



The influence of an entrepreneur's imprinting legacy upon the creation and international development of a new venture

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate how an entrepreneur's imprinting history influences the creation and international development of new firms. Using a qualitative research design, we investigate the life stories of three entrepreneurs and the international development of their firms. The study shows how imprinting episodes influence the entrepreneur's mindset, start-up motivation and the subsequent international trajectories of their firms. These episodes can occur in childhood, high school, college or in earlier work experience. We find that different international trajectories emerged depending on the imprinting history of the founding entrepreneurs. In contrast to prior research, we show that entrepreneurs can develop a global mindset without international experience and that such mindsets, along with entrepreneurial passion, can be instrumental in supporting a proactive international strategy. Drawing on imprinting theory, we challenge traditional ways of investigating firm internationalisation by focusing on the life stories of entrepreneurs.

Keywords

international new ventures, internationalisation, entrepreneur, imprinting, mindset, passion

Introduction

Evidence indicates that some firms, either from inception or shortly thereafter, actively seek opportunities in foreign markets; these are known by several terms, including 'early internationalising firms', 'global start-ups', 'born globals' and 'international new ventures' (Coviello et al., 2011; Evers et al., 2023; Madsen, 2013; Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019; Zahra, 2003). Research interest in these types of firms is increasing as they contribute significantly to economic growth

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(Efrat and Asseraf, 2024; Falahat et al., 2018). While debate on the terminology used to describe early internationalising firms is ongoing, in this article we focus on the communalities of these types of firms and use the term ‘international new ventures’ to reflect all types of new firms that internationalise.

There are explanations for this phenomenon, including factors such as small domestic markets, globalisation with lower trade barriers, reduced transport costs, advancements in technology (particularly in internet and communication technology), control of specific resources, and the influence of entrepreneurs (Knight and Liesch, 2016; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994). The development paths of new firms vary widely, with some choosing internationalisation and others not; this has led to in-depth explorations of how different founders influence the internationalisation behaviour of their ventures (Andersson, 2000; Taylor and Jack, 2013). To explore this issue, research has investigated the significance of early international experience and international networks in different contexts (Acedo and Jones, 2007; Andersson et al., 2006; Criaco et al., 2022; Freeman et al., 2006; Ryan et al., 2019). The role of entrepreneurs in firm internationalisation continues to be a topic of debate. Some argue that entrepreneurs exert only a limited influence and that early rapid internationalisation is accidental rather than a result of human agency (Hennart, 2014; Hennart et al., 2021). However, others have found that entrepreneurs do play a role in shaping the development of international new ventures and therefore, have called for further research to explore how entrepreneurs influence a firm’s international development (Cavusgil and Knight, 2015; Coviello, 2015; Zucchella, 2021). It has also been shown that founders with international experience influence the speed at which a firm expands internationally. Moreover, firms led by founders with foreign professional experience (Bloodgood et al., 1996; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994) or who have studied abroad (Reuber and Fischer, 1997) are more likely to pursue early internationalisation. Few studies have explored in-depth how an entrepreneur’s legacy influences the inception and development of international new ventures (De Cock et al., 2021). ‘Legacy’ refers to the long-lasting impact of other people, events, actions et cetera, on a person’s life. Prior research has shown that firm founders bring their own history, experiences and other qualities to their firms, as reflected in imprinting theory (De Cock et al., 2021; Dickel et al., 2021; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Mathias et al., 2015). In this study, we use imprinting theory as a theoretical lens to investigate how an entrepreneur’s imprinting history influences their mindsets, start-up motivation and the subsequent international development of their firms. In particular, we aim to explore how founders without international experience or networks create firms and why they exhibit diverse international trajectories (Andersson and Wictor, 2003). Imprinting theory posits that a founder’s legacy plays a crucial role in shaping a firm’s inception and development (De Cock et al., 2021; Hoang and Gimeno, 2010; Niittymies and Pajunen, 2020).

Our study extends the literature by challenging traditional ways to investigate firm internationalisation. To do so, we focus on the life stories of three entrepreneurs, drawing on imprinting theory. Prior studies have recommended questioning mainstream perspectives in international business (IB) research to further develop a specific area (Poulis and Poulis, 2018). Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) also call on researchers to challenge dominant assumptions in various management fields. IB research has primarily focused on firm and environmental factors, often neglecting the role of individuals and human agency (Buckley and Casson, 2020; Zucchella, 2021). Thus, in this study, we explore how individuals and human agency influence a firm’s inception and international development. In addition, we examine the factors that influence an entrepreneur’s decision to establish a firm that pursues internationalisation. To achieve this, gaining a deep understanding of the entrepreneur’s background and experiences, from childhood onwards, is essential. Imprinting in early childhood and during school influences not only new venture

creation but also the firm's long-term development and internationalisation. We show that families, teachers, and even employers, exert an influence on an entrepreneur's drive to start their own businesses and explain how these start-ups develop in international markets. We show that internationalisation is an integral part of a firm's overall strategy and that foreign business activities are closely related to the founder's mindset and start-up motivations. Furthermore, our study shows that the reasons to start an international business, passion and perseverance to fulfil their vision are grounded in entrepreneurial experiences from early childhood. We find that a global mindset can be developed without international experience and that such a mindset can be instrumental to a firm's proactive international strategy. Moreover, a firm can grow fast internationally, even if the entrepreneur does not have international experience or networks. Thus, this study contributes to the debate on whether a born global firm's internationalisation is accidental (Acedo and Jones, 2007; Andersson and Wictor, 2003; Criaco et al., 2022). We find that firms can become internationalised when they have proactive entrepreneurs with a global mindset, but we also show that an entrepreneur whose primary goal is not to internationalise per se but to develop the best product possible can have with a rapidly internationalising firm. We also show how entrepreneurs with a start-up motivation to create a profitable firm can end up with gradual regional internationalisation. That is, knowledge and networks, the mechanisms that help explain why firms can internationalise despite the entrepreneur's lack of international knowledge and networks, can be compensated by passion and perseverance, which have been grounded in their mindset since childhood.

Firm internationalisation

The dominant perspective on why firms internationalise is that they possess superior resources and capabilities, which they exploit in international markets (Caves, 1971; Hymer, 1976; Surdu et al., 2021). While this view is relevant, it does not explain the processes by which these firms develop such advantages for international expansion. A research stream that explores these processes in greater depth is the Uppsala school (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 1990, 2009; Vahlne, 2020), according to which the driving mechanism behind internationalisation is incremental learning. Firms gradually acquire knowledge by engaging in foreign markets, which leads them to make further investments in and deepen their commitments to these markets. In later developments, the Uppsala model also emphasised the importance of networks. Firms are part of networks, and entering a new market means entering a new network. This introduces the concept of the 'liabilities of outsidership' (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009), in which firms must navigate the challenges of being outsiders in these new networks.

As the Uppsala school's main focus is on organisational incremental learning, it leaves little room for the individual's role in strategic decision-making (Surdu et al., 2021). It also focuses on firms undergoing a slow incremental internationalisation process, not on rapidly internationalising firms or born globals. Research on born globals and international new ventures has shown that some firms internationalise early by compensating for liabilities of newness, foreignness, and smallness through the entrepreneur's knowledge, capabilities and networks (Andersson and Wictor, 2003). The focus on how entrepreneurs influence their firm's development is in line with the upper echelon's perspective (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Kunisch et al., 2019), which argues that top management and entrepreneurs play a central role in international strategic choices (Prashantham and Floyd, 2019; Prieto-Sánchez and Merino, 2022). Research also indicates that organisational activities originate from individual intentions and expectations (Felin and Foss, 2009; Foss, 2011; Foss and Lindenberg, 2013; Teece, 2014). In the case of international new ventures, the founding entrepreneurs are those who make key decisions (Andersson and Wictor, 2003; Boeker, 1989). In

turn, their mindsets are shaped by their background and experiences, informing their perceptions of what is crucial for firm success (Bryant, 2014; Busenitz and Barney, 1997; De Cock et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs with diverse past experiences develop distinct mindsets about the ideal development of the organisation (Baron and Hannan, 2002). Past experiences shape founders worldviews, influencing the types of information they seek and use and the way they interpret information (Andersson, 2000; Beckman and Burton, 2008; Boeker, 1989).

