

# THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SERVICES IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY TO MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF PANDEMIC SCENARIOS

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## Abstract

*The lockdown generated by COVID 19 has prompted a large number of companies to migrate their business models to digital services or platforms to continue in the market. This article analyzes the factors linked to the internationalization of service firms, due to its importance on the digital economy and as a possible strategy to mitigate negative economic-effects in pandemic scenarios. The study was structured in 3 stages, first a systematic literature review of 53 high-impact articles to know about the state of the art of the internationalization process; followed by the analysis of the results based on the literature; and a third analysis of the relationship of the identified factors integrated within an affinity diagram. The research concludes that due to the future of digital economies in the world and as a strategy to counteract the negative effects of pandemics, it is necessary to deepen the analysis and try to understand the needed factors for the internationalization of service companies in the digital environment.*

**Key words:** *service sector, internationalization, covid19, lockdown, literature review*

**JEL Classification:** *M16, L86, F23*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The globalization process has driven companies to develop strategies to compete in a global market and leave their national borders, Rojas Berrio & Rodriguez Vega (2013) mention that the internationalization of companies has gained great relevance and is fundamental for the growth of countries. This statement denotes that it is a topic of relevance worldwide, the Doing Business report of the World Bank, Group (2018) postulates cross-border trade as one of the key factors for the ease of doing business and increasing the competitiveness of countries, however, it does not contemplate the services sector, this being one of those that has become more important in recent years due to its economic impact.

Regarding this, Crespi, Olivari, & Vargas (2016) state that currently the service economy is the most important worldwide due to the integration of service activities in different economic sectors. Moreover, UNCTAD UN (2017) mentions that trade in services will play a key role in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, being a catalyst sector that will allow the modernization of economies, so it is necessary to create policies and strategies to develop an inclusive international trade in services for all economies in the world.

Therefore, this article delves into the understanding of the process of internationalization of service companies, providing an approach of its importance in the digital economy and as a possible alternative to mitigate the effects of the lockdown. The main objective is to identify the predominant areas and factors in the analysis of previous research on the process that companies initiate to go abroad. Therefore the research questions that arise are:

**RQ1.** What are the main areas in which the analysis of the internationalization of companies has been concentrated?

**RQ2.** What are the key factors in the internationalization process?

**RQ3.** What has been researched about this process in the service sector and the digital environment?

The present study performs an analysis of 53 high impact researches in the period from 2008 to 2020 focused on the internationalization of services and tries to locate those that have been developed in the service sector and the digital environment, in order to identify knowledge gaps and to be able to give a future direction to researchers interested in this area. The systematic literature review in addition to giving an orientation of the

processing of the analyzed researches, gives a preamble to an affinity diagram for the presentation of the conclusions of the analysis and finally make recommendations for future research regarding this topic.

**II. INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SERVICE COMPANIES**

To visualize the importance of understanding the internationalization of service firms, one must first conceptualize the main theoretical lines of this process, Gebert Persson, Mattsson, & Öberg (2015) explain that there are three basic theories of firm internationalization: (1) the Uppsala model of gradual internationalization, (2) the eclectic theory of key factors for foreign direct investment, and (3) the Born Global firms model of rapid internationalization. This last model of companies has attracted the attention of researchers in recent years, as they are newly created companies linked to the digital or service environment, which have quickly positioned themselves in the global market, highlighting the importance of analyzing the process followed by these types of organizations and trying to identify the factors that have contributed to their successful positioning in the global service economy.

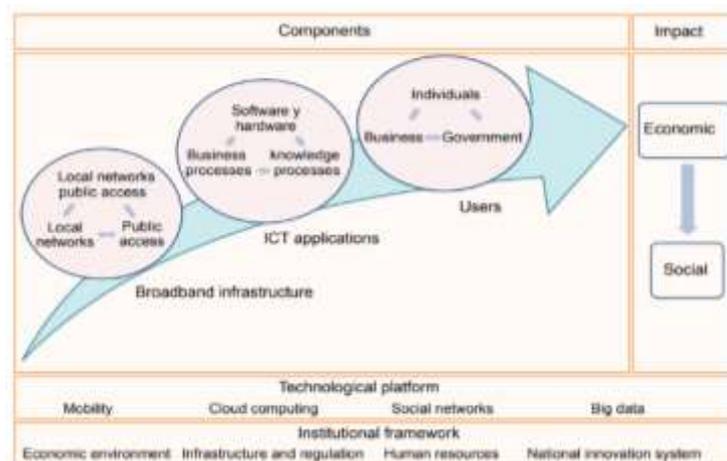
Regarding the analysis of service sector companies, Bai, Chen, & He (2019) indicate that although it is a relevant area in developed economies, there is little research aimed at understanding its operation and success, this is because the main internationalization theories and research have been developed based on manufacturing companies, however, due to the characteristics of service companies, a context-specific approach is required to understand their internationalization process.

