These actors range from individual entrepreneurs, trade firms, and social businesses to e-commerce platform providers, charity organizations, business networks, or UN funds and entities (United Nations, n.d.). The detection of this broad spectrum of actors problematizes the conventional understanding of internationalization as a purely business network-driven process, as these actors influence the internationalization trajectory at multiple levels. The finding of NOA aligns with Zahra et. al.'s (2014) depiction of “Global institutions” (p. 139) which influence internationalization networks. Consequently, the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders suggests that the internationalization of IAEE is not solely driven by traditional business networks. Rather, these actors introduce various dynamics, including social, cultural, and institutional factors, which collectively shape the process in unique ways and with a global scope. A more differentiated analysis of the specific actors, their goals and motives, the activities they undertake, and their influence on the internationalization process could provide further insights into these complexities. For instance, some actors may prioritize social impact or sustainable development, while others focus

more on market expansion or financial returns, potentially leading to diverging approaches to internationalization and network orchestration.

Previous research on public-private partnerships (Stadtler & Lin, 2019; Webb et al., 2010), innovation networks (Dhanasai & Parkhe, 2006), and open systems (Dutt et al., 2016; Giudici et al., 2017) offers valuable frameworks for investigating the interplay of diverse stakeholders in shaping international business networks or systems. Applying these different approaches to the artisan sector could reveal significant opportunities for further exploration, particularly in terms of understanding how the interaction between business, social enterprises, and global organizations impacts the internationalization process for IAEE.

In essence, the research study presents novel findings which challenge the current conception of business internationalization as a process formed by homogeneous processes of business actors seeking and exploiting opportunities across borders. These findings suggest that research on IAEE internationalization could benefit from adopting a more interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from SE, development economics, and institutional theory.

However, this study is not without its limitations, which will be discussed in the following section before addressing its theoretical and practical contributions.

## **Limitations**

### ***Limitations of the SLA***

The SLA conducted for this study, while rigorous in its methodology, presents several limitations that warrant consideration. The search strategy was constrained by the specific terminology employed and thereby reflects the progressive knowledge creation process of this study, as further relevant topics only emerged after the analysis was conducted. Further, the analysis may have inadvertently excluded pertinent literature that utilized alternative terminologies or was published in languages other than English, potentially omitting valuable perspectives from non-Anglophone scholars.

A significant methodological constraint arose from the exclusive utilization of the Social Sciences Citation Index (WoS-SSCI) database. While this choice ensured a high standard of academic quality through peer-reviewed publications (Martín-Martín et al., 2018), it potentially excluded relevant research published in other reputable databases or regional journals, particularly those from EE. The implementation of a citation minimum in the relevance reduction phase was necessary for focusing on the highest quality publications within the given research phase but introduced a temporal bias (Gates et al., 2024). That is because this criterion may have systematically excluded recent publications that, despite their potential relevance, had not yet accumulated sufficient citations to meet the threshold. This limitation is particularly pertinent given the dynamic nature and niche character of the young field of internationalization research in the artisan sector. Furthermore, the relative scarcity of literature explicitly addressing IAEE internationalization required the authors to increase the research scope to broader SME internationalization literature. While this approach provided valuable insights, it may not fully capture the unique characteristics and challenges specific to the IAEE sector.

The geographical representation within the analyzed literature revealed imbalances worth mentioning. First, because certain regions, especially in Africa, are visibly underrepresented, limiting the comprehensiveness of global EE SME internationalization. Second, the prominent representation of studies on Chinese SME may be seen as problematic, given the heterogeneous states of economic development within the country (K. Liu et al., 2020). , given the heterogeneous states of economic development within the country (K. Liu et al., 2020).

These limitations should be considered when interpreting the study's findings and could serve as starting points for future research endeavors in this field. Notwithstanding the unresolved challenges in conducting the literature analysis, the greatest possible transparency was ensured in order to adequately address these challenges in future studies.

### ***Limitations of this Empirical Study***

The qualitative research design employed in this study, while strategically chosen to explore the complex phenomenon of IAEE internationalization, necessitates careful consideration of several limitations. These limitations do not undermine the

significance of the findings but are important to acknowledge for contextualizing the study's contributions and guide future research.

A primary limitation emerges from the geographical distribution of the sample. Despite efforts to include diverse perspectives, the sample shows a notable concentration of organizations based in Germany (75%), with limited representation from Asia, North America, and South America. This geographical imbalance may affect the generalizability of findings to other contexts, particularly regarding EE perspectives. The predominance of ME perspectives (85%) in the sample composition is especially noteworthy given the study's focus on EE artisan enterprises, potentially limiting the depth of understanding regarding the unique challenges and opportunities in these contexts.

The use of expert interviews was strategically chosen to access insider perspectives on complex systems and networks (Döringer, 2021), making them particularly suitable for examining the network processes involved in IAEE internationalization. However, expert interviews also come with notable limitations. Experts may provide selective knowledge filtered by their own interests (Flick, 2018), and the inherently interpretative nature of such interviews (Bogner et al., 2009) may introduce subjectivity. Additionally, overly structured interview guides can constrain the natural flow of conversation, potentially limiting the depth of insights gained (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). The exclusive use of online platforms for conducting interviews, while facilitating international access and enabling a broader geographical reach, introduced specific challenges. The virtual format may have impacted the ability to establish interpersonal rapport and limited the observation of subtle non-verbal cues, which often enrich qualitative data collection. The potential loss of cultural and contextual nuances in digital interactions could have influenced the depth of insights gathered, particularly in cross-cultural communication settings (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Moreover, language-related limitations, including the predominant use of English and researchers' non-native proficiency, may have led to subtle constraints, affecting nuanced meanings and the richness of culturally specific perspectives and experiences (Van Nes et al., 2010).