Entrepreneurs make complex decisions under conditions of uncertainty and limited information access (Jones and Casulli, 2014; Simon, 1972). McGaughey (2007) found that entrepreneurs developed mindsets through their life experiences, which guided their decisions on internationalisation, rather than external information. This reflects prior research that shows that although entrepreneurs in international new ventures are exposed to the same opportunities as others, they tend to take advantage of international opportunities more frequently and make the decision to internationalise their firms (Andersson, 2000, 2004; Gabrielsson et al., 2025; McAuley, 1999; Rasmussen et al., 2001). Thus, determining how entrepreneurs perceive international opportunities and also how they act when these opportunities arise is important to understand firm internationalisation (Manolova et al., 2002).

Entrepreneur mindset

Scholars vary significantly in their definitions and conceptualisations of theories on mindsets. We use the mindset concept to illustrate cognitive capabilities, including both attitudinal and behavioural elements (Bohas et al., 2021; Levy et al., 2007; Nummela et al., 2004; Perlmutter, 1969). That is, we are interested in not only how entrepreneurs perceive and interpret their environment but also how they act upon and influence it (Weick, 1995). Entrepreneur mindsets form their understanding of international opportunities and also are the basis for the practices and actions undertaken in the firm's development (Lamb et al., 2011; Nummela et al., 2004; Sandberg, 2005). That is, mindsets influence what entrepreneurs deem important for the success of their firms (Baron, 1998; Calori et al., 1994; Cyert and March, 1963; Markóczy, 1997; Perlmutter, 1969). Our study considers the entrepreneur mindset that drives the motivation to start a firm and how the venture should internationalise (De Cock et al., 2021). This mindset influences how the entrepreneur evaluates complex environments and forms selective perceptions.

Mindsets are important because they dictate how entrepreneurs evaluate, select, and ultimately act on opportunities (Kiss et al., 2020; Mainela et al., 2014). Not only are entrepreneurs able to recognise opportunities, but they are also motivated to exploit them (Andersson and Evers, 2015). The ability to identify international opportunities and the knowledge and motivation to internationalise are closely linked to personal experiences, feelings and values. Mindsets develop from experience and influence an entrepreneur's start-up motivation and their firm's international behaviour (De Cock et al., 2021; Gabrielsson et al., 2025; Mathias et al., 2015; Milanov and Fernhaber, 2009; Ruzzier et al., 2007; Stinchcombe, 1965). However, research has also shown that some international new ventures are started and managed by entrepreneurs without international experience (Evers, 2010; Ghannad and Andersson, 2012). Thus, international experience alone may not explain the emergence of international new ventures. For example, Evers and O'Gorman (2011) argue that experience may shape the information to which an entrepreneur is alert, though the information does not need to pertain directly to international markets, nor does the entrepreneur need to have a deep understanding of the sector or international markets. What is crucial is that the entrepreneur identifies and acts on international opportunities (Kyvik, 2018).

In addition, research indicates that past experiences can play a critical role in the entrepreneurial process (Shane, 2000; Westhead et al., 2005). Understanding why entrepreneurs might focus on a

particular international venture idea but ignore others requires knowledge of their history and experiences. Life histories, education, functional expertise and past track records of successes and failures all shape perceptions of entrepreneurial opportunities (Zahra et al., 2005), generating diverse influences upon start-up decisions (Kolvereid and Isaksen, 2006). It is also argued that passion is an important aspect of start-up motivations and entrepreneurship (Cardon et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2009). Passion can not only form an element of the entrepreneur mindset but also enhance devotion and focus on the business, strengthen perseverance in working towards venture-related objectives, and boost their capacity to remain deeply involved and motivated in their efforts (Cardon et al., 2009; Drnovsek et al., 2016). Start-up motivations play a crucial role in shaping subsequent entrepreneurial behaviours, such as the identification and creation of opportunities and the development and management of the firm's later trajectory (Caliendo et al., 2023; Locke and Baum, 2007; Schjoedt and Shaver, 2007). Notably, few studies have examined how start-up motives influence later development (Caliendo et al., 2023). Studies in IB research focusing on individual factors have primarily dealt with international experience and networks (De Cock et al., 2021; Yang and Leppäaho, 2023). In this study, we take a broader perspective of how the individual legacy of the entrepreneur, their passion and mindset motivate them to create new firms and how they internationalise. To do so, we draw on imprinting theory (Bryant, 2014; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013) a little used approach in an IB context (De Cock et al., 2021).

Imprinting theory

Imprinting theory highlights the enduring impact of sensitive periods in history on animals, individuals, organisations and industries. The concept of imprinting originated from studies on animal behaviour (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). Spalding (1873) found that domestic birds followed the first-seen moving object. Heinroth (1911) made similar observations, and Lorenz (1935) continued to analyse the phenomenon and coined the concept of imprinting. Although imprinting occurs only during a short critical period early in the life of an animal, its effects persist over time, even if the animal is exposed to other moving objects and separated from the first object (Lorenz, 1935, 1937). Lorenz's work emphasises two general characteristics of imprinting: 'the existence of a sensitive period and the subsequent stability of the result of experience gained during that period' (Immelmann, 1975: 24). Stinchcombe (1965) introduced the concept of imprinting into organisational research by emphasising the significance of conditions present at the time of an organisation's founding in shaping its future development. These initial factors can become deeply embedded in the organisation's routines, influencing its operations and decision-making long after its establishment (Fazlelahi et al., 2024; Schreyögg and Sydow, 2011). Research on organisational imprinting has primarily focused on how technological, economic, political and cultural elements of the founding context shape the characteristics of the new organisation (Johnson, 2007; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Stinchcomb, 1965). While this body of research acknowledges the founder as an important orchestrator during the founding phase, it does not examine the entrepreneur's life story and its impact on the organisation's development.

Both the organisational and entrepreneurship literature has primarily viewed organisations as recipients of the imprinting process, often assuming that imprinting begins at the founding of a venture (Carroll and Hannan, 1989; Johnson, 2007; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). However, entrepreneurs themselves are likely both influenced by and contributors to this process. Certain imprinting sources may shape entrepreneurs even before they start their first venture and continue to affect them throughout their careers, influencing their decision-making and the direction of their firms (Mathias et al., 2015). Mathias et al.'s (2015) study is one of the few that go beyond the inception stage of a venture. It reveals that both the episodes and the context in which prior knowledge is

acquired influence not only an entrepreneur's decision to start a venture but also the decision-making processes while managing it.

Research (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Mathias et al., 2015) identifies three elements of imprinting: sensitive periods (e.g. childhood, education years, firm founding years), stamps (periods when individuals or organisations reflect on and are influenced by the environment), and persistence (periods that produce a persistent influence on an individual or organisation). This notion of imprinting aligns with entrepreneurship research that suggests that past experiences can play a crucial role in the development of a founder's new firms (Shane, 2000; Westhead et al., 2005). Andersson (2000) discusses how entrepreneurs make decisions early in their firm's development that dictate its future direction. In a similar vein, Haynie et al. (2009: 357) argue that individuals do not simply search for the 'best opportunities' but rather the best opportunities 'for them'. For example, an entrepreneur with technology expertise is likely to search for opportunities to use that knowledge (e.g. develop new products); an entrepreneur with knowledge of international business is likely to use that knowledge to create business abroad.