On this point, Castiblanco Moreno, Castro Castell, & Gómez Ramírez (2017) reaffirm that despite the boom of the sector and its importance in the world, there are few academic studies focused on the analysis of the internationalization of services, since most research has focused on the product production sector, they also state that the service sector has aspects that make it different from the others, so it is necessary to carry out scientific production that helps to understand how this process is integrated and its operability in the market.

Similarly, Jack, As-Saber, & Edwards (2015) agree with these perspectives and state that as companies become more international, new service needs are born to support these operations; however and despite its relevance, there is an absence in knowing the factors that generate the success of these companies when venturing into the international market. On the other hand, Grönroos (2016), mentions that the development of the internet, the use of mobile technologies and the digitalization of economies have made it possible to offer services in the global market and develop new models of internationalization for companies, so it is necessary to analyze this process to create efficient strategies for these new business models and focus attention on the importance of the digital environment.

**III. DIGITAL ECONOMY**

The digital economy is a topic that has gained relevance in recent years, the OECD (2016) states that its impact has permeated in different sectors, due to the fact that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been substantially integrated into the lives of people and in the operation of companies. At the same time, ECLAC (2013) defines it as a facilitator of an ecosystem where multiple technologies converge, such as: communication networks, equipment, web technologies and processing services. Figure 1 illustrates how they are integrated by 3 key elements: components, technological platforms and the institutional framework.



**Figure 1 The Digital Economy Environment**

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Ken J. Cochrane, From e-Government to the

Digital Economy, KPMG, November 2012 and Soumitra Dutta and Benat Bilbao-Osorio (eds.), The Global Information Technology Report 2012: Living in a Hyperconnected World, The Business School of the World (INSEAD)/World Economic Forum.

The reason for linking the internationalization of service sector companies with the digital economy arises from international foresight, the *World Bank. Development Data Group* (2017) projects that digitalization will be key in the business context, which will increasingly be in a context of more global competition and where the service sector will be positioned above the traditional marketing of products. The United Nations (2019) also mentions the importance of the digital economy in the development process within developing countries, explaining this concept as the process of evolution of traditional business models to new models on digital platforms and that take advantage of the benefits of new technologies. This ensures that in the coming years more companies will be incorporated in the process of digitization of services.

Moreover, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) also sets a similar position to the previous one where it indicates the strong trend that the digital economy will have in the coming years, giving an overview of how policies and business models should evolve in the digital context. Guterres & Kituyi (2017) state that information technologies will transform economic activities and will be the key to evolve into digital economies.

These scenarios open up a new avenue for service companies for their global marketing, through the use of digital platforms or tools that respond to new market demands, which exposes the need to deepen the research on the key factors and the process of internationalization of service companies, to understand their evolution in the digital environment and its benefits in complex or emergency contexts such as health contingencies.

#### IV. IMPACT OF COVID 19 LOCKDOWN

The globalized market in which companies operate, leads to analyze and pay attention to the impact of external situations, such as health crises on a global scale, particularly the effects of pandemics such as COVID 19, which has left not only human losses but also large economic losses and the closure of thousands of companies due to the lockdown. The ECLAC (2020) refers that access to digital technologies could counteract the effects of such health alert worldwide, pondering that most of the countries in the world and particularly those in the developing world, have taken a big step in the process of digitization of services, due to the measures taken by the authorities to stop traditional business activities and move them to digital environments.

Menz Queirolo, (2020) also mentions this event and points out that COVID 19 has generated large monetary losses in the traditional economy; however, it has opened a new scenario to the digital economy, which will allow the development of new platforms and the producers of traditional sectors, evolve to the use of technological tools to develop their processes. The Andean Development Corporation of the Development Bank of Latin America CAF (2020) agrees that digitalization can mitigate the economic impact of pandemics such as the coronavirus and attention should be focused on the development of the digital ecosystem as a strategy to combat the effects of pandemics.

