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CASE STUDY RESEARCH PAPER

Developing a Process Model for the Internationalization of Marketing in Iraqi Companies: With a Focus on Market-Entry Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this research is to develop a process model for the internationalization of marketing in Iraqi companies, with a particular focus on market-entry strategies. Despite the expansion of the internationalization literature, localized models for economies with high institutional uncertainty, such as Iraq, remain limited. This study was conducted with a qualitative approach using the grounded-theory method (the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin). Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 marketing managers, business owners, and internationalization experts of small and medium-sized Iraqi enterprises, and continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Data analysis using open, axial, and selective coding showed that the central phenomenon is "reducing uncertainty." The extracted process model indicates that the internationalization of marketing in Iraqi companies is a gradual, network-based, risk-averse, and adaptive process. Firms mostly begin by relying on trust-based networks (kinship, tribal, diaspora, and local intermediaries), low-commitment entry (indirect and trial exports), and experiential learning, and, if successful, gradually increase their level of control and commitment. The main contextual factors include institutional–border uncertainty, financial and currency constraints, and logistical challenges. The key strategies include contingent adaptation of the marketing mix, strategic resilience (suspension, rerouting, and re-entry), and a gradual transition from intermediary-centricity to greater control. The findings show that, in the Iraqi context, internationalization is more survival-oriented than classically development-oriented. By presenting a context-based model, this research contributes to enriching the process theory of internationalization in turbulent environments and offers practical recommendations for Iraqi managers and policymakers.

Running Title: Process Model for the Internationalization of Marketing

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26	02	04

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the internationalization of marketing activities has become one of the central paths to the growth, survival, and reinforcement of firms' competitive advantage (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Welch & Luostarinen, 1988 and Santangelo & Meyer, 2017). In the literature of international management and marketing, internationalization is more than a simple increase in exports or physical presence in foreign markets; rather, it is a dynamic, gradual, and multidimensional process through which firms expand the geographic scope of their activities, reconfigure their marketing resources and capabilities to adapt to target markets, and enhance their capabilities through organizational learning and interaction with the environment (Andersen, 1997; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). This process is inherently shaped by organizational learning, market feedback, institutional constraints, and network opportunities. Explaining it with static models or models based merely on performance variables is therefore inadequate, and it requires a process-based and context-based approach (Vahlne & Johanson, 2017). At the heart of this process lie market-entry strategies. These strategies determine the entry mechanisms, the level of resource allocation, the degree of control, commitment, exposure to risk, and the organisational structure of marketing activities in the target market (Brouthers, 2022; Meyer et al., 2009). The choice of entry mode is not a one-off and fixed decision; many firms begin with a trial-and-error approach and, as uncertainty decreases and market knowledge increases, move towards more committed modes (such as direct investment), or adjust their path when faced with political, institutional, or currency shocks (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Schweizer, 2022). In today's competitive and globalized environment, firms are compelled to have an effective presence in international markets in order to survive and develop a competitive advantage. This presence requires the design and implementation of marketing strategies appropriate to the characteristics of the target markets. Despite the importance of the subject, the process of marketing internationalization is always accompanied by challenges such as resource limitations, insufficient knowledge of foreign markets, cultural and institutional differences, political and economic risks, weak infrastructure, and the difficulty of choosing the appropriate entry mode. Under such conditions, the market-entry strategy becomes one of the most fundamental strategic decisions, because it determines the level of resource commitment, the degree of control, the intensity of risk, and the probability of success of international marketing activities. In recent years, Iraq's economy has faced institutional and economic reconstruction, fluctuations arising from oil revenues, geopolitical developments, and infrastructural and logistical challenges (Haj Youssef, 2021). To enter foreign markets, Iraqi firms must simultaneously adapt to internal challenges (quality standardization, supply-chain provision, branding, and competitive pricing) and external requirements (regulations, consumer preferences, global competition, and distribution channels). This simultaneity of intra-organizational and extra-organizational pressures has turned internationalization into a complex phenomenon. In Iraq, as a transitional economy, high institutional uncertainty, regulatory fragility, economic fluctuations, and the prominent role of informal networks have created a context different from stable settings, which affects decision-making patterns and entry strategy (Marquis & Raynard, 2015; Peng et al., 2008). A review of the literature shows that the major part of previous research has focused on relatively stable institutional environments and on firms from developed countries or large emerging economies. By contrast, environments with high institutional uncertainty and dependence on informal networks—a characteristic of many Iraqi firms necessitate different decision-making patterns (Gammeltoft, 2024; Haj Youssef, 2021). Therefore, the main gap in the existing literature is the lack of "localized process models" that explain how Iraqi firms confront the central challenges on the path of entry and the selection of appropriate mechanisms. On this basis, the main aim of this research is to develop a "process model for the internationalization of the marketing activities of Iraqi companies, with a focus on market-entry strategies." A process model is a model that explains the sequence of key events and decisions, the turning points, the mechanisms of learning and adaptation, and the facilitating or constraining conditions of choices (Vahlne & Johanson, 2017). Such a model not only contributes to the richness of theoretical knowledge in the field of international marketing (especially in turbulent institutional contexts) but also makes it possible to identify levers of improvement and better decision-making for Iraqi firms.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Internationalization of marketing

The internationalization of marketing activities refers to a dynamic and multidimensional process through which economic firms extend their marketing activities beyond the boundaries of the domestic market in order to create value for foreign customers, attract new markets, increase sales, and gain a sustainable competitive advantage. This process does not merely mean an increase in the export of goods or services; rather, it includes a set of strategic decisions and actions in the areas of selecting the target market, adapting or standardizing the product, pricing suited to local conditions, designing international distribution channels, cross-border promotion and marketing communications, and managing long-term relationships with foreign customers and partners (Cavusgil et al., 2014; Schweizer, 2022). In the literature of international management and marketing, internationalization is regarded as an evolutionary and often gradual path through which firms expand the geographic scope of their operations and reconfigure their organizational and marketing capabilities to confront new environments (Johanson & Vahlne, 2017). Unlike traditional views that consider entry into a foreign market a one-off and static decision, this concept emphasizes the process-based, learning-oriented, and context-dependent aspects (Vahlne & Johanson, 2020). In other words, the internationalization of marketing is not only geographic expansion but is also considered an evolution of the firm's capabilities to adapt to the cultural, institutional, economic, and competitive differences of the destination markets (Peng, 2001).