The hybrid thematic analysis approach, while providing structure through theory-driven codes while remaining open to emergent themes, presents several

methodological limitations worth acknowledging. The use of predetermined theoretical codes might have inadvertently constrained the identification of novel themes or led to confirmation bias, where researchers potentially forced data into existing theoretical categories rather than allowing for entirely new conceptual frameworks to emerge. This risk was particularly relevant given the study's application of the Business Network Internationalization Process Model as a theoretical lens. Furthermore, the study's reliance on predetermined theoretical concepts for initial coding may have limited its ability to capture culture-specific or sector-specific phenomena that fell outside established theoretical frameworks. This limitation is particularly relevant given the unique characteristics of the artisan sector and the cross-cultural nature of the research. The validation process, while including expert triangulation through two verification interviews conducted shortly after data collection, could have benefited from more extensive verification procedures. The inclusion of a broader spectrum of experts, particularly from EE, might have enhanced the robustness of the findings. Furthermore, implementing triangulation at various stages of the data analysis process, incorporating diverse expert perspectives, could have yielded more comprehensive insights and strengthened the validity of the conclusions (Morse, 2015).

Although continuous reflexivity, critical questioning, and fostering a dynamic discussion culture contributed to refining the precision of wording, frameworks, research questions, and the development of the interview guide, the researchers' status as novice investigators may have introduced inaccuracies. To address this, a high level of transparency in the applied methods was intentionally maintained to ensure the findings are both trustworthy and robust. In addition, the researchers' cultural backgrounds and professional experiences could have introduced biases in data analysis, potentially influencing the interpretation of themes through a particular cultural lens or prioritizing certain aspects over others. Temporal constraints posed another significant limitation, as the data collection was confined to a three-month period. This restricted timeframe may have curtailed opportunities for comprehensive follow-up interviews and in-depth exploration of emerging themes. A more extended data collection period might have facilitated deeper investigation of specific phenomena and allowed for more thorough examination of complex internationalization processes. Especially while integrating the empirical and literature

findings, the potential value of conducting a second iteration of literature screening and expert interviews became evident.

These limitations not only provide essential context for interpreting the study's findings but also illuminate valuable opportunities for future research. Subsequent studies might address these constraints through more geographically diverse sampling, extended data collection periods, and more comprehensive validation procedures, thereby advancing the academic understanding of IAEE internationalization dynamics.

## **Contributions**

### ***Theoretical Contributions***

This chapter explores the theoretical contributions of this research, which might be of value to extend existing frameworks in international business literature and network internationalization theory. By integrating novel insights, the study inherits the potential to challenge conventional assumptions and aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving internationalization, particularly in the context of emerging economies and non-commercial actors. The following sections detail the main aspects in which this research might contribute to and advance theoretical discourse.

First, the study can contribute to expanding the understanding of key actors which constitute network internationalization in EE contexts. While prior research identified two primary resource pathways for EE SME internationalization - social capital through personal connections and support through government agencies (Che Senik et al., 2011). This research, however, reveals a third critical pathway: Network Orchestrating Actors driven by global social missions. This observation aligns with and extends the insights of Gil-Barragan et al. (2020) regarding the role of networks in accelerating internationalization. It also demonstrates how these processes can be actively orchestrated rather than emerging organically. This insight may change the theoretical understanding of internationalization mechanisms by demonstrating how non-commercial actors can facilitate market entry and development.

Second, the research may broaden the theoretical understanding of how internationalization networks operate by revealing the systematic orchestration processes employed by these actors. Moving beyond existing notions of organic network development (Coviello & Munro, 1995; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009), the findings demonstrate structured approaches to capability development, market access facilitation, and active network positioning. This complements Tiwari & Korneliusen's (2018) work on experiential knowledge in internationalization by showing how such knowledge can be systematically developed through orchestrated processes. The findings may also extend Narooz & Child's (2017) insights on how firms respond to institutional voids by revealing how orchestrating actors can help bridge these voids systematically. This orchestrated "network pull" approach represents a significant departure from conventional market-entry theories that assume primarily entrepreneurial or market-driven processes.

Third, and most significantly, this research may provide a contribution to challenge the existing comprehension of the phenomenon of internationalization by integrating social mission perspectives into existing internationalization theory. The findings indicate how non-commercial assets such as cultural heritage and community impact can be transformed into competitive advantages through network orchestration, thereby supporting and extending Shafi et al.'s (2019) findings on how cooperation with various stakeholders can drive innovation in creative industries. Furthermore, the findings support Zahra et al.'s (2014) efforts to integrate social missions into internationalization frameworks by illustrating how social motives are affecting internationalization processes in the artisan sector.

The research might also contribute to theory by reconceptualizing power dynamics in international business relationships. Building on Johanson & Vahlne's (2009) "liability of outsidership" concept, the findings demonstrate how structural power differences between emerging and ME actors fundamentally shape internationalization processes. The study suggests that orchestrating actors could potentially serve as equalizing forces, providing a new theoretical perspective on how firms from EE might overcome structural disadvantages in international markets.

These theoretical contributions might be particularly valuable because they address multiple elements of existing theory while providing compelling empirical

observations. By suggesting how social missions and structured orchestration processes could influence internationalization mechanisms, this research may offer new perspectives for understanding how firms from EE might access international markets more effectively. The findings prefigure the need to expand existing theoretical frameworks to better incorporate non-commercial drivers and systematic orchestration in internationalization processes. Before delving into detailed directions for future research, the next chapter will focus on outlining the practical contributions of this study.