Furthermore, the WHO (2020) within its strategies against COVID 19 mentions it is a joint work of institutions and the population in general, stressing the importance of activities related to the health situation, however, also points out that private companies must design strategies that allow them to continue their activities normally despite adverse situations and how this will allow organizations to face health challenges of this type in the future. These perspectives confirm, once again, the relevance and need to deepen the analysis of our object of study as a valid strategy to mitigate the effects of covid19 and future pandemic scenarios.

#### V. METHOD

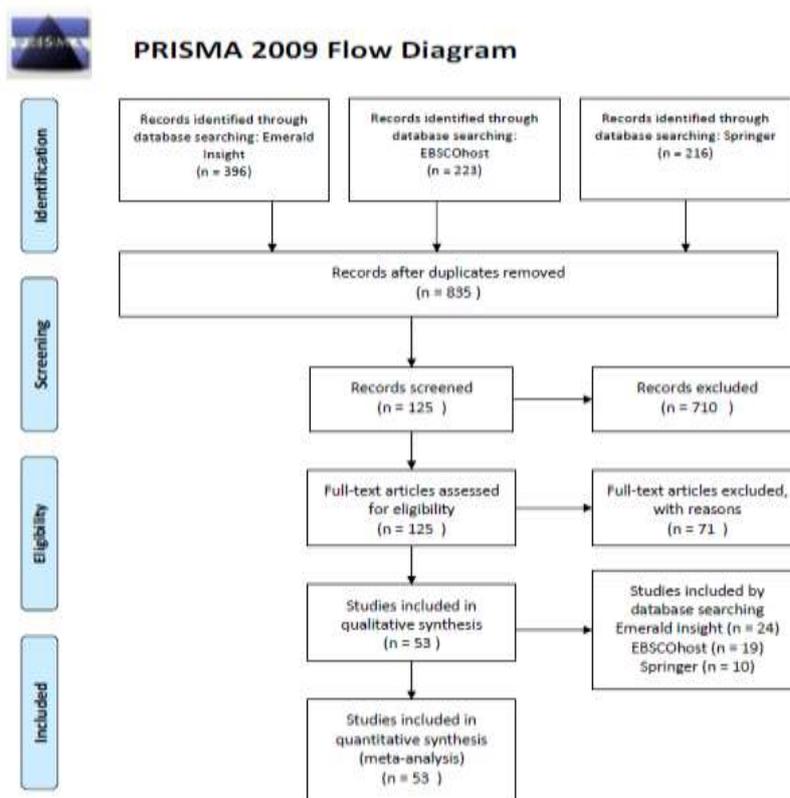
Due to the lack of research regarding the internationalization of service companies and the lack of visualization of the factors that are linked to this process, the development of an affinity diagram is proposed in order to organize the main variables present in this topic, to identify the key similarities that allow a comprehensive analysis and better understand the current situation of our object of study.

For this reason the study was structured in 3 phases; the first phase with a systematic literature review of 53 high impact articles to know the state of the art of the internationalization process, the second phase based on the literature applying an analysis of the results to identify the main variables studied and in the third phase the development of an affinity diagram to explain the relationship of the factors identified, results that will allow to have a broader view of the factors and areas of analysis developed so far regarding the internationalization of this type of companies.

**VI. PHASE 1: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW RSL**

For the analysis of the present study, the research was developed through a systematic literature review RSL, Snyder (2019) mentions this method in the medical area has been used constantly, however, its use has been increasing within business research, as a research method that allows to identify and critically evaluate previous research, which helps to understand a specific problem and reach reliable conclusions. In the same way. Wondimagegn, Teshome, & Legese (2019) indicate this method allows to collect evidence of certain topics of interest for the generation of knowledge from various studies applicable to observed gaps, previous knowledge or trends, to develop appropriate conclusions and proposals that are helpful to researchers, policy makers or decision makers in certain fields.

Hutton, Catalá-López, & Moher (2016) mention that systematic reviews have gained importance to improve the quality, transparency and support of the information analyzed methodologically, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement since 2009 has allowed improving publications and research results, due to the planning and preparation of systematic reviews. The figure 2 illustrates the process of the research articles selection for the SLR.