Process theory of internationalization and the Uppsala model

Among the various theoretical approaches, the process theory of internationalization holds a special place. Unlike neoclassical economic models that consider entry into a foreign market the result of a one-off rational calculation, this theory sees it as a staged path, dependent on learning and the accumulation of experience. The most important formulation of this approach is the Uppsala model, developed by Johanson and Vahlne (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). This model was formed on the basis of longitudinal studies of Swedish firms and shows that firms usually enter foreign markets with low levels of resource commitment (such as indirect export through intermediaries) and gradually, with the acquisition of experiential knowledge and the reduction of uncertainty, increase their commitment and turn to more committed modes such as establishing a sales branch, strategic partnership, or direct investment (Schweizer, 2022; Igwe, 2022). The fundamental assumptions of the Uppsala model include the initial limitation of foreign-market knowledge, the importance of experiential learning (rather than objective and written knowledge), the gradual increase of resource commitment, and the central role of psychic distance. Psychic distance refers to the perceived differences between the home and host countries in cultural, linguistic, legal, economic, and normative dimensions. Firms first enter markets that have less psychic distance from them and then gradually expand to more distant markets (Vahlne & Johanson, 2017). This learning–commitment process creates a feedback loop in which practical experience reduces uncertainty and provides the ground for greater commitment (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

The resource-based view and dynamic capabilities

The resource-based view provides an important complement to the process theory. According to this view, firms' sustainable competitive advantage stems from resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and organized for exploitation (Barney, 1991). In the field of marketing internationalization, intangible resources such as foreign-market knowledge, brand capital, network relationships, and a learning organizational culture play a more prominent role than tangible resources (Peng, 2001; Beamish, 2021). Marketing capabilities act as the driving engine of internationalization. These capabilities include market intelligence, the management of distribution channels and partners, the adaptation of the marketing mix, cross-cultural customer-relationship management, and brand communications in multicultural environments. From a process perspective, this view shows that internationalization is a cumulative process (Sipos, 2025). This positive cycle establishes a deep link between the resource-based view and the gradual logic of the Uppsala model. To remedy the static limitation of this view in unstable environments (such as the Iraqi economy), the concept of dynamic capabilities has been introduced. These capabilities emphasize the firm's ability to sense opportunities and threats, to seize and mobilize resources, and to reconfigure assets (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2025). In the internationalization process, dynamic capabilities help firms to adapt their entry strategies to institutional changes, currency shocks, or market feedback (Prange, 2011; Matysiak et al., 2022).

Market-entry strategies and internationalization success

Market-entry strategies lie at the heart of the internationalization process, and their selection has a decisive effect on the firm's long-term performance in foreign markets. These strategies are categorized on the basis of the level of resource commitment, the degree of risk, the degree of control, and the speed of market entry. On the low-commitment to high-commitment spectrum, options such as indirect export (through intermediaries), direct export, licensing, franchising, manufacturing contracts, joint ventures, and foreign direct investment are found (Glowik, 2020; Brouthers, 2022). Indirect and direct export are usually accompanied by low resource commitment, limited risk, and less control, and often act as the starting point of the internationalization process, especially for firms with limited knowledge of the destination market. By contrast, foreign direct investment provides the highest level of resource commitment and control but is accompanied by greater institutional, currency, and cultural risks. The selection of an appropriate strategy is a function of several factors: environmental factors (such as psychic distance, institutional stability, regulations, and the attractiveness of the target market), organizational factors (financial resources, marketing capabilities, international experience, and firm size), and industry-related factors (the intensity of competition, technology, and the nature of the product). In markets such as Iraq, which face institutional challenges, currency fluctuations, and cultural differences, the choice of strategy must be made with attention to local conditions and the firm's dynamic capabilities (Igwe, 2022; Bondar, 2025). In a process approach such as the Uppsala model, the choice of entry strategy is not a static and one-off decision but a gradual and learning-oriented process. Firms first enter psychically close markets with low-commitment modes and, with the accumulation of experiential knowledge and the reduction of uncertainty, move towards more committed modes. This view is consistent with the logic of dynamic capabilities, because firms must be able to reconfigure their strategies on the basis of market feedback, institutional changes, and emerging opportunities (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Teece, 2025). In addition, network theory emphasizes that successful entry is often facilitated through relationships and strategic partnerships with local actors, which helps to reduce psychic distance and gain faster access to market resources (Vahlne & Johanson, 2020).

The success of marketing internationalization cannot be measured by a single criterion alone; rather, it requires a multidimensional approach. Key indicators of success include financial dimensions (export sales growth, foreign-market share, profitability, and return on investment), market-oriented dimensions (customer satisfaction and loyalty, brand strength, and market penetration), organizational-learning dimensions (acquiring market knowledge, developing international capabilities, and innovation), and sustainability dimensions (the endurance of long-term presence and adaptation to environmental shocks) (Beamish, 2021; Martin et al., 2022). In recent research, success is often defined as the fit between the entry strategy, the firm's resources and capabilities, and the environmental conditions of the target market. For example, in emerging economies such as Iraq, factors such as political–economic stability, infrastructure, and local network relationships play a central role in determining the level of success. Firms that use dynamic capabilities to sense opportunities, seize local resources, and redesign the marketing mix have a higher probability of success. Moreover, indicators such as the customer-retention rate, the efficiency of distribution channels, and organizational learning from failures or early experiences are considered more important criteria than short-term financial metrics (Sipos, 2025; Malinga, 2024). In this research, the success of marketing internationalization is considered the result of a dynamic interaction between the firm's internal resources and capabilities, the specific environmental conditions of Iraq (such as economic reconstruction, growing demand, and institutional challenges), and the intelligent and flexible selection of entry strategies. Therefore, managers must continuously evaluate and adjust entry strategies by relying on process models and dynamic capabilities (Cavusgil et al., 2014; Prange, 2011).

Methodology

The present research method is qualitative, with a grounded-theory approach following the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. The term "grounded theory" refers to a theory that is derived inductively/deductively (or a combination of the two) from a set of data. If this approach is implemented well, it leads to theories that are fully consistent, at least with the data under examination. Grounded theory is used when: existing theories in the research literature do not provide a sufficient explanation for the observed phenomena; the aim is to understand a process; the aim is to create a theory; there is a need for the researcher to enter the field in order to understand the phenomenon; the phenomenon is in constant evolution; and the researcher is interested in involving the participants' views in guiding the flow of theory-building or explaining the phenomenon. Given that the concept studied in this research has most of the characteristics stated above, the application of the grounded-theory strategy is feasible in this study. The statistical population of this research consists of owners of small and medium-sized Iraqi enterprises who have sufficient and relevant experience of the research topic. Therefore, in this study, theoretical sampling was used to determine the sample size and to reach the participants. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and this process continued until theoretical saturation was reached. On this basis, theoretical saturation was achieved after 16 interviews; however, for sufficient assurance, interviews 19 to 21 were also conducted.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