### ***Practical Contributions***

The findings from this research might offer valuable practical implications for multiple stakeholder groups involved in IAEE internationalization. For IAEE business leaders, the study could provide guidance on leveraging NOAs to access international markets. The findings suggest how artisan enterprises might benefit from systematic capability development programs, which appears to emphasize both technical and market readiness. Understanding approaches to building legitimacy through established organizations while maintaining cultural authenticity might emerge as a crucial strategy, particularly given the identified challenges of power dynamics between EE and EE actors.

For policy makers and development organizations, these findings could help inform approaches to structuring support programs for IAEEs. The research suggests how NOAs potentially combine capability building with active network positioning through trade fair participation. The study's identification of complex power dynamics might indicate the need for programs that specifically address structural disadvantages faced by IAEE. Development organizations could consider the study's finding that successful internationalization appears to require coordinated support across multiple dimensions, from basic language translation to sophisticated market capability development. Moreover, digital platform operators and commercial market intermediaries might benefit from the study's exploration of combining social missions with commercial objectives. As suggested by the interviewed experts working for platforms, successful digital marketplaces appear to implement systematic verification processes while maintaining social impact goals. Consequently, the research suggests platforms might emphasize (further) developing structured capability building

programs, implementing careful internationalization processes to ensure market readiness, and creating visibility mechanisms that could highlight both commercial and social value. Further, the findings particularly suggest how intermediaries might enhance their effectiveness by addressing specific barriers identified in the research, such as language and communication challenges, business practice differences and cultural perceptions of products and their design.

For advocacy organizations and NGOs, the research appears to demonstrate the potential value of orchestrating complementary support mechanisms. The approaches of interviewed experts from advocacy organizations in combining capability building with market access facilitation could provide insights for effective intervention. The study indicates these organizations might focus on developing structured pathways that progressively build capabilities while maintaining cultural authenticity. Additionally, the research might also offer practical insights for designers and brands seeking to work with IAEEs. The findings suggest the importance of cultural sensitivity and long-term relationship building, as exemplified by designer-artisan collaborations documented in the study. Understanding and adapting to different cultural perceptions of design could emerge as crucial for successful partnerships.

These practical contributions might be valuable as they emerge from systematic analysis of expert experiences across multiple contexts and stakeholder types in the artisan sector. While acknowledging the study's limitations, particularly regarding geographical representation, these insights could offer preliminary guidance for improving IAEE internationalization support. The findings suggest that successful internationalization might require coordinated action across multiple stakeholders, with each potentially playing distinct but complementary roles in orchestrating market access and development for artisan enterprises.

Further research would be needed to validate and expand upon these initial findings, as discussed in detail in the following chapter.

### **Future Research Directions**

The research conducted in this thesis suggests several potential areas that might warrant further investigation to enhance understanding of IAEE internationalization. While this study offered initial insights into network orchestration

mechanisms in the artisan sector, significant questions remain unexplored. Based on the findings and identified research gaps, six key areas emerge as particularly promising for future research: the long-term sustainability of orchestrated networks, the role of social missions in internationalization processes, power dynamics between EE and ME based actors, the impact of digital platforms, the intersection of artisan characteristics with internationalization, and effectiveness of capability development processes. These areas not only address fundamental gaps in current internationalization theory but also respond to pressing practical challenges identified in the empirical findings. While each of these areas present opportunities to advance both theoretical understanding and practical support for artisan enterprises from EE, three aspects appear particularly crucial for future and are therefore examined in greater detail.

The presence of social missions in IAEE internationalization, as observed in the theme "Advocacy Motives and Effects", suggests important questions about the interaction between social and commercial objectives. Prior research has explored how organizations deliberately integrate elements of social welfare and commercial logics (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Mair et al., 2012), yet little is known about how these dynamics manifest in internationalization processes. While the findings indicated how online retailers for instance attempt to balance social and commercial goals, further investigation could explore how different types of social missions might affect internationalization strategies. Research attention could be directed toward understanding the potential viability of hybrid social-commercial business models in the artisan sector, building on Santos et al.'s (2015) work on aligning business models with social trajectories, as well as examining possible impacts of social missions on relationship development. The limitations observed in existing network internationalization theory might suggest opportunities for theoretical development. Building on Zahra et al.'s (2014) work on social entrepreneurship and extending Johanson & Vahlne's (2009) network model, future research could explore new theoretical frameworks that might integrate social missions. Scholars could focus on how cultural preservation objectives could influence internationalization and examine potential ways development goals might shape network orchestration or, vice versa, how network orchestration could impact cultural preservation trajectories.

The power dynamics identified between EE and ME based actors might deserve additional study as a critical factor shaping IAEE internationalization. As evidenced by experiences with *"lightning strike orders"* (I3), where large orders from ME based buyers overwhelm artisan enterprises' capabilities, these dynamics fundamentally influence relationship development and sustainability. The empirical findings suggest that power asymmetries manifest not only in business transactions but also in deeper cultural and institutional dimensions, as illustrated by the *"preconceptions and very colonial thinking"* (I6) noted by one expert. Future research could investigate how these power imbalances affect relationship sustainability and evolution over time, while also examining potential strategies for developing more equitable international business relationships. Of particular interest might be comparative case studies of successful relationships where power asymmetries have been effectively managed, perhaps through intermediary intervention or innovative business models.