**Figure 2 PRISMA 2009 FLOW DIAGRAM**

Source: Modified from: Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, Altman DG, The PRISMA Group (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement. PLoS Med 6(7): e1000097. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed1000097

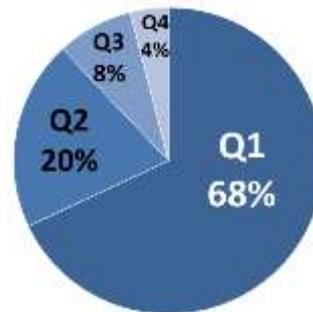
In the eligibility process, publications in the period from 2008 to 2020 were analyzed, identifying the main research focused on the internationalization process of companies and specifically in the services sector, trying to identify those related to digital services or with a technological inclination. The study was conducted according to a systematic literature review process, to ensure the quality of the publications consulted, the EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight and Springer databases were used, the advanced search methodology used were the terms "Internationalization", "Services", "Internationalization Process", "Digital services", limited to full-text academic articles and the impact level of the publications was considered.

**VII. PHASE 2: ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

An analysis of the 53 selected articles was carried out using Excel to identify and visualize the distribution of the studies with respect to the level of impact per journal, countries where the research was carried out, the year

of publication and number of articles per journal. With the aim of purifying, organizing the information and giving a broader vision to future researchers on this topic, identifying the main topics on which previous research has focused and thus making an analysis to develop an affinity diagram that allows mapping the information obtained.

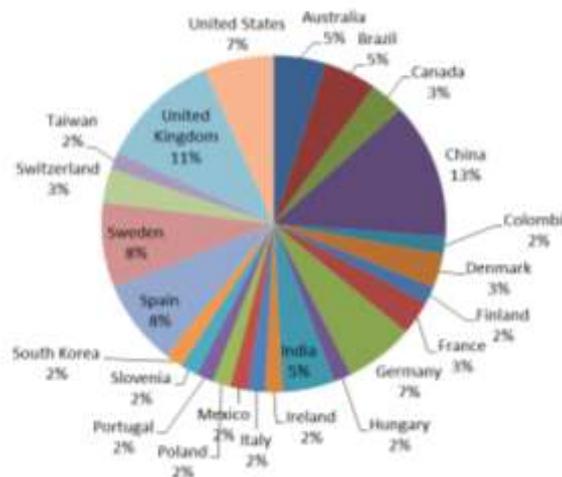
**Impact level:** Criteria provided by the SCImago Journal & Country Rank were considered, which uses the SCImago Daily Rank (SJR) indicator that determines the quartile (Qi) of impact or prestige of the publications with respect to the level of citations in other research, thus ensuring that the literature reviewed had greater scientific support and represented relevant contributions in the area. Figure 3 show the percents of the articles reviewed, 68% were in the Q1 quartile, 20% in Q2, 8% in Q3 and 4% in Q4.



**Figure 3 Impact level (Qi)**

Source: Author’s own creation with information from Scimago Lab.

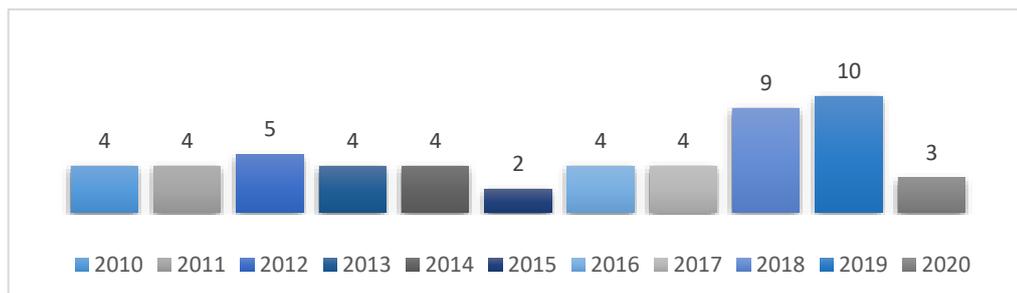
**Countries where the research was carried out:** the countries where the research was carried out were identified, in order to highlight the geographical areas where the greatest numbers of studies have been carried out on the internationalization of service companies. Figure 4 shows that China, the United Kingdom, Spain, Sweden, United States and Germany represent the countries where the greatest number of studies have been carried out on the subject.



**Figure 4 Impact level (Qi)**

Source: Author’s own creation with information from Scimago Lab.

**Year of publication:** Figure 5 illustrates the levels of scientific production in the last 12 years were identified to visualize the booms that the study of the process of internationalization of service companies has had over the years, finding that since 2018 there has been an increase in researches within the last two years.



**Figure 5 Publication year**

Source: Author's own creation

**Number of articles published by journal:** Regarding to the academic journals consulted, the number of studies focused on the object of study was identified. Figure 6 illustrates than the journals: the service industries journal, journal of international business studies and the international marketing review, are the journals that have indexed the largest number of research studies related to the internationalization of service companies.