IInformation about the interviewees is presented in Table 1. (Tab. 1)

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents (Source: Authors)

Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	12	57.0
Female	9	43.0
Educational level		
Bachelor's degree	4	20.0
Master's degree	10	50.0
Doctoral student	3	15.0
Doctorate	3	15.0
Professional field		
Marketing / export manager of Iraqi companies	7	35.0
Senior business manager (manufacturing and services)	5	25.0
Internationalization & market-entry researcher/consultant	5	25.0
Academic faculty & university researcher (management and marketing)	3	15.0
Total	21	100

In the present research, in order to reach the main aim of the study, after conducting 21 interviews, the three-stage thematic-analysis process of King and Horrocks was used. In the first stage, for open coding, the content of all the recorded interviews was examined several times to extract the key points and was finally implemented in Word software. These concepts were adapted from the texts and, in some cases, were the exact wording of the text; in total, 115 initial codes were created from the 21 interviews (the theoretical-saturation process of the selected codes is shown in Fig. 1), and after merging similar codes and removing redundant items, 100 final open codes were obtained. (Fig. 1)

A sample of the interviews and the initial coding is presented in Table 2. The 100 final open codes obtained are as follows. (Tab. 2)

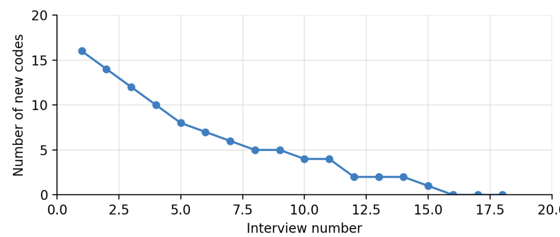

Figure 1: The theoretical-saturation process (Source: Authors).

Table 2: The open codes obtained (Source: Authors)

No.	Open code
1	Volatility & unpredictability of the dinar/dollar exchange rate and its effect on export pricing
2	Difficulty of money transfer & international settlement due to banking restrictions
3	Reliance on exchange bureaus & hawala networks for currency receipts and payments
4	Preference for cash deals or advance payment to reduce non-collection risk
5	Concern over blocked payments or delays in financial settlement
6	Risk of sudden changes in customs and tariff policies
7	Time-consuming customs formalities at border crossings
8	Multiplicity of procedures between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region

9	Role of informal relations in facilitating administrative affairs and the movement of goods
10	Concern over administrative corruption and hidden transaction costs
11	Security uncertainty on some domestic and border transport routes
12	Choosing safer transport routes even at higher cost
13	Dependence on land transport in foreign trade
14	Uneven quality of logistics and export-transport services
15	Difficulty in obtaining valid insurance for international cargo transport
16	Reliance on commercial intermediaries for initial entry into the foreign market
17	Role of regional traders in marketing and distribution in neighboring markets
18	Reliance on kinship and tribal networks to build trust
19	Use of the Iraqi diaspora networks in destination countries
20	Effect of language and dialect on the success of negotiations and foreign sales
21	Starting exports with nearby markets such as Iran, Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf
22	High sensitivity to the credibility of the trading partner at the start of cooperation
23	Concern over partner default and the difficulty of legal follow-up
24	Drafting short, simple contracts in the early stages
25	Using practical guarantees instead of formal bank guarantees
26	Relying on small trial orders to test the market
27	Learning from early failures caused by border or logistical problems
28	Difficulty in obtaining the standards and certificates required by the destination market
29	The high cost of obtaining international certificates for Iraqi firms
30	Concern over a negative mental image of the Iraqi origin of the goods
31	Efforts at trust-building through quality assurance and sample shipments
32	Using multilingual packaging for target markets
33	Modifying packaging to withstand land transport and weather conditions
34	Adapting the product to the taste and needs of destination-market consumers
35	Changing the brand or sub-brand for cultural and commercial compatibility
36	Limited access to valid data on foreign markets
37	Using the Baghdad, Erbil, and Dubai exhibitions to find customers
38	Relying on border markets to start international sales
39	Difficulty in creating a formal distribution channel in destination countries
40	Preferring cooperation with a local distributor instead of establishing a branch
41	Challenge of supervising foreign sales agents
42	Relying on local marketers to collect market feedback
43	Reducing direct presence in the destination market due to cost and risk
44	Limited digital-marketing skills in Iraqi firms
45	Using WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram for negotiation and sales
46	Drawing on B2B platforms and professional social networks
47	Intense competition with imported goods in Iraq's domestic market
48	Export as a survival strategy during the domestic-market recession
49	Efforts to reduce dependence on domestic contracts through exports

50	Effect of energy and fuel price fluctuations on export costs
51	Preference for indirect exports due to financial and managerial constraints
52	Transition from indirect to direct exports after gaining experience
53	Using a sales agent in the destination country to increase control
54	Tendency to partner with a local partner in larger markets
55	Caution in foreign direct investment because of institutional uncertainty
56	Decision to stay in or exit the market based on the collection of receivables
57	Temporary suspension of exports when borders close or during a political crisis
58	Re-entry into the market by changing route, partner, or payment method
59	Increasing commitment to the market after several successful deals
60	Expanding the export product portfolio after greater market knowledge
61	Creating a small export team after consolidating foreign sales
62	Shortage of specialist staff in export and international contracts
63	Practical learning of Incoterms through trial and error
64	Diversifying export markets to reduce concentration risk
65	Testing the destination market through trial orders and distributor feedback
66	Using flexible pricing in line with currency and transport
67	Granting short-term credit only to customers with a relational backing
68	Resolving commercial disputes through network mediation instead of the courts
69	Importance of the personal credibility of the manager or owner in foreign negotiations
70	Role of the chamber of commerce and unions in introducing and vetting partners
71	Effect of Iraqi religious and social occasions on the timing of supply and promotion
72	Role of local and regional consumer preferences in choosing the product mix
73	Using informal communications to collect market information
74	Difficulty in forecasting demand in foreign markets due to regional instability
75	Effect of border and political tensions on the continuity of distribution channels
76	Institutional and border uncertainty as the main barrier to entering the foreign market
77	Financial and currency constraints as a factor shaping the entry mode
78	Network-centricity and relational trust as a risk-reduction mechanism
79	Preference for low-commitment, reversible entry strategies
80	Experiential and gradual learning as the basis for developing foreign presence
81	Geographic and cultural proximity as a criterion for choosing the initial market
82	Weak formal infrastructure and a strengthened role for intermediaries and local partners
83	Challenges of standard, quality, and origin of goods in destination-market acceptance
84	Gradual adaptation of product, packaging, and brand to foreign-market requirements
85	Flexible pricing influenced by currency, transport, and destination purchasing power
86	Dependence on local distributors for market penetration and control
87	Role of low-cost digital tools in the foreign marketing of Iraqi firms
88	Domestic competitive pressure and Iraq’s market recession as a driver of exports
89	Managerial caution and risk-aversion in international decision-making
90	The manager’s individual credibility and social capital as an exchange advantage