Additionally, the role of digital platforms in democratizing market access warrants deeper exploration, particularly given their emerging significance in IAEE internationalization. While platforms and marketplaces demonstrate the potential of technology in facilitating market access, several fundamental questions remain unexplored. Research could investigate how different types of digital platforms might influence internationalization processes, from simple marketplace models to more sophisticated orchestration platforms that integrate capability development and relationship management. This is highlighted by the findings which suggest that platforms serve not only as market connectors but potentially as transformative actors in power relationships, as evidenced by their role in standardizing business practices and verifying capabilities. Future studies might examine the potential impacts of digital transformation on traditional intermediaries and their business models, while also investigating the effectiveness of platform-based capability development programs in preparing IAEE for international market participation. Of particular interest might be understanding how digital platforms could help overcome the *"massive universe of makers"* (I11) challenge identified, where many artisan enterprises remain excluded from international markets due to formalization and professionalization barriers. This research direction appears especially relevant given the growing significance of digital transformation in international trade and its potential to create more inclusive market access mechanisms for artisan enterprises from EE.

These suggested research directions have the potential to contribute not only to the theoretical understanding but also to the practical facilitation of IAEE internationalization. Building on the concept of systematic orchestration observed in this study, advancing knowledge in this area requires coordinated efforts that bridge social and economic dimensions. Given the artisan sector's critical role in promoting economic development in EE, as outlined in the introduction, addressing these research gaps could provide valuable insights to support the sustainable growth of artisan enterprises. By deepening our understanding of social missions in internationalization processes, power dynamics between EE and ME based actors, and the transformative impact of digital platforms, future research could offer impactful contributions to fostering the growth and positive global influence of artisan enterprises in in EE.

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## Appendix

### Overview of Appendices

|                                                                                                                      |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Appendix 1</b> Result overview of the SLA.....                                                                    | 120 |
| <b>Appendix 2</b> Geographical distribution of analyzed studies by country .....                                     | 128 |
| <b>Appendix 3</b> Geographical distribution of analyzed studies by continent and demographic contextualization ..... | 129 |
| <b>Appendix 4</b> Data protection .....                                                                              | 130 |
| <b>Appendix 5</b> Experts of the Four Preliminary Interviews - Detailed Profiles .                                   | 131 |
| <b>Appendix 6</b> <i>Interview Guideline Phase 1</i> .....                                                           | 132 |
| <b>Appendix 7</b> Interview Guideline Phase 2 .....                                                                  | 133 |
| <b>Appendix 8</b> Interview Guideline Phase 3 .....                                                                  | 134 |
| <b>Appendix 9</b> <i>Interview Audio Recordings</i> .....                                                            | 135 |
| <b>Appendix 10</b> <i>Transcripts of the Interviews</i> .....                                                        | 136 |
| <b>Appendix 11</b> <i>Results of the Coding Process</i> .....                                                        | 137 |
| <b>Appendix 12</b> Mapping of the three-staged process of theme development (1/2) .....                              | 138 |
| <b>Appendix 13</b> Mapping of the three-staged process of theme development (2/2) .....                              | 139 |
| <b>Appendix 14</b> Distribution of tasks upon research team .....                                                    | 140 |

## Appendix 1

### *Result overview of the SLA*

| No. | Study                                                                                        | Topic                                                                                        | Method                                                                                            | Main results                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Barriers to enter in foreign markets: evidence from SME in emerging market                   | SME internationalization; Market entry barriers; Emerging markets; Bangladesh                | Type or Research Design: Mixed-method analysis, Sample Size: 212 firms, Country: Bangladesh       | SME from EE face specific internationalization barriers. Economic barriers are more significant than social barriers for SME in developing countries when entering foreign markets, contrary to assumptions in existing theories. |
| 2   | Building capabilities for international operations through networks: a study of Indian firms | Internationalization; Capabilities; Networks; Emerging markets; India                        | Type or Research Design: Quantitative regression analysis, Sample Size: 794 firms, Country: India | Indian firms build international capabilities by leveraging parental and foreign networks to gain knowledge and scarce resources. The study provides evidence for the relevance of networks for EE firm internationalization      |
| 3   | Context-specific micro-foundations and successful SME internationalization in emerging       | SME internationalization; Emerging markets; Managerial resources; Dynamic capabilities; Iran | Type or Research Design: Mixed-method analysis,                                                   | Iranian SME managers are utilizing managerial resources and capabilities, such as international networks, to overcome                                                                                                             |

|   |                                                                                                             |                                                                                    |                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   | markets: A mixed-method analysis of managerial resources and dynamic capabilities                           |                                                                                    | Sample Size: Not specified, Country: Iran                                                              | barriers and limitations resulting from resource constraints and foreignness.                                                                                                                                |
| 4 | Export marketing assistance and early internationalizing firm performance<br>Does export commitment matter? | Export assistance; Early internationalization; Export commitment; Bangladesh       | Type or Research Design: Quantitative regression analysis, Sample Size: 224 firms, Country: Bangladesh | Marketing and financial internationalization assistance can lead to higher export performance, especially for highly export committed, low experienced firms.                                                |
| 5 | Exporting by experiential knowledge: a study of emerging market micro firms                                 | Micro firms; Experiential knowledge; Internationalization; Emerging markets; Nepal | Type or Research Design: Qualitative case study, Sample Size: 9 firms, Country: Nepal                  | Internationalization of resource-poor emerging market micro firms relies heavily on entrepreneurs' experiential knowledge acquired through prior experience, social networks, and international trade fairs. |
| 6 | Friends with money? Owner's financial network and new venture                                               | New venture internationalization; Financial networks;                              | Type or Research Design: Quantitative                                                                  | Diversity of domestic financial networks positively affects internationalization,                                                                                                                            |