Although prior research connects entrepreneurs with different mindsets and internationalisation trajectories (Andersson, 2000; Haynie et al., 2009), it does not, however, investigate in-depth how the legacy and history of individuals influence their decision to start a business and internationalise. Investigating an entrepreneur's legacy and history can offer valuable insights into key imprinting episodes that influenced their decision to start an international venture, as well as the passions and motivations behind these decisions (Mathias et al., 2015). Both entrepreneurship (Cardon et al., 2009; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011) and psychology (Newman et al., 2021) research have acknowledged the significance of passion, showing it is a precursor to various entrepreneurial outcomes, such as growth, performance, funding and other successes (see also Drnovsek et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017; Mueller et al., 2017). However, few studies have investigated the link between passion and internationalisation (Adomako and Ahsan, 2022; Adomako et al., 2023). Thus, we emphasise the entrepreneur's thoughts, feelings and beliefs about themselves in the role of creating and internationalising their firms (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010; Rosenberg, 1979).

Prior research has also shown that individuals can be imprinted through a variety of sources, such as family members (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015) and other individuals (McEvily et al., 2012), or through economic conditions and institutional conditions (Dokko et al., 2009; Higgins, 2005). Individuals also experience several sensitive periods, including during the formative years of childhood, early career or significant economic change (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). Neeley (2013) suggests that childhood experiences can set an individual's entrepreneurial mindset and approach to business; similarly, Reid and Mair (2012) discuss the concept of entrepreneurial imprinting, or the way childhood experiences shape an individual's attitudes and behaviours as an entrepreneur. Studying earlier experiences, however, means significant methodological and empirical challenges. To understand the process of imprinting, an in-depth assessment of individuals and their lives over time is crucial. Figure 1 depicts a self-reinforcing cycle. Initial imprinting episodes shape the founder's passion and mindset, which then guide motivation and strategic activities – most notably the decision to start the venture and to pursue international opportunities. These choices, in turn, steer the firm's subsequent development and its evolving international trajectory. Crucially, each milestone or setback the firm experiences feeds back into the founder's experience base, becoming a fresh imprinting episode that can recalibrate the founder's mindset and actions. The double-sided arrow in Figure 1 highlights this ongoing, path-dependent interplay between founder and firm.

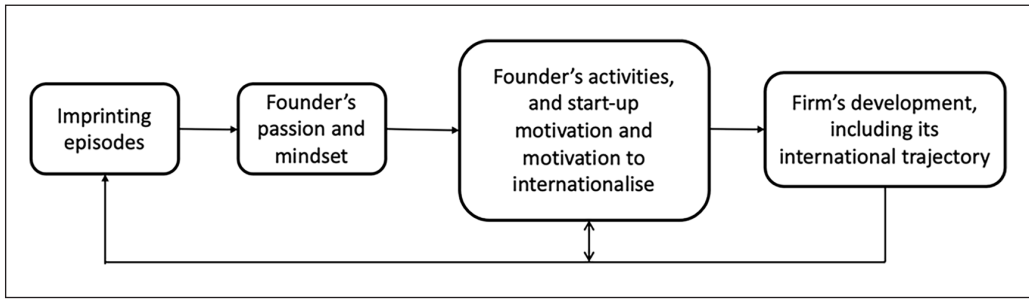


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Methodology

Research design

To explore how an entrepreneur and human agency influence a firm's inception and international development, we employ a qualitative case study approach. Our research is inspired by studies rooted in traditions that emphasise human agency as a key factor in understanding internationalisation, such as critical realism (Welch et al., 2011) and interpretivism (Aguzzoli et al., 2024). Following Stake (1995, 2005), we use a qualitative case study approach to explore how an entrepreneur's imprinting history influences the creation and international development of their firms. Our study adopts a two-phased approach to data collection. The first phase, conducted between 2000 and 2011, provided a comprehensive understanding of early imprinting episodes and the firm's initial trajectory. The second phase, conducted a decade later (2020–2022), allowed us to revisit these cases to examine the long-term developments and enduring effects of the initial imprinting episodes. This processual approach enabled us to bridge the temporal gap between formative episodes and long-term outcomes, thus providing deeper insights into the entrepreneurial experience. Together, these phases contribute to a richer understanding of how early life events shape long-term entrepreneurial and organisational development. The research design is influenced by phenomenography and interpretive methodology (Lamb et al., 2011; Marton, 1986; Marton and Booth, 1997; Sandberg, 2000, 2005). This design aims to capture how individuals understand specific aspects of reality, their roles as entrepreneurs (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010), and how these factors inform their actions, such as venture creation and internationalisation. By following the development of the firms and entrepreneurs over an extended period, we avoid the limitations of studies that rely solely on shorter episodes or snapshot views, which can be misleading when trying to understand factors influencing long-term international development (Rumyantseva and Welch, 2023).

Case selection

As the focus of this study is on entrepreneur influence on internationalisation, we chose firms whose founders were still full owners and acting as CEOs at the time of the study. The firms also needed to be internationally active (with more than 70% of their sales outside Sweden). To explore variations in internationalisation behaviour, we selected firms exhibiting both rapid and gradual internationalisation and operating within a similar context. All firms studied are in the

manufacturing industry, were established around 1980 by a single entrepreneur, and are located in the same (northern) region of Sweden.

Data collection

Data collection took place in two distinct phases. In the first phase (2000–2011), we conducted 108 interviews with 58 respondents that provided an in-depth understanding of the entrepreneur's life story, the firms and the early internationalisation. We identified the respondents through snowball sampling (Potter, 1996; Spreen, 1992), beginning with key informants who offered critical insights and expanding to include their networks. This technique allowed us to interview a wide range of stakeholders, including the entrepreneurs themselves, managers, former employees, business partners, friends, family members, suppliers and customers. While the initial questions in this phase focused on topics such as respondent life stories (e.g. 'Could you please tell me your life story from childhood onward?' 'What experiences in your life were important for firm establishment and international development?'), the nature of the questions evolved as the snowball sampling expanded. These later interviews allowed respondents to provide perspectives on what had occurred and how specific events or relationships affected the entrepreneurs and their firms.

The second phase (2020–2022) involved eight follow-up interviews with five respondents. These respondents had sustained involvement in the firms during both phases and deep insights into the development of the firm. Unlike the first phase, the second did not focus on imprinting during childhood but instead followed up on firm development. The questions aimed to validate or refine the initial analysis conducted after the first phase. Examples included 'How has the firm developed over the past decade?' 'What role has the entrepreneur under investigation played in this development?' and 'Have there been any major changes in the firm that might be relevant to our research?' This phase also incorporated extensive secondary data, including annual reports, newspaper articles, online publications, and internal documents. By integrating primary and secondary data, we traced the firm trajectories over approximately two decades, evaluating the lasting impacts of early imprinting episodes and gaining a longitudinal perspective on their evolution.

Interviews in both phases were informal, in person and guided by open-ended questions. Interviews typically lasted between one and four hours and were recorded, transcribed and sent to respondents for feedback and verification. Secondary data collected in both phases further enriched our cases, ensuring reliability and facilitating triangulation (Creswell, 1994; Rouse and Daellenbach, 1999). This two-phased approach enhances multiple facets of the study. It (1) provides a temporal perspective, allowing us to link formative episodes to long-term outcomes and (2) strengthens the empirical foundation through data triangulation, thereby improving trustworthiness and content validity (Creswell, 1994; Rouse and Daellenbach, 1999).