91	Continuous revision of the entry strategy based on market feedback and experience
92	Resilience in foreign trade through suspension, rerouting, and re-entry
93	Gradual transition from intermediary-centricity to greater control over the sales channel
94	Diversifying destination markets as a risk-reduction strategy
95	The process nature of marketing internationalization in Iraq's context of instability
96	Reducing risk and uncertainty through network, trust, and low-commitment entry
97	Formation of a staged entry path of Iraqi firms from trial exports to consolidated presence
98	Co-evolution of entry strategy and marketing capabilities through experiential learning
99	International marketing in Iraq as a process of resilience against currency, border, and political shocks
100	A localized model of marketing internationalization for Iraqi firms: network-based, gradual, risk-averse, and adaptive

In the next stage, the identified open codes are classified into axial codes, and then the relationships between the codes are explained. As shown in the table, the 100 open codes obtained have been classified into axial codes. (Tab. 3)

Table 3: Classification of the open codes into axial codes (Source: Authors)

No.	Open code	Axial code	Analytical explanation
1	Volatility & unpredictability of the dinar/dollar exchange rate and its effect on export pricing	Financial & currency constraints	Currency instability directly affects pricing, profit margins, and the continuity of exports.
2	Difficulty of money transfer & international settlement due to banking restrictions	Financial & currency constraints	The inefficiency of formal financial channels makes foreign trade costly and risky.
3	Reliance on exchange bureaus & hawala networks for currency receipts and payments	Financial & currency constraints	Actors resort to informal mechanisms to compensate for the weak banking system.
4	Preference for cash deals or advance payment to reduce non-collection risk	Financial & currency constraints	Firms prefer conservative payment patterns to manage financial risk.
5	Concern over blocked payments or delays in financial settlement	Financial & currency constraints	Uncertainty in collecting funds limits entry and continuity decisions.
6	Risk of sudden changes in customs and tariff policies	Institutional & border uncertainty	Policy instability weakens export-planning capability.
7	Time-consuming customs formalities at border crossings	Institutional & border uncertainty	Slow border procedures increase the time and financial cost of trade.
8	Multiplicity of procedures between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region	Institutional & border uncertainty	Multiple decision centres lead to ambiguity in implementing trade regulations.
9	Role of informal relations in facilitating administrative affairs and the movement of goods	Institutional & border uncertainty	Weak formal institutions strengthen dependence on informal mechanisms.
10	Concern over administrative corruption and hidden transaction costs	Institutional & border uncertainty	Administrative corruption increases invisible costs and executive uncertainty.

11	Security uncertainty on some domestic and border transport routes	Logistical dependence & route management	Route security becomes a decisive variable in choosing the market and route.
12	Choosing safer transport routes even at higher cost	Logistical dependence & route management	Firms prioritise security over economic efficiency to reduce risk.
13	Dependence on land transport in foreign trade	Logistical dependence & route management	The dominance of land transport creates a particular structure of logistical dependence and vulnerability.
14	Uneven quality of logistics and export-transport services	Logistical dependence & route management	Weak logistics services limit the firm's competitiveness.
15	Difficulty in obtaining valid insurance for international cargo transport	Logistical dependence & route management	The lack of suitable insurance cover increases the perceived risk of exporting.
16	Reliance on commercial intermediaries for initial entry into the foreign market	Network-centricity & relational trust	Initial market entry is mainly facilitated through relationships and intermediaries.
17	Role of regional traders in marketing and distribution in neighbouring markets	Network-centricity & relational trust	Regional intermediaries act as a bridge of access to the market.
18	Reliance on kinship and tribal networks to build trust	Network-centricity & relational trust	Social and tribal trust substitutes for the weakness of formal guarantees.
19	Use of the Iraqi diaspora networks in destination countries	Network-centricity & relational trust	Cross-border networks help reduce search costs and build credibility.
20	Effect of language and dialect on the success of negotiations and foreign sales	Geographic & cultural proximity	Linguistic and cultural closeness increases the likelihood of successful initial interactions.
21	Starting exports with nearby markets such as Iran, Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf	Geographic & cultural proximity	Firms prefer nearer markets to begin internationalization .
22	High sensitivity to the credibility of the trading partner at the start of cooperation	Network-centricity & relational trust	Partner credibility is the main selection criterion in uncertain environments.
23	Concern over partner default and the difficulty of legal follow-up	Institutional & border uncertainty	Weak enforcement intensifies the risk of the trading relationship.
24	Drafting short, simple contracts in the early stages	Preference for low-commitment entry	Firms prefer limited, reversible contracts to reduce commitment.
25	Using practical guarantees instead of formal bank guarantees	Network-centricity & relational trust	Practical trust and a track record substitute for formal guarantee instruments.
26	Relying on small trial orders to test the market	Preference for low-commitment entry	Trial orders are a tool for assessing the market before broad commitment.
27	Learning from early failures caused by border or logistical problems	Experiential & gradual learning	Early experiences become the basis for revising subsequent decisions in the entry process.
28	Difficulty in obtaining the standards and certificates required by the destination market	Standards & market-acceptance challenges	Standards create a barrier to the formal acceptance of goods in the foreign market.
29	The high cost of obtaining international certificates for Iraqi firms	Standards & market-acceptance challenges	Compliance cost limits some firms' capacity to enter.