Figure 6 Number of articles published per journal

Source: Author's own creation

Following the analysis of the information, four key topics were identified on which previous research has focused: table 1 show the key issues in the internationalization of technology companies, table 2 the dynamism of Internationalization, table 3 the factors influencing internationalization and table 4 the innovation.

**Table 1.**  
**Key issues in the internationalization of technology companies**

<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Authors</i>
Knowledge acquisition via internet	Zou & Ghauri (2010)
Internationalization paths	Freiling, Wassermann, & Laudien (2012)
Knowledge intensive services	Kumar (2013)
Outsourcing	Su (2013)
Network theory / E-commerce	Brouthers, Geisser, & Rothlauf (2016)
Value creation logics / Internet companies	Hazarbassanova (2016)
Internet providers	Wentrup (2016)
High tech industries	Arora, Kweh, & Mahajan (2018)
Knowledge intensive services	Rezende, Galdino, & Lamont (2018)
Big data	Dam, Le Dinh, & Menvielle (2019)
Knowledge acquisition via internet	Glavas, Mathews, & Russell-Bennett (2019)
Digital services	Hennart (2019)
Specific ecosystem advantages in digital commerce	Li, Chen, Yi, Mao, & Liao (2019)
Born digitals	Monaghan, Tippmann, & Coviello (2020)

Source: Author's own creation

**Table 2. Dynamism of Internationalization**

<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Authors</i>
Global organizational structures/ Manufacturing	Breashear Alejandro, Kucza, & Gebauer (2011)

Marketing	Pluta-Olearnik (2011)
Outsourcing	Jaklič, Ćirjaković, & Chidlow (2012)
Internationalization of services VS manufacturing	Pla-Barber & Ghauri (2012)
Base of the pyramid, Social entrepreneurship	Ghauri, Tasavori, & Zaefarian (2014)
Value creation logics	Jensen & Petersen (2014)
Outsourcing	M. Lacity, S. Khan (2016)
Mode of entry	Laudien & Daxböck (2017)
Global competitiveness	Sun & Pang (2017)
Global platforms and ecosystems	Nambisan, Zahra, & Luo (2019)
Dynamic capabilities	Felzensztein, Crick, Gonzalez-Perez, Jurado, & Etchebarne Lopez (2020)
Knowledge-intensive services	Muñoz Guarasa & Fischer (2020)

Source: Author's own creation

**Table 3. Factors influencing internationalization**

<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Authors</i>
Mode of entry	Jose Pla-Barber, Sanchez-Peinado, & Madhok (2010)
Network resources	Kenny & Fahy (2011)
Entry mode	Philippe & Léo (2011)
Appropriability	Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Ritala (2012)
Entry mode	Shukla, Dow, & Misra (2012)
Competitiveness	Lee, Madanoglu, & Ko (2013)
Strategic capabilities	Raymond, St-Pierre, Uwizeyemungu, & Le Dinh (2014)
Integration of services	Jack, As-Saber, & Edwards (2015b)
Entry mode	Håkanson & Kappen (2017)
Local political connections	Bai et al. (2019)
Marketing	Jussani, Vasconcellos, Wright, & Grisi (2018)
Organizational culture	Kumar & Sharma (2018)
Market choice	Larios Hernandez (2018)
Speed of internationalization	Lin & Si (2018)
Regional orientation	Melén Hånell & Rovira Nordman (2018)
Internationalization modes	Békés & Muraközy (2018)
Socio-political actors	Chidlow, Ghauri, & Hadjikhani (2019)
International competitiveness/ Market orientation	Fernandes, Ferreira, Lobo, & Raposo (2019)
Resource-based vision and region-based vision	Xiao, Lew, & Il Park (2019)

Source: Author's own creation

**Table 4. Innovation**

<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Authors</i>
Innovation policy / Technology centers	Martinez-Gomez, Baviera-Puig, & Mas-Verdú (2010)
Modes of internationalization	Meliá, Pérez, & Dobón (2010)
Service innovation	Hsieh, Chiu, Wei, Yen, & Cheng (2013)
Knowledge-intensive services	Doloreux & Laperrière (2014)
Innovation strategy	Ndubisi, Capel, & Ndubisi (2015)
Relationship between innovation and internationalization	Castiblanco Moreno et al. (2017)
Innovation and productivity in services	Peters, Riley, Siedschlag, Vahter, & McQuinn (2018)

Source: Author's own creation

**VIII. PHASE 3: AFFINITY DIAGRAM**

The affinity diagram or also known as the KJ Diagram, is an analysis tool increasingly used in business research, since it allows categorizing the information obtained from an exploratory research, in order to provide a solution to a research problem, Cwiklicki (2016) states that this diagram allows organizing different qualitative data in small groups to identify the similarities between them and to develop parameters, when it is difficult to locate the correlations between these variables and try to understand the fundamentals of a certain topic.