Analysis

To gather and analyse data, we employed our conceptual framework derived from prior research, which outlines the central concepts of the study and their interrelationships. The analysis consisted of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, according to the concurrent flow of activities (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). We analysed the data from both a within-case and a cross-case perspective. In the within-case analysis, we examined evidence from each case individually, constructing detailed narratives

from multiple data sources. Inspired by Langley's (1999) temporal bracketing strategy and Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique, we identified imprinting episodes throughout the founders' life, from early childhood to their entire lifespan, including the inception of their firms and their international development. Temporal bracketing involves identifying distinct episodes and examining how they connect over time (Langley, 1999; Lerman et al., 2022). This approach unpacks why these episodes occur, considering both individual agency and the influence of the individual's environment during each episode. This method acknowledges the interdependencies between individual actions and the structures they both create and are influenced by (Giddens, 1984). It is particularly appropriate for process studies that do not view phases as a predictable, sequential development but instead account for feedback loops, mutual shaping and multidirectional causality – key elements of the conceptual framework underpinning our analysis. With its potential for internal replication, temporal bracketing is well-suited for generating deep insights in studies with one or a few cases (Langley, 1999). We then conducted a cross-case analysis to identify patterns in the cases, using visual maps and tables to compare findings. This comparative analysis helped uncover both similarities and differences among the cases, linking our findings to prior research and highlighting replicated factors (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Case presentations

This section explores the foundational episodes that influenced the creation and development of three firms: Polaris Optic, Index Braille, and Liko AB. We also provide a brief introduction to their founders. Examination of the entrepreneurs reveals how distinct episodes from childhood and early life experiences forged individual motivations and entrepreneurial mindsets, ultimately guiding them towards firm establishment and international behaviour (see Table 1).

Staffan Preutz and Polaris Optic AB

During childhood, Staffan Preutz spent countless hours in his father's optical store, developing a passion for crafting eyewear. His interest in design led him to manufacture and sell frames in his father's shop, pretending that these were the latest designs from France and Italy. In 1979, he founded Polaris Optic AB, a niche firm that designed, developed and sold a wide range of rimless eyewear. By combining long-standing technical expertise in lenses with a flair for design, Preutz introduced industry-first techniques that seamlessly merged functionality and aesthetics. His pioneering approach reshaped a niche segment of the eyewear industry and drew acclaim for minimalist styling.

In his recollection of growing up in Boden in far North of Sweden, Preutz paints a vivid picture of the town's social scene – one marked by mismatched marriages and surprising contrasts:

The doctors living in Boden were very ugly but somehow, they always married the most beautiful nurses. These nurses together with the officer's wives were very fashion oriented and elegant. They were not like some of the customers, who were farmer's wives who had been milking the cow in the morning and had taken the bus into town to repair their watches. These beautiful women used to travel much and were familiar with the latest fashions, which were much different than what people were used to in this small Northern Swedish town.

As Preutz worked in his father's shop, he could hear these women explaining that the eyeglasses in Stockholm were much nicer than those available in Boden. The reason for this was because of a

Table 1. Imprinting episodes influencing firm creation.

	Staffan Preutz Polaris Optic AB	Björn Löfstedt Index Braille	Gunnar Liljedahl Liko AB
Imprinting episodes	Preutz became interested in eyewear design from working in his father's shop as a teenager. Preutz's older brother took over the family business, and he wanted to show his family that he could be successful with his own business.	Löfstedt grew up with a blind mother, who he wanted to help. He worked in the same industry as his father and wanted another life for himself.	Liljedahl's family struggled financially during his childhood. He worked in a sawmill and realised that this was hard work with little reward and that he needed to study to advance. A teacher complemented him on his problem-solving abilities. He also desired to have his own firm.
Founder's mindset	To be sociable, meet people and travel around the world	To pursue never-ending research and develop products	To not be poor, as he was during childhood
Start-up motivation	To show his father and brother that he could be more than just an optician	To help his blind mother and others who were blind	To create a growing firm that could provide wealth for the founder at low risk
Firm mission	To become the world's smallest multinational firm	To develop the best Braille printer in the world	To have an annual growth of 25%

shortage of eyeglasses in the mid-1950s. What usually happened was that a Swedish wholesaler imported a limited number of eyeglasses, which it then sold to stores in the metropolitan areas. This meant that the glasses that reached Boden were the leftovers and tended to be unattractive. This posed little problem for people living in northern Sweden, as many were unaware of fashion and were satisfied with the selection offered. However, to satisfy the increasing need of the upper-class customers in Boden, Preutz began to hand-draw some new eyewear designs. Drawing was something he was good at in school and which he enjoyed doing. Soon, he began to saw and polish in his father's workshop and constructed a couple of eyeglasses that he placed among the other glasses in his father's exhibition corner. Before long, the doctor's and officer's wives noticed Preutz's glasses. Preutz, who was only 15 years of age at the time, did not dare say that he had made them himself, so he answered, 'These frames are the latest fashion, directly from Paris'. It was from this moment that Preutz realised that he wanted to design and manufacture eyeglasses when he got older.

At approximately the same time, in addition to building frames in his father's shop, Preutz developed another interest. According to Preutz, when he was a teenager, his hometown was invaded by people from 'outer space'. These people were young boys in their 20s from different parts of Europe, such as Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and England, who were hitchhiking to North Cape in Norway. As Preutz was bicycling to and from his father's shop, he would see these hitchhikers sitting on the side of the road waiting for a ride. Preutz often stopped and tried talking to them for a while. However, he could only communicate with them in broken English, having had only two years of English in elementary school.

Outside Boden, the family had an old barn that had previously been used to store food. Preutz cleaned the floors of the barn, furnished it with old beds and began a youth hostel for the hitchhikers. At this time, he was 15; he directed the hitchhikers by drawing maps by hand, showing how they could find their way to the hostel. Each time he saw hitchhikers, he gave them one of the maps. Everything was free, both housing and food; he offered them potatoes, sausage, ketchup and mustard, and milk. Preutz had an agreement with the local sausage manufacturer to provide his produce free as was unsaleable because they were damaged or shaped oddly. The 60 litres of milk consumed each week were provided by Preutz's mother. Preutz did all this only because he enjoyed meeting and talking to new people. He continued this 'business' for five summers until he was 20 years old. During these years, he established many connections, which he still has today. Furthermore, in addition to improving his English, he learned about different cultures, customs and traditions and, most important, how to deal with people from different nationalities. Preutz explained that this was the time after World War II and that sometimes young boys from Germany and England, who had lost their fathers in the war, slept under the same roof.

One problem that Preutz faced when he got older was that his older brother also worked in his father's shop, and Preutz realised that he would not be the one to inherit the family business:

The store was too small to support three families, since my brother was also an optician and my parents didn't want to retire, wishing to work as long as possible. So, I was more or less ordered to leave the store and move. It was, however, not a surprise, and I had prepared myself for this for a long time.

Preutz's experience in optical lenses, together with a burning interest in design, led him to use a new technique, and thus he became a pioneer in rimless eyewear. Polaris Optic also introduced revolutionary products such as the SP collection featuring rimless and frameless eyewear. After rapid growth during the initial internationalisation process, the firm reached a more stable phase between 2000 and 2010, with 70–80 employees worldwide and a turnover of 70 million SEK (approximately 10 million USD). Almost 93% of the total sales were generated from markets abroad. The firm also had fully owned manufacturing facilities in the United Kingdom and Germany and a joint venture in Japan.