30	Concern over a negative mental image of the Iraqi origin of the goods	Standards & market-acceptance challenges	The country-of-origin effect may reduce foreign customers' initial trust.
31	Efforts at trust-building through quality assurance and sample shipments	Standards & market-acceptance challenges	Firms use trust-building strategies to compensate for weak initial legitimacy.
32	Using multilingual packaging for target markets	Marketing-mix adaptation	Multilingual packaging signals an effort to adapt to the destination market.
33	Modifying packaging to withstand land transport and weather conditions	Marketing-mix adaptation	Physical adaptation of packaging is done in response to route and market requirements.
34	Adapting the product to the taste and needs of destination-market consumers	Marketing-mix adaptation	Product compatibility with local preferences strengthens market acceptance.
35	Changing the brand or sub-brand for cultural and commercial compatibility	Marketing-mix adaptation	Brand adaptation is a strategy to reduce the cultural and perceptual distance to the destination market.
36	Limited access to valid data on foreign markets	Experiential & gradual learning	The lack of formal information highlights practical, exploratory learning.
37	Using the Baghdad, Erbil, and Dubai exhibitions to find customers	Network-centricity & relational trust	Exhibitions are a ground for forming relationships and trust and for finding partners.
38	Relying on border markets to start international sales	Geographic & cultural proximity	Border markets provide a lower-risk ground for starting foreign activity.
39	Difficulty in creating a formal distribution channel in destination countries	Dependence on local partners & distributors	Limits on creating a direct channel increase dependence on local partners.
40	Preferring cooperation with a local distributor instead of establishing a branch	Dependence on local partners & distributors	Firms prefer local distributors to reduce cost and risk.
41	Challenge of supervising foreign sales agents	Dependence on local partners & distributors	Heavy reliance on local agents limits the firm's control over the market.
42	Relying on local marketers to collect market feedback	Dependence on local partners & distributors	Local partners are the main source of operational and market information in the destination market.
43	Reducing direct presence in the destination market due to cost and risk	Preference for low-commitment entry	High risk and cost make direct presence an unattractive option.
44	Limited digital-marketing skills in Iraqi firms	International marketing capabilities	Weak digital capabilities slow the development of international marketing.
45	Using WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram for negotiation and sales	International marketing capabilities	Informal digital tools are used as a low-cost substitute for marketing.
46	Drawing on B2B platforms and professional social networks	International marketing capabilities	Online platforms facilitate the search for partners and customers.
47	Intense competition with imported goods in Iraq's domestic market	Domestic-market pressure for export	Domestic competitive pressure drives the firm to seek external markets.
48	Export as a survival strategy during the domestic-market recession	Domestic-market pressure for export	Export turns from a strategic choice into a survival necessity.

49	Efforts to reduce dependence on domestic contracts through exports	Domestic-market pressure for export	Income diversification through exports is a response to domestic-market vulnerability.
50	Effect of energy and fuel price fluctuations on export costs	Financial & currency constraints	Rising operating costs weaken the competitive advantage of price.
51	Preference for indirect exports due to financial and managerial constraints	Preference for low-commitment entry	Indirect export is a way of entering the foreign market at low cost and low risk.
52	Transition from indirect to direct exports after gaining experience	Gradual transition to greater control	Successful experience becomes a basis for gradually increasing control over the market.
53	Using a sales agent in the destination country to increase control	Gradual transition to greater control	A sales agency is an intermediate stage between indirect entry and direct presence.
54	Tendency to partner with a local partner in larger markets	Dependence on local partners & distributors	Local partnership is a strategy to reduce risk and facilitate market penetration.
55	Caution in foreign direct investment because of institutional uncertainty	Preference for low-commitment entry	Institutional uncertainty deters firms from heavy investment commitments.
56	Decision to stay in or exit the market based on the collection of receivables	Resilience & strategy revision	The firm's survival in the foreign market depends on continuous risk-and-return assessment.
57	Temporary suspension of exports when borders close or during a political crisis	Resilience & strategy revision	Firms use a temporary-suspension strategy to cope with shocks.
58	Re-entry into the market by changing route, partner, or payment method	Resilience & strategy revision	Re-entry reflects the firm's flexibility and strategic adaptation.
59	Increasing commitment to the market after several successful deals	Experiential & gradual learning	Gradual successes lead to increased trust and commitment.
60	Expanding the export product portfolio after greater market knowledge	Experiential & gradual learning	Market knowledge provides the ground for the gradual expansion of the supply range.
61	Creating a small export team after consolidating foreign sales	International marketing capabilities	Institutionalising exports is accompanied by creating specialised internal structures.
62	Shortage of specialist staff in export and international contracts	International marketing capabilities	Human-capital limits hinder the professional development of international marketing.
63	Practical learning of Incoterms through trial and error	Experiential & gradual learning	Operational learning by doing substitutes for formal training.
64	Diversifying export markets to reduce concentration risk	Target-market diversification	Market diversity is a strategy for distributing geographic and political risk.
65	Testing the destination market through trial orders and distributor feedback	Experiential & gradual learning	Field data from market testing become the basis for subsequent decisions.
66	Using flexible pricing in line with currency and transport	Marketing-mix adaptation	Pricing in the foreign market is contingent and volatile.

67	Granting short-term credit only to customers with a relational backing	Network-centricity & relational trust	Granting financial credit depends on trust and a relational track record.
68	Resolving commercial disputes through network mediation instead of the courts	Network-centricity & relational trust	Networks take on the dispute-resolution function in the absence of formal efficiency.
69	Importance of the personal credibility of the manager or owner in foreign negotiations	Individual credibility & social capital	The manager's personal credibility acts as symbolic capital in foreign exchanges.
70	Role of the chamber of commerce and unions in introducing and vetting partners	Individual credibility & social capital	Intermediary bodies are effective in building initial trust and reducing information asymmetry.
71	Effect of Iraqi religious and social occasions on the timing of supply and promotion	Marketing-mix adaptation	Marketing timing must align with the cultural and social calendar of the destination.
72	Role of local and regional consumer preferences in choosing the product mix	Marketing-mix adaptation	Consumption differences affect the design of the marketing mix.
73	Using informal communications to collect market information	Network-centricity & relational trust	Market information is often obtained through informal and relational networks.
74	Difficulty in forecasting demand in foreign markets due to regional instability	Institutional & border uncertainty	Environmental instability makes demand forecasting and sales planning difficult.
75	Effect of border and political tensions on the continuity of distribution channels	Resilience & strategy revision	Distribution channels in unstable environments need continuous redesign and flexibility.
76	Institutional and border uncertainty as the main barrier to entering the foreign market	Institutional & border uncertainty	This category is one of the most fundamental contexts affecting the entry pattern.
77	Financial and currency constraints as a factor shaping the entry mode	Financial & currency constraints	The firm's entry mode is strongly affected by financial and currency capacity.
78	Network-centricity and relational trust as a risk-reduction mechanism	Network-centricity & relational trust	Networks act as an alternative governance mechanism to formal institutions.
79	Preference for low-commitment, reversible entry strategies	Preference for low-commitment entry	Firms choose more flexible options when facing uncertainty.
80	Experiential and gradual learning as the basis for developing foreign presence	Experiential & gradual learning	Internationalization development relies on practical experience and gradual knowledge accumulation.
81	Geographic and cultural proximity as a criterion for choosing the initial market	Geographic & cultural proximity	Geographic and cultural closeness reduces the perceived risk of entry.
82	Weak formal infrastructure and a strengthened role for intermediaries and local partners	Dependence on local partners & distributors	The deficiency of formal institutions highlights the role of local partners.
83	Challenges of standard, quality, and origin of goods in destination-market acceptance	Standards & market-acceptance challenges	The market legitimacy of the product depends on quality, standard, and the image of origin.