|   |                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                     |                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   | internationalization in a transition economy                                                                                          | Transition economies; Bulgaria                                                                      | e survey, Sample Size: Not specified, Country: Bulgaria                                             | with the effect increasing with firm size in Bulgarian new ventures.                                                                                                                   |
| 7 | Intangible resources influencing the international performance of professional service SME in an emerging market: Evidence from India | Professional services; SME internationalization; Intangible resources; India                        | Type or Research Design: Quantitative survey, Sample Size: 199 firms, Country: India                | Entrepreneurial orientation, human capital, and relational capital directly influence international performance of Indian SME, with human capital's effect mediated by other factors.  |
| 8 | Internal and external determinants of export performance: Insights from Algeria                                                       | Algeria, export performance, export regularity, resources and capabilities                          | Type or Research Design: Quantitative regression analysis, Sample Size: 103 firms, Country: Algeria | Export influencing factors depend on firm location, Algerian export SME rely more on networks, marketing performance and managerial resources than high tech and innovation capacities |
| 9 | International Network Searching, Learning, and Explorative Capability: Small                                                          | Emerging market firms · International learning intent · Breadth of international network · Depth of | Type or Research Design: Structural equation modelling                                              | A broad international network positively affect Chinese ESME explorative capability and thus innovation performance.                                                                   |

|    |                                                                                                                |                                                                                           |                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    | and Medium-sized Enterprises from China                                                                        | international network · Explorative capability                                            | Sample Size: 204 firms<br>Country: China                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 10 | Internationalization and the performance of born-global SME: the mediating role of social networks             | Born-global SME; Internationalization; Social networks; Performance; China                | Type or Research Design: Quantitative survey, Sample Size: 129 firms, Country: China  | Home-based social networks play a mediating role in the relationship between internationalization and firm performance for born-global SME through knowledge, learning, and trust benefits. |
| 11 | Internationalization of Chinese SME: The role of networks and global value chains                              | SME, internationalization, global value chains, network ties, upgrading, emerging economy | Type or Research Design: Qualitative case study, Sample Size: 9 firms, Country: China | Networks facilitate internationalization for Chinese manufacturing SME but do not help overcome their low position in GVCs limiting business development and capability building            |
| 12 | Internationalizing through networks from emerging to developed markets with a case study from Ghana to the USA | SME internationalization; Networks; Emerging markets; Ghana; USA                          | Type or Research Design: Qualitative case study, Sample Size: 1, Country: Ghana       | Network and effectuation approaches are relevant for understanding SME internationalization from emerging to developed markets, highlighting the                                            |

importance of relationships and adaptive strategies.

- |    |                                                                                                                            |                                                                    |                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 13 | Managing firm risk through supply chain dependence: an SME perspective                                                     | Supply chain dependence; Credit risk; SME; China                   | Type or Research Design: Quantitative regression analysis, Sample Size: 7.548 firms Country: China | Dependence on major customers and suppliers is positively related to credit risk and negatively related to credit rating for Chinese SME. To reduce risk, SME should increase their supplier & customer network, to which Guanxi can have negative influence    |
| 14 | Networking responses to different levels of institutional void: A comparison of internationalizing SME in Egypt and the UK | SME internationalization; Institutional voids; Networks; Egypt; UK | Type or Research Design: Qualitative comparative study, Sample Size: 20 SME, Country: Egypt and UK | Substantial differences exist between Egyptian and UK SME in networking behavior in response to specific institutional conditions during internationalization. Egyptian SME rely more on informal ties to access institutional support for internationalization |
| 15 | SME international innovation and strategic adaptiveness: The                                                               | SME internationalization; Innovation; Networks; Croatia            | Type or Research Design: Quantitative                                                              | Domestic network informality moderates the relationship between network                                                                                                                                                                                         |

|    |                                                                                                                                                |                                                                            |                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    | role of domestic network density, centrality and informality                                                                                   |                                                                            | e structural equation modeling, Sample Size: 263 SME, Country: Croatia             | centrality/density and international innovation/strategic adaptiveness for Croatian SME.                                                                                                     |
| 16 | Social Network of Small Creative Firms and Its Effects on Innovation in Developing Countries                                                   | Creative industries; Social networks; Innovation; Developing countries     | Type or Research Design: Quantitative survey, Sample Size: 254 Country: Bangladesh | Cooperative relationships with buyers, suppliers, and designers positively impact innovation in small creative firms, while cooperation with competitors does not have a significant effect. |
| 17 | Social network relationship, supply chain resilience and customer-oriented performance of small and medium enterprises in a developing economy | SME; Supply chain resilience; Social networks; Customer performance; Ghana | Type or Research Design: Quantitative survey, Sample Size: 110 SME, Country: Ghana | The Ghanaian SME external and internal social networks can be leveraged to enhance its supply chain resilience and customer-oriented performance                                             |
| 18 | The impact of Founder's human capital on firms' extent of early internationalization                                                           | Early internationalization; Human capital; Least-developed                 | Type or Research Design: Quantitative analysis,                                    | Specific human capital factors, such as prior experience and professional network of the founder directly                                                                                    |