The three markets generated almost 65% of the firm's sales. In 2010, when Preutz had reached a senior age, the firm faced declining foreign sales. One reason was that no one could replicate Preutz's innovativeness. In 2015, when Preutz was 75 years of age, the firm sold its Japanese joint venture to the Japanese partner, and in 2016, it also sold the British subsidiary to its foreign partners. The same year, it closed the factory in northern Sweden, and the era of Staffan Preutz and Polaris Optic came to an end.

Björn Löfstedt and Index Braille AB

In 1982, Björn Löfstedt founded Index Braille AB, which manufactures and sells high-quality and technically advanced Braille printers. The firm is the world leader in the segment of single- and double-sided Braille embossers with high printing speed. By raising the technical level of these embossers, Index Braille has made braille more accessible for blind people worldwide. In 2022, the firm had a turnover of 50 million SEK and 15 employees. The turnover and number of employees have been more or less the same during the 10-year period between 2012 and 2022 (2012 was 55 million SEK in turnover and 10 employees).

Growing up with a blind mother who relied on manual Braille typing sparked Björn Löfstedt's determination to improve the technology available to the blind. Specifically, at age eight, Löfstedt faced a profound shift in his family life when his mother lost her sight entirely as a result of diabetes. In response, he put his early technical skills to work, continually seeking ways to improve her everyday experiences. As one of his childhood friends, Elisabeth, recalled:

There were lots of us kids who used to go to his place, and his mother was there all the time helping us in baking bread, buns and food. She helped us, but we had to be her eyes. Both she and Björn were amazing. Björn was a true handy boy, making all kind of tools for his mother.

Löfstedt's mother used to work as an administrative assistant for a local blind association and write its protocols in Braille. In the mid-1970s, Braille typewriters were like regular typewriters, a mechanical device that required powerful strokes on the keyboard, and a hammer was often used for this purpose. Braille typewriters also did not have any memory, and therefore Löfstedt's mother was often forced to re-type her work; for example, making 15 copies was not unusual, and this could take her several days. Consequently, Löfstedt had the idea to design an affordable and compact Braille printer and began working on this idea in his garage. At this time, he had just begun working as a research assistant at the newly established local university, which made it possible for him to use certain skills and tools for his idea. During his time at the university, Löfstedt poured much of his energy into a personal invention for his mother – a commitment that did not go unnoticed by his mentors. As his former lecturer, Kjell Lindfors, recalled:

I had Björn as a student. Once he was finished and started to work at the university, all his time went to develop this device for his mother. Björn put his whole soul into this. He had no money beside the little he got from the tenants in his house and the few hours he worked at his father's small side project, Löfstedt's Pump Service.

Löfstedt's Pump Service.

Löfstedt's time at the university was relatively brief. During his first few years of employment, he was granted several approved leaves of absence to concentrate on developing his idea. Ultimately, in 1983, he decided to resign from his position to dedicate himself fully to his vision and the newly started business. Securing resources for the fledgling venture required significant personal sacrifices. As Löfstedt recounted:

I pawned my business, home, car, wife, kids and the dog—everything I had. I was the only one taking all the risks in this firm. If things had gone bad, I would be the only one losing everything. Maybe it was foolish, but I had to do it.

In 2022, 97% of Index Braille's total sales came from 92 countries. The firm's largest export markets were the United States, Canada, and Europe, which accounted for 70% of exports. In June 2022, Löfstedt decided that it was time to sell his business after a lifelong effort to help the blind. Reflecting on his motives and the lessons learned, he explained:

What basic needs does a person have? Well, you need love, recognition and to be seen by our parents. There are these basic needs and what people do, is to try to build a platform around it. [Starting] a firm is one way, writing a doctoral thesis is another. There is both good ways and bad ways. Also, what's the meaning of having a firm? (1). To earn money. We are earning more money per employee than any other

firm in Northern Sweden. (2). To develop oneself and others. I have done both. The idiotic fixation on the development of the printers was wrong. It was a compensation for something else.

Löfstedt also added:

I am finished with Index. There is too much of my identity on the firm, mainly because I have [sacrificed] my time, money and life on this. Index is not my baby anymore. There are so many things I have lost. I have to get things back, which will take time. My kids for example.

Gunnar Liljedahl and Liko AB

Growing up on a small farm with three cows, some chickens, and 100 acres of forest, Gunnar Liljedahl spent his early years trying to help increase the land's productivity. His family's resource constraints fuelled a passion for engineering practical solutions. Later, after a decade developing assistive aids at a county health council, he founded Liko AB in 1979 to refine and commercialise his custom-designed lifts. Liko specialises in developing, manufacturing and marketing lift and transfer equipment to people whose mobility is impaired. The main products are patient lifts, stationary lifting, mobile lifting, horizontal lifting, slings, leg extenders and other accessories for heavy lifting. Today, Liko, as part of Baxter (formerly Hill-Rom), is a world leader in patient lift and transfer solutions, recognised worldwide for its innovative and ergonomic designs. The firm provides a comprehensive range of products – including ceiling lifts, mobile lifts, and specialised slings – that enhance safety and comfort for both patients and caregivers.

During Liljedahl's childhood, his family greatly struggled. Liljedahl's father was a carpenter who worked at different construction sites in the area, while his mother took care of the daily work on the farm. Rather than fully supporting the family, the farm was supposed to be complementary to his father's work. However, on occasion, when Liljedahl's father had trouble finding jobs, the farm was the only source of income for the family. Liljedahl noticed his family's struggle and promised himself not to end up in the same situation when he got older. As a teenager, he had the opportunity to work in his uncle's sawmill during the summer holidays, and he realised that the hard work and low salary were not enough for him. As he recalled, 'the years in the sawmill made me very motivated to continue study, since I realised that this isn't something I want to do [for the] rest of my life'.

Even as a child, Liljedahl was interested in solving problems. At the age of 10, he constructed a canal to transport water to the plot of growing land his family owned to improve the productivity. At the age of 14, he designed his first summer cottage with timber from a chicken farm teardown. The meticulous planning that went into designing the cottage was evident long after its completion. As Liljedahl notes:

I do still have the blueprints for this cottage and when looking at it, you will be amazed how accurate and specific it is.

In 1963, Liljedahl was accepted to study engineering in upper secondary school in Luleå for three years. During this time, his teachers noticed his advanced skills in problem solving. Reflecting on his time there, Liljedahl recalled:

At that school one teacher used to say that I am typical of the kind of person who will start a firm of their own. I, however, thought that he was just drivelling. At that time, I thought my future would be to work as an engineering or technician in a large firm'

After his studies, Liljedahl worked for the Swedish multinational corporation ASEA. During this time, he had the opportunity to participate in many interesting projects. For example, the firm sent him to Italy to negotiate with the board of the Italian railway for new switchyards:

I was only 22 years old and didn't even own a suit. I admire ASEA for sending me on such an important mission. I remember the negotiation room where I was sitting alone on one side and at least 20 Italians on the other side. However, once you have managed to get them to sign the order book you are better than the best students at Harvard Business School. I was away for a week. This was the first time for me outside the Nordic countries and it was a great experience. Many of the Italians couldn't speak English, so we had to use lots of gestures and sign language. I think this trip made me lose my fear for working abroad and of meeting strange people in unfamiliar environments.

As noted, Liljedahl founded Liko after being an employee at the county health council for 10 years as a problem solver/inventor to improve the quality of life of patients with functional disorders. After a decade, he realised that more people could benefit from his inventions and offered them in the market. He considered selling the patents but then decided that he did not want to sell his 'golden eggs'. Liko experienced rapid growth, entering multiple international markets. Liljedahl was fixated on having a minimum 20% growth per year at any cost. For example, during difficult years, the firm did reduce its prices and had less revenue, but the turnover kept growing as Liljedahl expected. Liljedahl's brother offered insight into Gunnar's single-minded pursuit of expansion, highlighting how this desire shaped the firm's strategy from the beginning. He explained:

Gunnar has always been obsessed with increasing the volume. Once he told me that he didn't dare [set] any result objectives on the firm since it wouldn't give him the volume he required. I think in some cases the volume we got was [at] the expense of our financial result. I do, however, understand him. Even though we would get much smaller marginal, in the long run, this would give us scale benefits which are necessary in this industry.