84	Gradual adaptation of product, packaging, and brand to foreign-market requirements	Marketing-mix adaptation	Gradual adaptation of the marketing mix provides the ground for deepening market presence.
85	Flexible pricing influenced by currency, transport, and destination purchasing power	Marketing-mix adaptation	Pricing logic in these firms is contingent and dependent on environmental conditions.
86	Dependence on local distributors for market penetration and control	Dependence on local partners & distributors	Market penetration is in many cases achieved through the local distribution network.
87	Role of low-cost digital tools in the foreign marketing of Iraqi firms	International marketing capabilities	Digital tools act as a supporting capability for low-cost entry.
88	Domestic competitive pressure and Iraq's market recession as a driver of exports	Domestic-market pressure for export	Domestic-market pressures pave the way for orientation towards foreign markets.
89	Managerial caution and risk-aversion in international decision-making	Preference for low-commitment entry	A conservative managerial attitude is reflected in the choice of entry modes.
90	The manager's individual credibility and social capital as an exchange advantage	Individual credibility & social capital	The manager's social capital is part of the firm's competitive advantage in foreign entry.
91	Continuous revision of the entry strategy based on market feedback and experience	Resilience & strategy revision	The entry strategy in these firms is not static and is continuously readjusted.
92	Resilience in foreign trade through suspension, rerouting, and re-entry	Resilience & strategy revision	The continuity of international activity requires flexibility in facing shocks.
93	Gradual transition from intermediary-centricity to greater control over the sales channel	Gradual transition to greater control	Developing experience and trust provides the ground for gradually increasing control over the market.
94	Diversifying destination markets as a risk-reduction strategy	Target-market diversification	The dispersion of target markets is a way to reduce dependence risk.
95	The process nature of marketing internationalization in Iraq's context of instability	Experiential & gradual learning	Internationalization is not a one-off event but a cumulative, staged process.
96	Reducing risk and uncertainty through network, trust, and low-commitment entry	Network-centricity & relational trust / Preference for low-commitment entry	This code expresses the combined logic of the model emerging from the data.
97	Formation of a staged entry path of Iraqi firms from trial exports to consolidated presence	Gradual transition to greater control	The firms' entry path follows a staged, incremental pattern.
98	Co-evolution of entry strategy and marketing capabilities through experiential learning	International marketing capabilities / Experiential & gradual learning	Capabilities and the entry mode evolve simultaneously and interactively.
99	International marketing in Iraq as a process of resilience against currency, border, and political shocks	Resilience & strategy revision	Survival and continuity in the foreign market depend on the capacity to adapt to shocks.

100	A localized model of marketing internationalization for Iraqi firms: network-based, gradual, risk-averse, and adaptive	Core category	This category aggregates the other axial codes into a coherent theoretical logic.

Table 4: The selective codes obtained (Source: Authors)

No.	Selective code (core category)	Core keywords
1	Reducing uncertainty through network-centricity and gradual low-commitment entry (with adaptation and resilience)	uncertainty, network, gradual entry, low-commitment, adaptation, resilience
2	Internationalization of marketing in Iraqi firms as a process of reducing uncertainty through trust-based networking and gradual low-commitment entry, accompanied by marketing-mix adaptation and resilience	trust, network, low-commitment entry, mix adaptation, resilience
3	Staged entry into foreign markets with network reliance, in response to institutional–border uncertainty and financial constraints	staged entry, network, institutional/border uncertainty, financial constraint
4	Gradual increase of commitment and control in foreign markets based on experiential learning and relational trust	gradual commitment, control, experiential learning, trust
5	Networks as an alternative governance mechanism in marketing internationalization: risk reduction, market access, and continuity of presence	network governance, risk reduction, access, continuity
6	Strategic resilience in international marketing: suspension/re-entry, rerouting, and strategy revision to maintain foreign presence	resilience, suspension, re-entry, rerouting, revision
7	Contingent adaptation of the marketing mix and entry path under the pressure of currency volatility, standards, and logistical constraints	adaptation, contingent, currency, standards, logistics
8	Diversification of target markets and entry modes to distribute risk in Iraq's turbulent institutional–financial environment	market diversity, risk distribution, turbulent, institutional/financial

Given the main aim of the research, developing a process model for the internationalization of marketing in Iraqi companies with a focus on market-entry strategies, the qualitative research method and the grounded-theory approach (systematic approach) were used. By analyzing the interviews with this method, the causal, intervening, contextual, strategic, and consequential factors were identified, and finally the identified categories were presented in the form of a paradigm model (Fig. 2).

Causal conditions: domestic-market pressure for export; financial and currency constraints; standards and market-acceptance challenges. Internal competitive/recessionary pressures and financial–currency constraints drive the firm towards the foreign market; but the difficulties of standards and market acceptance increase the level of risk and caution in entry.

•*Central phenomenon:* the internationalization of marketing in Iraqi companies, whose core is "reducing uncertainty."

•*Contextual factors:* institutional and border uncertainty; logistical dependence and route management; geographic and cultural proximity. The instability of regulations, border risks, and logistical constraints, alongside cultural/geographic closeness, make the "form and path" of entry contingent and make starting from nearer markets more likely.

•*Intervening factors:* individual credibility and social capital; international marketing capabilities; access to local partners/reliable intermediaries. Social capital and marketing capabilities can reduce the negative effect of uncertainty (trust-building/learning/better control) or, if weak, intensify dependence and risk.