|    |                                                                                                               |                                                                             |                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    | n: Evidence from a least-developed country                                                                    | countries; Bangladesh                                                       | Sample Size: 159, Country: Bangladesh                                                           | and indirectly affect early internationalization extent, while general human capital factors are not significant in the Bangladeshi apparel industry.                                        |
| 19 | The Influence of networking on the internationalization of SME: Evidence from internationalized Chinese firms | SME; Internationalization; Networking; China                                | Type or Research Design: Quantitative regression analysis, Sample Size: 210 SME, Country: China | Strategic networking with key partners is beneficial for accelerating foreign business development and achieving rapid internationalization                                                  |
| 20 | The international market selection of Chinese SME: How institutional influence overrides psychic distance     | International market selection; Institutions; Psychic distance; Chinese SME | Type or Research Design: Qualitative multi-case study, Sample Size: 6 SME, Country: China       | Formal and informal institutional factors, such as government support and guanxi, enable Chinese SME to choose psychically distant markets, overriding psychic distance in market selection. |

|    |                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                    |                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 21 | The role of business and social networks in the effectual internationalization: Insights from emerging market SME                                    | Effectual internationalization; Networks; Emerging markets; SME                                    | Type or Research Design: Quantitative survey, Sample Size: 469 SME, Country: Brazil, China, and Poland     | Business networks with knowledge that circulates easily among network actors may help managers compensate for a lack of information during internationalization, but requires flexible orientation and context-awareness of managers. |
| 22 | When do domestic networks cause accelerated internationalization under different decision-making logic? Evidence from weak institutional environment | SME internationalization; Domestic networks; Decision-making logic; Weak institutional environment | Type or Research Design: Qualitative comparative analysis, Sample Size: 33 SME, Country: Colombia and Peru | Domestic networks can accelerate internationalization for SME, particularly when firms employ effectual decision-making logic in uncertain environments                                                                               |

---

## Appendix 2

### *Geographical distribution of analyzed studies by country*

| <b>n</b> | <b>Country</b> |
|----------|----------------|
| 7        | China          |
| 4        | Bangladesh     |
| 3        | India          |
| 2        | Ghana          |
| 2        | Peru           |
| 2        | Colombia       |
| 1        | Iran           |
| 1        | Nepal          |
| 1        | Bulgaria       |
| 1        | Algeria        |
| 1        | Egypt          |
| 1        | Croatia        |
| 1        | Brazil         |

### Appendix 3

*Geographical distribution of analyzed studies by continent and demographic contextualization*

| Continent        | n  | Total Inhabitants | Result<br>Distribution | Distribution of<br>Inhabitants | Divergence<br>(absolute) |
|------------------|----|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Asia             | 16 | 4.780.000.000     | 59%                    | 62%                            | 3,11%                    |
| Africa           | 4  | 1.480.000.000     | 15%                    | 19%                            | 4,49%                    |
| South<br>America | 5  | 658.900.000       | 19%                    | 9%                             | 9,92%                    |
| Europe           | 2  | 745.600.000       | 7%                     | 10%                            | 2,32%                    |

**Appendix 4***Data protection*

## Appendix 5

### *Experts of the Four Preliminary Interviews - Detailed Profiles*

| No. | Soci-cultural background                  | Current/main role                            | Organisation (location)                                                                                                         | Qualifications/previous role (s)/other                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Male, born in Ghana, located in Germany   | CEO/Founder                                  | Online retailer that is a UN agency initiative, employs refugees from camps and markets their artisanal products (Switzerland). | Master's degree in Industrial Design (Germany), Consultant for UNHCR, Lecturer for Social Impact Design at a Berlin University of Applied Sciences (Germany), Consultant for a government agency (Netherlands)                                                                                                        |
| 2   | Male, born in India, located in Germany   | (1) Consultant<br>(2) CEO/Founder            | (1) Freelancer for different international organisations/NGO's/ development cooperations<br>(2) Artisan Business (India)        | Master's degree in Agriculture - Economics, Academic contributions to research and teaching in the field of development studies, CEO/Founder of an artisan business crafting accessories                                                                                                                              |
| 3   | Female, born and located in Germany       | CEO/Founder                                  | Online Retailer (Germany)                                                                                                       | Bachelor's degree in Political Science and Sociology (UK), Master's degree in Business Management (UK), Board member of a global network of fair trade organisations, Board member of a German network of fair trade organisations                                                                                    |
| 4   | Male, born in Australia, located in Spain | (1) CIO<br>(2) Consultant<br>(3) CEO/Founder | (1) Artisan Business (Sri Lanka)<br>(2) Development cooperation (EU/Sri Lanka)<br>(3) Artisan network (Sri Lanka)               | Bachelor's degree in International Business Management (Denmark), Master's degree in Fashion Design and Brand Management (Denmark), Doctor's degree in Business Administration and Management (France), Founder of a Creative Agency (Hong Kong), Guest Lecturer at a Berlin University of Applied Sciences (Germany) |