For Liljedahl, selling the firm was always one exit he had considered. Multiple times during the interviews, we circled back to whether he should sell the firm or go public and list it on the stock exchange. In 2008, Liljedahl finally decided that it was time to sell the firm. At that time, the firm, including its subsidiaries (e.g. Liko textile, Liko R&D, Liko Production) and foreign sales offices in Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom, employed 260 people, had a turnover of 400M SEK, and exported 80% of its sales. In 2008, Liljedahl sold Liko to the US-based Hill-Rom Company (today Baxter) for 183 million USD. He used the money to start a family-owned holding company with investments in real estate and financial instruments. Through this, Liljedahl secured his promise that his family for many generations to come would not need to live in poverty as he did as a child. Recounting the concerns that shaped his decisions, Liljedahl noted:

For a long time I was afraid that my children would end up having a childhood as I had. But I do not have that fear today. My family and I are having a good income from Liko and I could at any time retire and have a decent life. It was important for me to secure my kids and their kid's future with my work.

The role of imprinting episodes upon firm creation

All three cases show how imprinting episodes in the entrepreneur's early lives were influential in the creation and international development of their firms; the three founders were working in

family businesses, which were their first encounters with employment and earning a salary. These experiences helped shape their mindsets, which in turn influenced their future goals and dreams and eventually their lives. For example, Preutz's opportunity to design and sell his eye-wear in his father's shop helped him realise that this was what he wanted to do in the future. With his older brother taking over the family shop, Preutz was forced to create his own business. Löfstedt and Liljedahl had the opposite experience to Preutz's while working with their relatives. Their negative experiences motivated them to continue studying so as not to end up with the same blue-collar, non-stable and difficult life their fathers endured. During this early period, the participants were already showing entrepreneurial propensity by creating opportunities and exploiting them, which distinguished them from their friends. For example, Preutz started a successful youth hostel, Löfstedt invented advanced tools and other aids for his blind mother, and Liljedahl invented solutions to increase the productivity of the plot of land that fed the family when his father was unemployed.

In these cases, a need, a crisis and dissatisfaction moved the young people towards entrepreneurial action. Many of their personal characteristics were formed during this period. Furthermore, Preutz used his connection with networks (also his parent's network) at a young age to attain the necessary resources to start the youth hostel. He managed to obtain used beds from a military camp, sausages from the local manufacturer and milk from his mother. Similarly, Löfstedt and Liljedahl gained important life experiences during their youth by working on weekends and holidays with their fathers (as caretaker, carpenter, plumber and farmer). In this way, they developed an interest in technical skills, learned how to use tools and how to solve various problems. Furthermore, they quickly realised the fruits of their efforts, as the small innovations they made at home improved the quality of life for them and their families.

Compared with prior research (Maksimov et al., 2017), these stories give more nuanced and deeper insights to the factors influencing venture creation. Family exerts an important influence on the formation of an entrepreneurial mindset. The entrepreneurs in this study all worked with their fathers, which motivated them either to follow their father's example, (Preutz) or to find another way of life (Löfstedt and Liljedahl). Löfstedt's desire to help his mother was also a driving force behind firm creation. We thus, conclude that imprinting episodes from childhood, and family influences, are critical motives for venture creation.

International development of the firms

Polaris Optic

Five years after inception, Polaris Optic entered more than 20 countries, by direct exporting or through its own foreign sales offices, either fully or jointly owned. Many of these foreign markets were psychologically distant from Sweden (see Table 2). The influx of money also helped the firm maintain high growth. The firm had many opportunities to further develop the domestic market; however, Preutz was not keen on doing so. He believed his hesitancy was due to the negative response he had received from colleagues in Stockholm and other southern metropolitan cities when he had shown them his prototypes a few years earlier. He explained that when he went to Stockholm to show his eyewear collection, the Swedish opticians were sceptical because they believed that a person from northern Sweden could not design glasses. For them, eyewear fashion came from Italy or France, not Boden. However, when Preutz went to the United Kingdom with the same products and asked opticians if they were interested in his glasses, the answer was a

Table 2. Polaris Optic's international development.

Polaris Optic	Market entries	Motivation for internationalisation
Proactive	United States 1979	Managerial urge (Preutz's big dream)
	Australia 1987	Managerial urge (fun to sell on the other side of the world)
	Italy 1982	Managerial urge (to be in the prestigious Italian market)
Reactive	United Kingdom 1979	Brother-in-law moving back to United Kingdom
	Germany 1979	German optician moving back to Germany
	Japan 1981	Inquiry from abroad
	France 1980	Inquiry from French optician

resounding yes. Reflecting on the unintended consequences of emphasising international sales over domestic opportunities, Preutz remarked:

Of course I wanted more Swedes to buy my product, but I think my mental obsession of foreign sales and my unfair treatment of the domestic market sent negative, implicit signals to my employees.

In addition, Preutz decided to follow his heart and have fun while doing business. According to him, one of the main reasons for internationalising his business was to travel and meet new people: 'Sometimes you know that you can earn much money, but you don't like the person. In such cases, you don't have fun, are not comfortable, and therefore I don't [do] business with him'. Consequently, he largely ignored the Swedish market for growth. For a long time, the Swedish market shares were around 20% of turnover and later decreased to 8%–10%. Consequently, the more proactive motives to internationalise were most important during the firm's early years. Preutz's desire to show himself and the world that he could sell his eyewear designs and products abroad was the driving force behind the firm's internationalisation. Within five years of inception, the firm had entered multiple countries. As noted previously, some of these countries (i.e. United States, United Kingdom and Japan) were fully owned sales offices or joint ventures, which is rather unusual given the firm's small size and no market in its country of origin. Preutz explained that having a firm abroad was one childhood dream coming true:

Establishing a subsidiary or sales office abroad has never been only for earning money. It is exciting and challenging to start a new project abroad, just like putting a small boat far out [to] sea and . . . watch[ing] with enthusiasm if it will stay [afloat] and if it can find its way back to the harbour. Therefore, most of the things I have done have been because it is fun and interesting.

During our last interview with Preutz, he also mentioned:

Thinking back, it is a miracle that the firm has survived this period. If I had known what I know today, perhaps I [would have] stopped myself from doing certain things. He went on to add, 'but I would have lost so much fun and experience'. I have become a millionaire on adventure and life experience.

Index Braille

A childhood friend described Löfstedt as a person who even as a child was different from the others: 'He was always a bit special from the rest of us; he didn't care what the others thought, but went his own way'. As mentioned previously, the motivation behind Löfstedt's product was

primarily to help his mother, but beyond that, the Swedish market was too small to create a business. As Löfstedt explained:

I knew from the beginning that this product must be sold abroad. The Swedish market was too small . . . you cannot survive in this business without exporting. You could not have a business and only concentrate on the Swedish market, which would sell 40 printers annually. With these small volumes, our R&D would never pay off.

Consequently, at the age of 31 years, Löfstedt took one prototype with himself to different trade-shows abroad. This was his first trip outside Nordic countries. 'It was a totally different world – a lifetime experience', he said. At these tradeshowes, he met some German, British and Norwegian distributors interested in selling the Braille printers in their home countries. Therefore, he began travelling around to different countries to demonstrate the product for these distributors. According to Löfstedt:

1984–1985 was the golden time in this line of business. There was lots of money and opportunities. Our machines cost one-third of what the competitors took. We made revolution in this business. It was exiting to be there and making a difference.