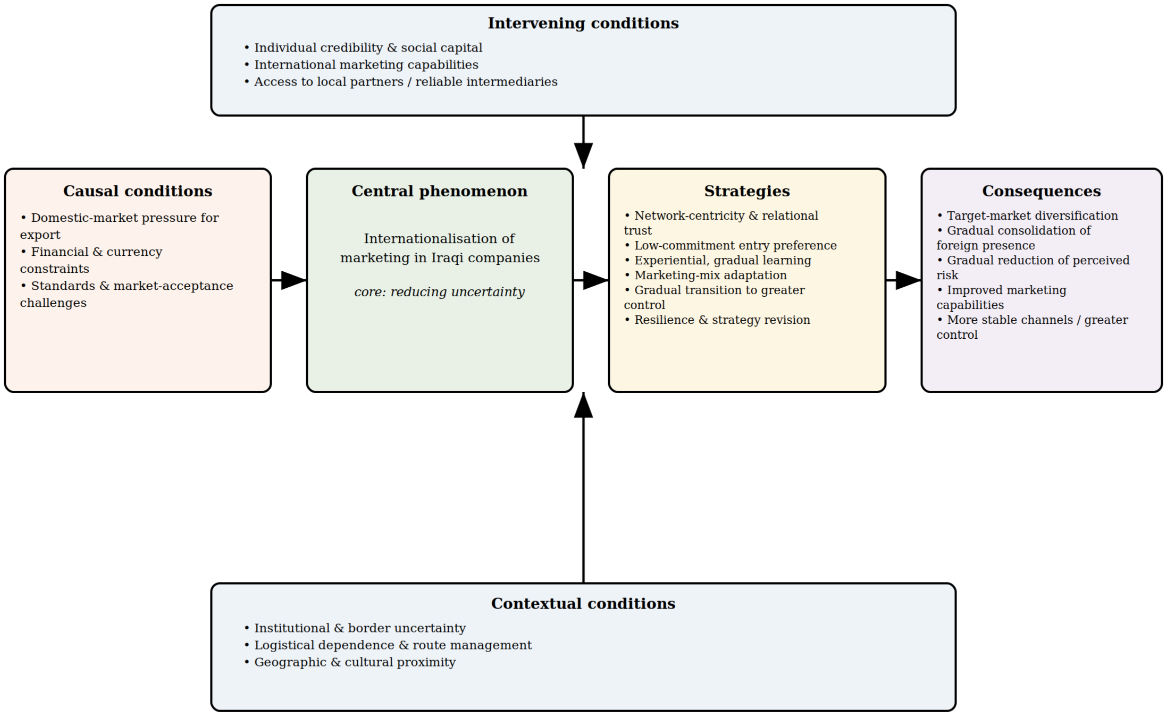

Figure 2: The research paradigm model (Source: Authors)

•*Strategies:* network-centricity and relational trust; preference for low-commitment entry; experiential and gradual learning; marketing-mix adaptation; gradual transition to greater control; resilience and strategy revision. Firms first enter with low-commitment strategies (indirect export, short contracts, advance payment, trial orders) and by relying on networks; then, through learning and adaptation, they correct the path and, if successful, increase control/commitment in stages; in shocks, they adapt through suspension/re-entry and changing the route/partner.

•*Consequences:* diversification of target markets; gradual consolidation of foreign presence; gradual reduction of perceived risk; improvement of international marketing capabilities; the formation of more stable channels/greater control. The result of the process is a localized, "staged, network-based, risk-averse, and adaptive" model that leads to the gradual continuity and reinforcement of presence in foreign markets and the distribution of risk through market diversity.

The paradigm derived from the data shows that the central phenomenon in the internationalization of marketing in Iraqi companies is reducing uncertainty, which occurs in a context of institutional–border uncertainty and financial–logistical constraints. By relying on trust-based networks and adopting gradual, low-commitment entry strategies, together with experiential learning and marketing-mix adaptation, firms attempt to manage risk and, if successful, increase their level of control and commitment in stages. The consequence of this process is the gradual consolidation of foreign presence, the diversification of target markets, and the enhancement of international marketing capabilities. The findings of the qualitative data analysis of this research showed that, contrary to static and linear views, the internationalization of marketing in Iraqi companies is not a one-off and purely economic decision, but a gradual, contingent, learning-oriented process deeply affected by institutional, financial, border, and social conditions. The findings show that, in confronting foreign markets, Iraqi firms make decisions, more than on the basis of pre-established planning and classic full-rationality models, in a context of a set of constraints, uncertainties, social relationships, occasional opportunities, and adaptive mechanisms. Hence, the process model extracted from the data rests on the fact that the dominant logic in the international behavior of these firms is reducing uncertainty and managing risk through network-centricity, low-commitment entry, gradual learning, marketing adaptation, and strategic resilience.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

At the first level, the interpretation of the data shows that the driving force behind the start of marketing internationalization in many Iraqi companies is not necessarily a classic expansionist motive, but a combination of structural pressures of the domestic market and the necessities of survival and continuity of activity. Intense competition with imported goods, the limited absorption capacity of the domestic market, demand fluctuations, low profit margins, and the fragility of the domestic business environment compel many firms to regard presence in foreign markets not as a luxury choice but as a strategic necessity for reducing dependence and distributing risk. In other words, the findings show that, for some of these firms, exporting and entering foreign markets is not of a "development-oriented" nature but acts as a survival strategy, a compensation for domestic pressure, and a diversification of income sources. This finding implies that internationalization in the Iraqi context has a deep root in the pressures of the domestic environment, and this very fact explains the cautious and low-commitment nature of the entry mechanism.

At the second level, the findings show that financial and currency constraints are one of the most fundamental factors shaping the path of marketing internationalization. Exchange-rate fluctuations, the difficulty of money transfer, banking restrictions, the risk of delay or blocking of payments, weakness in access to formal trade-finance instruments, and reliance on informal settlement mechanisms make the firms' decision-making space highly conservative. Under these conditions, instead of high-commitment and capital-intensive entries, firms lean more towards options with higher flexibility, lower reversal cost, and greater risk control. Therefore, the preference for indirect export, cooperation with intermediaries, short-term contracts, requesting advance payment, trial orders, and a limited start in nearby markets is not a sign of weakness but a rational and contingent response to the structure of financial and currency constraints.

At the third level, the data revealed the importance of institutional and border uncertainty in the formation of the marketing-internationalization pattern. The variability of regulations, the multiplicity of procedures, ambiguity in the implementation of laws, administrative corruption, differences in the interpretation and implementation of rules at various levels, and the risks associated with border crossings and customs formalities all cause firms to perceive entry into the foreign market not as a predictable path but as a process with the possibility of suspension, revision, withdrawal, and re-entry. This finding is very important, because it shows that the "process nature" of internationalization in the Iraqi context is not merely the result of gradual learning but is also a direct product of the instability of the institutional environment. In other words, gradualness here is not only the logic of development but also the logic of defense and conservatism. Because firms cannot assume the long-term stability of the rules of the game, they are compelled to move with short steps, flexible decisions, and limited commitments. One of the most important pieces of evidence is that network-centricity and relational trust have become the core of the firms' international action. The findings show that, to enter foreign markets, Iraqi firms rely to a high degree on intermediaries, local partners, commercial acquaintances, kinship ties, ethnic/tribal networks, foreign lobbyists and advisers, chambers of commerce, and the personal credibility of managers. This reliance is not merely the result of a cultural preference but is, in many cases, a functional substitute for the weakness of formal institutions, the lack of valid information, the risk of contracts, and the high cost of supervision. In fact, networks in this context perform three fundamental functions: first, reducing information asymmetry by providing market information, vetting the counterparty, and identifying opportunities; second, reducing transaction risk by strengthening trust, facilitating dispute resolution, and increasing the probability of fulfilling commitments; and third, facilitating market learning by transferring experience, understanding customer tastes, and grasping informal rules. Therefore, the research findings make clear that, in the process model of Iraqi firms, the network is not a marginal variable but the central mechanism for regulating and advancing the marketing-internationalization process.