**Appendix 6***Interview Guideline Phase 1*

**Appendix 7***Interview Guideline Phase 2*

**Appendix 8***Interview Guideline Phase 3*

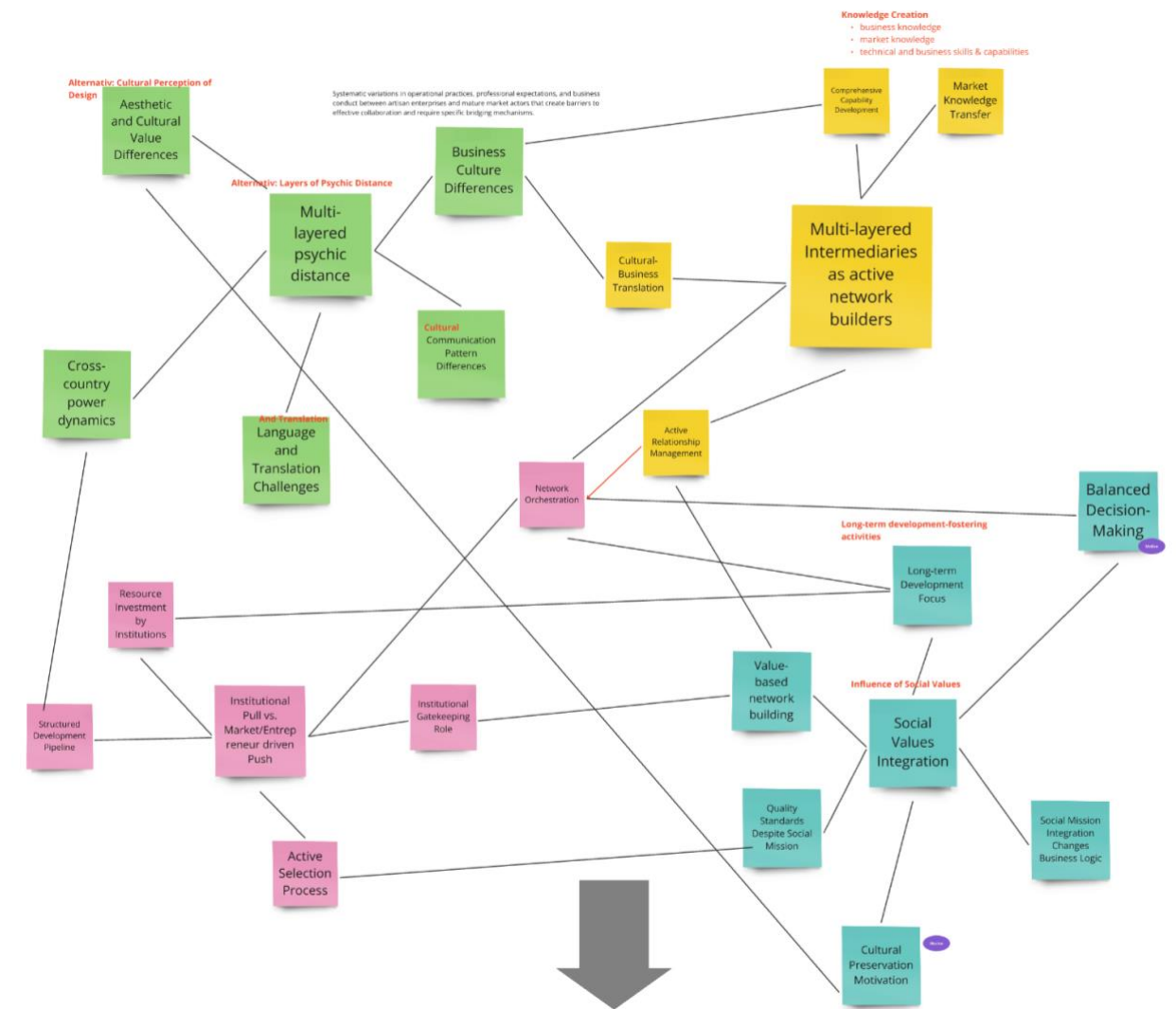
**Appendix 9***Interview Audio Recordings*