He went on to note that, mentally, entering foreign markets is like 'prostituting' yourself:

It's a matter of offering them everything you have. Once you have agreed on everything they ask you, one can feel that he or she has entered the market and now can start making things happen. This is a dirty job with lots of frustration and hard work.

The language was also something that Löfstedt remembers as being challenging:

At that time I could hardly speak English. As a student all the literature was in Swedish, and also it was very rare that people spoke English on the radio or television. Therefore, I had to learn English the hard way. I was forced to learn English for conducting business abroad.

As Löfstedt was travelling around Europe, Index Braille began receiving increasingly more orders. As Table 3 shows, 5 years after inception, Index Braille entered many countries by direct exporting through distributors in foreign markets. In 1982, when the firm was established, opportunities to develop the domestic market were minimal because of the lack of demand for Braille printers in Sweden. To be able to sell the expected number of printers to recover the investment in R&D, the firm was forced to look to markets outside Sweden. For a long time, the Swedish market share was approximately 10% of turnover, but it has since decreased to only 3%. Consequently, we can conclude that Löfstedt's reactive motives were most important during the firm's internationalisation. Furthermore, internationalisation (i.e. foreign sales) was deemed a necessary pain to have the revenue to continue developing the product further.

Liko

Liko was in no rush to enter foreign markets. After the firm was established in 1979, it took four years to enter other Nordic countries such as Denmark, Finland and Norway as a result of participation in Nordic trade shows. Liko AB was established as a spin-off from Liljedahl Konstruktion. Consequently, the firm had some operations and an employee from its onset. Still, at this time,

Table 3. Index Braille's international development.

Index Braille	Market entries	Motivation for internationalisation
Proactive	France 1986	Market information
Reactive	Norway 1984	Inquiry from abroad
	Germany 1984	Inquiry from abroad
	United Kingdom 1984	Inquiry from abroad
	Italy 1986	Inquiry from abroad
	Spain 1987	Inquiry from abroad
	United States 1987	Inquiry from abroad

Table 4. Liko's international development.

Liko	Market entries	Motivation for internationalisation
Proactive	Norway 1984	Managerial urge
	Denmark 1984	Managerial urge
Reactive	United States 1987	Friends from United States
	Canada 1987	Friends from United States
	Germany 1987	Inquiry from abroad
	Japan 1987	Meeting Japanese distributor
	More than 20 other countries	Unsolicited orders

Liljedahl had little idea of how the firm would develop (it was still manufacturing only furniture leg extenders) and thus, had no real desire to go overseas. Indeed, he was so uncertain that it took him four years before he left his other work to fully commit to Liko. At this time, Liljedahl also began investigating the opportunities to sell abroad by attending trade fairs in the Nordic countries. As foreign sales began to increase, he believed the firm needed someone with more experience in this area. Two years after selling the first lifts, Liljedahl began considering the possibility of exporting outside Sweden. As mentioned previously, during this period Liko was making a good profit and experiencing high growth in the Swedish market. Liljedahl had also begun traveling around Sweden and participating in domestic trade fairs to promote the product. Moreover, he was aware that the Swedish market was too small: 'When you are in a small niche market as we [were], then the market is very limited in terms of turnover, and therefore, if you want to grow, there is no other option than starting to export'.

At this time, domestic sales were also rapidly increasing, with no indication of a slowdown. Consequently, Liljedahl continued to focus on product development and domestic sales, and he put his older brother, Sören, in charge of international sales. Table 4 shows the international development of the firm during the initial years.

Comparison of the entrepreneur's influence on the firm's international development

The internationalisation of the three firms is closely linked to the entrepreneur's mindset and motivation to start the firms. Their mindsets affected not only the speed of internationalisation but also the international behaviour of their organisations. As the firms succeeded in growing internationally, which became a large part of their businesses, it might be expected that internationalisation

Table 5. Imprinting episodes influencing international development.

	Staffan Preutz Polaris Optic AB	Björn Löfstedt Index Braille	Gunnar Liljedahl Liko AB
Imprinting episodes influencing international development	Preutz started a hostel because he wanted to meet people from other countries. Opticians from Stockholm did not believe that good eyewear design could come from northern Sweden. Preutz wanted to show that his designs would be appreciated worldwide.	To help his blind mother, Löfstedt invented Index Braille. The home market was too small to cover R&D costs, prompting him to expand to other countries.	A poor childhood led Liljedahl to study and to create a firm from which he could make a good living. An assignment from his employer ASEA made Liljedahl aware that he wanted to establish his business abroad.
Motives for internationalisation	Managerial urge (proactive)	Small domestic market (reactive)	Small domestic market (reactive)
Countries entered five years after inception	18 countries on four continents	Nine European markets and the US market	Nordic markets (full product range) and US market (no lifts)
Modes of entry	Export, joint venture, foreign direct investment	Export	Export, foreign direct investment
Internationalisation behaviour	Random, psychologically distant markets from start, many failures, high risk	Random, psychologically close markets initially, many failures, high risk	Calculated, minimal market failures, low risk
Firm growth	Fluctuating	Fluctuating	Stable growth (25% annually)

was an important goal for the entrepreneurs at the inception of the venture; however, this was not the case. None of the firms, except for Polaris Optic, had internationalisation as a primary goal at inception. While Preutz had a vision to become an internationally recognised player, the other two entrepreneurs, Löfstedt and Liljedahl, did not. Consequently, the decision to internationalise was not a strategic one taken at the time of the establishment of both firms. The findings of this study show that the sensitive childhood period is also to a great extent about the creation of an identity. Individual identity issues were instrumental in start-up motivations and visions, which were transferred to the culture of the firms they established. Thus, we can conclude that imprinting episodes from childhood influenced international development (see Table 5).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how an entrepreneur's imprinting history influences the creation and international development of their firm. Contrary to the dominant view of firm internationalisation, which suggests that entrepreneurs with international experience and networks are those who start international new ventures (Andersson and Wictor, 2003; Criaco et al., 2022; Freeman et al., 2006; Ryan et al., 2019), we show that entrepreneurs without prior international knowledge, experience or networks can also establish international businesses. The findings reveal that imprinting experiences from childhood onwards can significantly shape an entrepreneur's mindset, start-up motivation, and desire to internationalise. We identify three different types of

Table 6. Relationship between imprinting episodes, mindsets, start-up motivation and the firm's international trajectory.

Entrepreneur	Imprinting episodes	Mindset	Start-up motivation	International trajectories
Personal international entrepreneur	Having little experience with other countries Desiring to branch out from family and proving to Swedish opticians that his product was just as appealing	An interest in seeing the world	An interest in building a multinational firm	Rapid internationalisation
Social impact entrepreneur	Growing up with his blind mother	An interest in helping his mother	An interest in developing the best product to help blind people	Rapid internationalisation
Business entrepreneur	Living in poverty as a child	A desire to avoid poverty	An interest in creating a profitable firm	Incremental internationalisation

entrepreneurs – namely, the personal international entrepreneur, the social impact entrepreneur and the business entrepreneur – and show how these entrepreneurs created firms with different international trajectories (Table 6).