In terms of entry strategy, the findings show that low-commitment and gradual entry is the most common and most rational path for Iraqi firms. These firms usually begin their international activity with indirect export, the use of local agents or distributors, limited contracts, and market testing, and move towards more committed modes only if they gain experience, observe relative stability, build trust with the partner, and become assured of the market's capacity. This finding clearly accords with the logic of the process theory of internationalization and especially the idea of the gradual increase of resource commitment; but the data show that, in the Iraqi context, this gradualism is more intensely affected by financial, institutional, and logistical risks. More precisely, gradual entry here is not merely the consequence of a lack of international knowledge but the result of a combination of learning, strategic conservatism, and structural constraints. Hence, the findings show that the low initial commitment of Iraqi firms is part of a deeper logic of managing uncertainty.

The findings also show that experiential and gradual learning plays a decisive role in this process. In many cases, firms lack comprehensive, formal, and ready-made information about foreign markets, and therefore accumulate their knowledge through practical experience, interaction with intermediaries and customers, attendance at exhibitions, limited market tests, trial and error, and gradual corrections. This shows that the internationalization of marketing in these firms is formed on the basis of a "learning-by-doing" pattern. Firms first enter, then learn, and on the basis of what they learn from the entry process and initial presence, they correct their strategy. As a result, the data support the idea that foreign-market knowledge in the Iraqi context is more a posteriori and in-action than a priori. This finding is of high theoretical importance, because it shows that the capacity for practical learning is one of the key conditions for passing from the trial-entry stage to the stage of consolidation and greater commitment.

Furthermore, the analysis of the data indicates that marketing-mix adaptation is one of the essential axes of success in foreign markets. The firms studied have realized that mere presence in the foreign market, without adapting the product, packaging, pricing, marketing-communication methods, and even brand messages to the characteristics of the destination market, cannot lead to a sustainable presence. In many cases, adaptation is not an optional choice but a precondition of initial acceptance. Packaging suited to the language and culture of the destination, changes in product features, flexibility in pricing, the use of communication channels suited to local buyer behavior, and drawing on local partners for a more accurate understanding of needs are all part of the operational pattern extracted from the data. Therefore, the findings show that the internationalization of marketing in these firms does not merely mean transferring a product from inside to outside, but requires the gradual reconfiguration of the value proposition and marketing mechanisms in line with the requirements and wants of the destination market.

On the other hand, the findings showed that international marketing capabilities in many Iraqi firms are still at the introduction and formation stage, and this very fact affects the type and scope of entry strategies. The shortage of specialist human resources in the field of export and international marketing, weakness in cross-border negotiation skills, the limited professional use of market research, weakness in branding, and limited use of advanced digital tools cause firms in the early stages to rely excessively on intermediaries and local partners. Nevertheless, the data show that this very gradual-entry process gradually provides the ground for the development of capabilities. In other words, there is a two-way relationship between internationalization and the development of marketing capabilities: firms need capability in order to enter, but entry into international markets itself also enhances capabilities. This finding is notable from a theoretical perspective, because it shows a clear link between the process logic of internationalization and the resource-based view: according to the data, marketing capabilities are not only a prerequisite for entry but also an output of the entry and learning process.

Another important part of the interpretation of the findings concerns the gradual transition from dependence on intermediaries to greater control over the market. The data show that, in the early stages, firms—owing to limitations of knowledge, resources, and access are compelled to rely on intermediaries, sales agents, or local partners; but this dependence, if it continues, can lead to a limited profit margin, reduced information transparency, weak control over the customer experience, and vulnerability to the partner's performance. Hence, firms that act more successfully in the learning process gradually become able to take a greater share of market control for example, communicating directly with the distributor or final buyer, appointing a dedicated agent, drawing on a stable distribution network, or making their marketing presence more professional. Therefore, the data show that one of the important patterns in this research is the staged transition from intermediary-centricity to greater control a transition that is not sudden but dependent on the accumulation of experience, trust, and organizational capacity.

The findings also made clear that resilience and strategic revision are an inseparable part of the process of marketing internationalization in Iraqi companies. In such a context, the firms' success depends not only on their power and capability of entry but also on their ability to face shocks, readjust the path, change the partner, change the payment method, temporarily suspend, or re-enter after a crisis. The data show that firms with a more flexible and experiential view of entry can better endure border changes, banking restrictions, price fluctuations, security risks, and logistical disruptions. Therefore, the internationalization process in this research has a continuous yet non-linear nature; that is, it may be accompanied by interruption, withdrawal, or readjustment, but this very flexibility is considered an important part of the firms' survival and continuity mechanism. This finding emphasizes the necessity of understanding internationalization not as a linear, upward path but as an adaptive, revisable process that is resistant to fluctuations.

In the final summary, it can be said that the model extracted from the data shows that the internationalization of marketing in Iraqi companies is centered on managing uncertainty. This management of uncertainty is carried out through an interconnected set of mechanisms such as reliance on trust-based networks, the initial selection of low-commitment entry strategies, staged and learning-oriented movement, the continuous adaptation of the marketing mix to the conditions of the destination, and revision and resilience against environmental shocks. In this way, the core category of the research namely, "reducing uncertainty through network-centricity and gradual low-commitment entry accompanied by adaptation and resilience" is not just a conceptual model but expresses the internal logic and the real pattern of action of Iraqi companies on the path of internationalizing their marketing activities. Therefore, the final conclusion of the research is that the market-entry strategy of Iraqi companies cannot be explained merely on the basis of conventional economic criteria such as market size, entry cost, or potential profitability; rather, this strategy is formed in close connection with perceived risk, the quality of social–commercial networks, the level of marketing capabilities, prior experience, and the firm's degree of resilience to environmental instability. As a result, any attempt to understand or design an internationalization model for these firms must place the specific institutional and social context of Iraq at the center of the analysis. This research shows that the model of marketing internationalization in Iraqi companies is context-based, process-based, multi-stage, network-reliant, drawing on a low-commitment mode at the start, learning-oriented in continuity, and adaptive and resilient in survival. In what follows, based on the research findings, recommendations are presented from a practical and policy perspective.

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