**Appendix 10***Transcripts of the Interviews*

**Appendix 11***Results of the Coding Process*

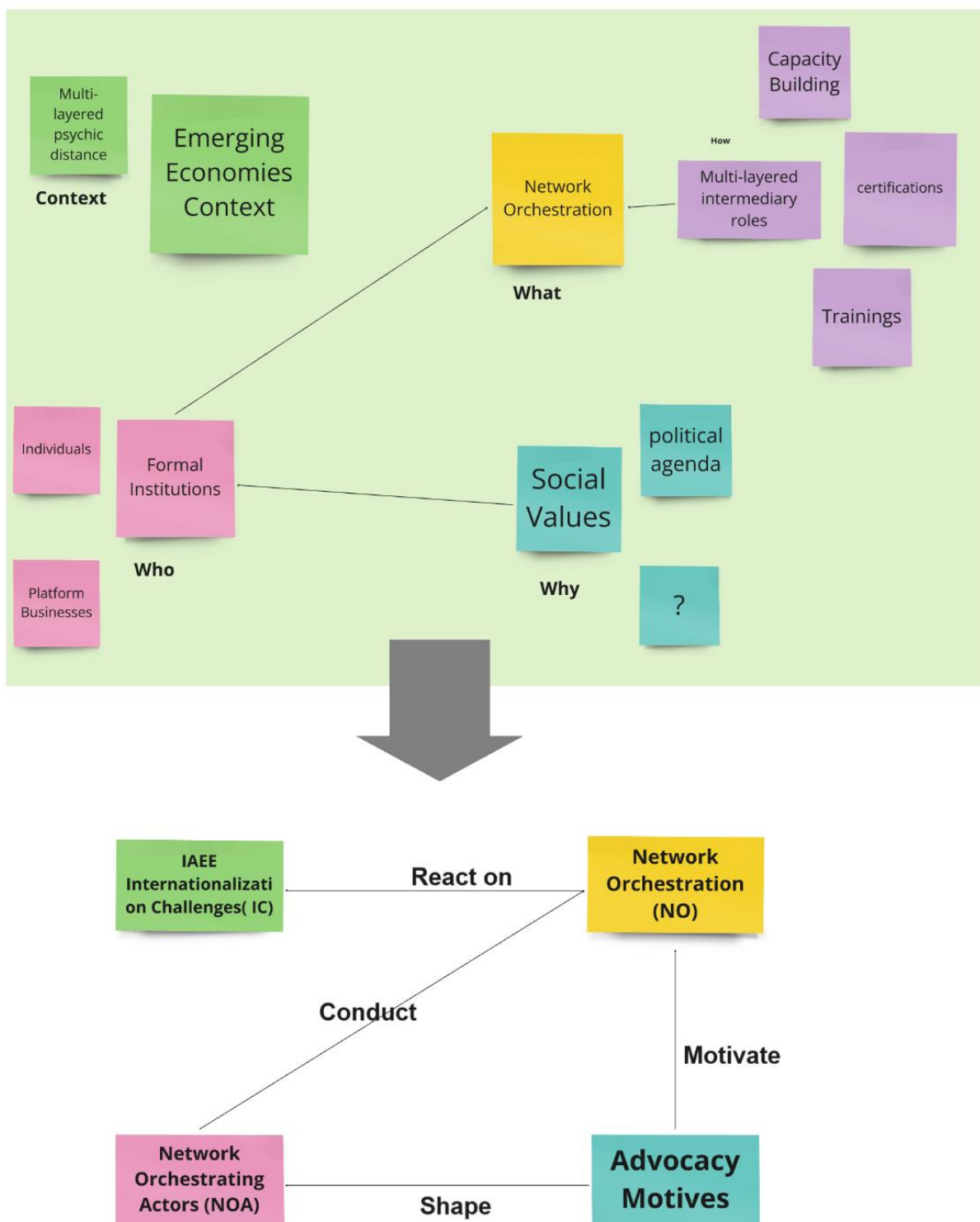
## Appendix 12

### Mapping of the three-staged process of theme development (1/2)



## Appendix 13

### Mapping of the three-staged process of theme development (2/2)



## Appendix 14

### *Distribution of tasks upon research team*

| Task                                                                  | SB      | MP      | KT      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Development of the thesis                                             |         |         |         |
| Participating in weekly meetings                                      | Group   | Group   | Group   |
| Preliminary formulating introduction                                  | Support | Review  | Lead    |
| Preliminary review of the literature                                  | Support | Lead    | Co-Lead |
| Preliminary formulating of the research question                      | Group   | Group   | Group   |
| Preliminary Research of suitable methodology                          | Support | Support | Lead    |
| Development of interview guide for exploratory orientation interviews | Co-Lead | Co-Lead | Support |
| Conducting the exploratory orientation interviews                     | Lead    | Support | Support |
| Preliminary analysis of exploratory interviews                        | Lead    | Support | Support |
| Preliminary Research on theoretical framework                         | Support | Lead    | Support |
| Preliminary formulating Distribution of tasks and timeframe           | Support | Support | Lead    |
| Writing first drafts of exposé                                        | Review  | Lead    | Support |
| Meetings with examiner                                                | Support | Lead    | Support |
| Adjusting the exposé based on examiners feedback                      | Review  | Lead    | Support |

| <b>Task</b>                                           | <b>SB</b> | <b>MP</b> | <b>KT</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Extensive review of the literature                    | Support   | Support   | Lead      |
| Structured literature review                          | Support   | Lead      | Support   |
| Extensive Research on theoretical framework           | Support   | Lead      | Support   |
| Extensive Research of suitable methodology            | Lead      | Support   | Lead      |
| Formulation of the introduction                       | Support   | Review    | Lead      |
| Formulation of literature review                      | Review    | Lead      | Support   |
| Formulation of research gap                           | Support   | Lead      | Support   |
| Formulation of theoretical framework                  | Review    | Lead      | Support   |
| Formulation of suitable methodology                   | Lead      | Support   | Review    |
| Formulating the final research question               | Group     | Group     | Group     |
| Formulating ethical consideration                     | Support   | Support   | Lead      |
| Formulating expected results and contribution         | Support   | Support   | Lead      |
| Formulating final Distribution of tasks and timeframe | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Check and adjust exposé based on examiners feedback   | Group     | Group     | Group     |
| Formulate final exposé                                | Support   | Lead      | Support   |

|                                                                                       |           |           |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Final review                                                                          | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Data collection and analysis                                                          |           |           |           |
| <b>Task</b>                                                                           | <b>SB</b> | <b>MP</b> | <b>KT</b> |
| Search for potential experts                                                          | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Approaching experts                                                                   | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Categorizing experts                                                                  | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Scheduling suitable time and date for interviews                                      | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Follow-up to confirm participation                                                    | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Development of Interview guide for each interview batch and several expert categories | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Extensive Research on experts, role and company of scheduled interviews               | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Conducting interviews                                                                 | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Preliminary Transcription                                                             | Support   | Lead      | Support   |
| Final Transcription                                                                   | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Preliminary Coding                                                                    | Lead      | Support   | Co-Lead   |
| Extensive Coding                                                                      | Lead      | Support   | Support   |
| Final Coding                                                                          | Support   | Support   | Lead      |
| Data triangulation                                                                    | Support   | Support   | Lead      |
| Identification and analysis of emerging themes                                        | Lead      | Support   | Co-Lead   |
| Development of concept maps                                                           | Support   | Co-Lead   | Lead      |

|                                               |         |         |         |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Anonymization of quotes for use in the thesis | Lead    | Support | Support |
| Development of visual aids                    | Support | Lead    | Co-Lead |
| Findings synthesis                            | Group   | Group   | Group   |
| Final review and preparation for submission   | Lead    | Support | Support |
| Thesis submission                             | Lead    | Support | Support |