At the same time, Pop & Gabriela (2014) agree that it is an appropriate tool for processing complex information to understand certain issues. Finally, Pons, Canós, & Gil, (2004) explain how the affinity diagram allows structuring groups of previous concepts, to be analyzed in an integral way and develop a model or conceptual framework, which allows understanding a certain problem or research subject. Figure 7 illustrates the affinity diagram with the 4 main topics were identified: the key issues in the internationalization of technology companies, the dynamism of Internationalization, the factors influencing internationalization and innovation, the key findings of the systematic literature review was grouped into two subgroups: Internationalization dynamics and key elements for internationalization, in order to identify the principals key factors related into the process of internationalization of services.



**Figure 7. Affinity diagram of the services firms internationalization**

Source: Author's own creation

**IX. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

International foresight shows that in the coming years a large number of countries will evolve to digital economies, this will drive thousands of companies to initiate strong digitization processes, creating new business models on digital platforms or with strong technological bases and begin to operate in the international market in search of growth. The systematic literature review confirmed that despite the importance of the topic, there is an absence of research related to the internationalization of services, which is why more studies should be developed in this sector. In addition, it allowed the identification of studies focused on digital or technology-based services and the main approaches to internationalization, which will allow researchers interested in the topic and in the operation of international business to better direct their future research.

The affinity diagram resulting from the systematic literature review made it possible to identify and correlate the main variables linked to a better understanding of the fundamentals of this topic. Regarding to the research questions, RQ1 what are the main areas on which the analysis of the internationalization of companies has focused? Four main areas were identified (see Figure 7): (1) Factors influencing internationalization, (2)

Innovation, (3) Dynamism of internationalization and (4) Key issues in the internationalization of technology companies.

Regarding, RQ2 what are the key factors in the internationalization process? It was found that: strategic capacity, analysis of entry modes, organizational culture and marketing orientation are some of the most relevant factors. Finally, the RQ3 what has been researched about this process in the service sector and the digital environment? It is observed that among the main topics analyzed have focused on: Big data, born digital companies, digital services and e-commerce among others.

Based on this information, two main categories were concentrated that allowed the identification of 3 subcategories in each one, which are the main findings of this study, in the dynamics of internationalization it was found that the management of global performance, technological capacity and analysis of the global environment are fundamental to understand the dynamism of the internationalization process. At the same time, the category of the key elements of the company's internal environment made it possible to identify that the strategic planning of internal resources, knowledge of external agents and the capacity for innovation are key elements for a company to initiate an internationalization process.

This result is consistent with Bai et al., (2019) who recommends future research focus on measuring the political and governmental connections that impact the internationalization of service firms. Similarly, Chidlow, Ghauri, & Hadjikhani (2019) propose to inquire more about the macroeconomic factors that are linked in the internationalization of services, as we can see in the proposed affinity diagram. Regarding the technological issue, Raymond, St-Pierre, Uwizeyemungu, & Le Dinh, (2014) make the recommendation that future research should analyze the technological capabilities related to the internet and e-business to understand their functioning in the future.

Hennart (2019) makes reference that the process of digitization of industries and the openness of the service sector should be observed to understand their operations abroad. Also Li et al. (2019) agree that it is necessary to deepen the process of internationalization of services through digital platforms and ecosystems. This allows locating new areas of opportunity to direct future research, opening new lines to the internationalization of digital services and the impact that digital ecosystems will have in the coming years. In addition, this research makes a contribution by using the affinity diagram as a valid methodology for the analysis of this type of topics, in response of the need to identify in a systematic way the key factors that are necessary for the internationalization of services and try to understand how companies can successfully go abroad.

The research concludes that it is necessary to deepen in knowing the process that these companies follow when going abroad and try to identify the necessary factors for the internationalization of service companies in the digital environment, in order to design better strategies and action plans for companies wishing to venture into the international market, due to the future competitive environment they will face and as a viable strategy to counteract the negative economic effects of the lockdowns caused by pandemics such as COVID 19.

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