Many factors can contribute to an individual's entrepreneurial imprinting, but our evidence suggests two qualitatively different layers: fundamental imprinting episodes and adaptive imprinting episodes. Fundamental imprinting episodes occur early in life and lay down the foundations of an entrepreneurial mindset. Growing up in an environment in which risk-taking and innovation are encouraged can foster this orientation; likewise, exposure to business concepts and experiences, such as contributing to a family venture (Polaris Optic), learning from entrepreneurial family members (Index Braille), or directly supporting the family's livelihood (Liko), builds a durable preference for autonomy and opportunity seeking. Childhood adversity can have a similar formative effect: those who grow up in poverty or face other challenges often learn to be resourceful, resilient and determined, qualities that later prove essential to entrepreneurial success. Adaptive imprinting episodes, by contrast, arise later and can recalibrate the founder's original outlook without erasing it. Although the early, fundamental layer has the deepest influence on start-up motivation, we find that founder views – especially regarding internationalisation – can shift through subsequent, venture-specific experiences. Liko offers a clear example: the entrepreneur initially had no intention of expanding abroad, but when domestic demand plateaued, the realisation that Sweden was too small prompted a strategic pivot towards international markets. Overall, recognising both fundamental and adaptive imprinting underscores the importance of understanding not only how early experiences shape passion, mindsets and start-up motivations but also how later events can refine or redirect those mindsets. Figure 2 illustrates this distinction, showing that founders are simultaneously anchored by deep, early imprints and flexible enough to incorporate new lessons as their ventures evolve.

We chose to investigate three entrepreneurs from the same geographic area in northern Sweden. Despite having no international experience or established networks, all three successfully developed international firms. This finding suggests that the different internationalisation patterns

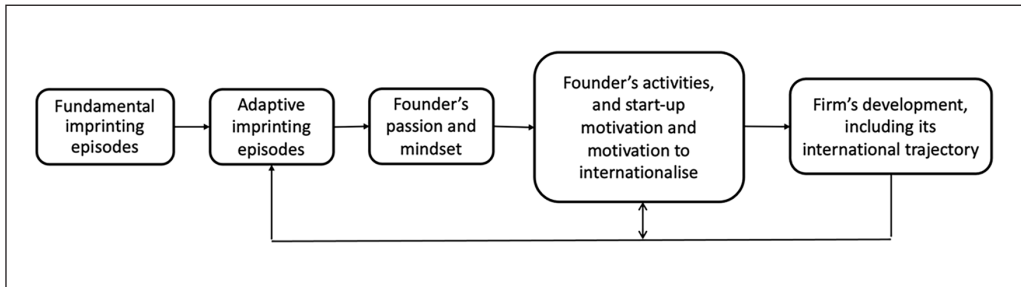


Figure 2. Influence of fundamental and adaptive imprinting episodes on the founder's passion, mindset and motivation and the international trajectory of the firm.

observed in their firms cannot be explained by their past international experience or networks. This distinction sets our research apart from previous studies using imprinting theory to explain firm internationalisation (De Cock et al., 2021). From our analysis, we identified three distinct types of entrepreneurs, which we argue can aid in better understanding the varying international development paths of international new ventures: the personal international entrepreneur, the social impact entrepreneur and the business entrepreneur.

Types of entrepreneurs

The personal international entrepreneur. For these entrepreneurs, internationalisation is not just a business strategy but a passion and a personal goal. Their motivation for early and rapid international expansion is driven less by profitability and more by a personal desire to explore and experience the world. A significant imprinting episode in their life is often the lack of international exposure, which fuels their eagerness to engage in global markets.

The social impact entrepreneur. The primary goal of such entrepreneurs is to develop products that improve lives rather than focusing on profitability, business growth or internationalisation. However, as their products often serve a niche market with limited demand if the market is small, such as Sweden, internationalisation becomes a necessary step to ensure the sustainability of the business.

The business entrepreneur. These are those who start a business with the primary objective of achieving long-term profitability. A key imprinting episode in their life is often an early experience of poverty which instills a strong motivation to ensure financial security for themselves and their family. They are not particularly interested in the content of the business itself but rather in its ability to generate stable profits. Given their risk-averse nature, their international expansion follows a cautious and incremental approach.

These three entrepreneurial types illustrate different motivations and paths to internationalisation, providing valuable insights into the diverse ways new ventures expand beyond domestic markets. Figure 3 illustrates how the primary motives of the different entrepreneurial types influence internationalisation patterns. In our study, we did not identify any cases of proactive internationalisation driven by business motives. We suggest that future research explore this type of entrepreneur, whom we refer to as the strategic international entrepreneur.

	<i>Business motives</i>	<i>Personal motives</i>
<i>Proactive internationalisation</i>	Strategic international entrepreneur Rapid internationalisation	Personal international entrepreneur Rapid internationalisation
<i>Reactive internationalisation</i>	Business entrepreneur Incremental internationalisation	Social impact entrepreneur Rapid internationalisation

Figure 3. How the motives of different entrepreneurial types influence internationalisation patterns.

Theoretical contributions

Our study challenges traditional ways to investigate internationalisation by focusing on individual entrepreneur’s life stories and drawing on imprinting theory. In so doing, we were able to capture how those with different imprinting legacies, passions, mindsets and start-up motivations developed different internationalisation trajectories. This study contributes to the entrepreneurship and IB fields by grounding its conceptualisation in imprinting theory.

Studies on internationalising firms using imprinting theory stress the importance of international imprinting episodes through past experience and connections with international networks (De Cock et al., 2021). However, our findings contradict research that highlights the importance of international experience and networks (Acedo and Jones, 2007; Andersson and Wictor, 2003; Criaco et al., 2022; Ryan et al., 2019). Instead, we demonstrate that entrepreneurs without international experience or networks can develop diverse passions and mindsets and cultivate motivations that lead to the creation of international firms. Their persistence in building their firms (Drnovsek et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017; Mueller et al., 2017) enables them to overcome the disadvantages associated with a lack of international experience and networks. Few studies on firm internationalisation have examined how passion, imprinted in entrepreneurs during their early formative years, may play a decisive role in their international development. As such, this study also contributes to the debate on whether international new ventures and born global internationalisation is accidental - or not (Hennart, 2014; Hennart et al., 2021). We find that proactive entrepreneurs can intentionally create international new ventures when they have a global mindset and proactively employ international marketing to gain international customers (Yang et al., 2023), but we also show that an entrepreneur whose primarily goal is not to internationalise per se, but to develop the best product possible, can own a rapidly internationalising firm. We also show how entrepreneurs with a start-up

motivation to create a profitable firm can end up with gradual regional internationalisation (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 2009).

Consequently, our study adds to the IB literature by providing a more nuanced view of how different mechanisms can lead to different international trajectories. Different models and theories of internationalisation can apply to entrepreneurs with different imprinting legacies, passions, mindsets and start-up motivations. It has been shown that founder decisions and the conditions at the outset of a venture have a significant impact on venture development (Milanov and Fernhaber, 2009); we deviate from organisational imprinting research by exploring the entrepreneur's history prior to founding. Previous research has primarily viewed organisations as recipients of the imprinting process (Carroll and Hannan, 1989; Johnson, 2007; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). In our study, we consider the entrepreneur's entire life story and how imprinting episodes form their related passion and mindset; this deviates from extant work. We also develop two concepts: fundamental imprinting episodes and adaptive imprinting episodes. These episodes play a fundamental role in shaping the entrepreneur's mindset, while certain aspects of the mindset can also change through later experiences. In one of the few studies focusing on sensitive periods in an entrepreneur's life before the firm founding, Mathias et al. (2015) show that the mindset is a consequence of sources of imprint from past experiences and that they influence the way entrepreneurs identify opportunities and create new ventures. We extend that research by including the importance of passion and an international dimension. We find that imprinting episodes in early life influence start-up motivation. We also show which international opportunities were identified and exploited that, in turn, influenced internationalisation trajectories. The international trajectories of new ventures are influenced by formative episodes in childhood, in high school or college and even in early work experiences that shape an entrepreneur's passion and mindset; these aspects are persistent over time and influence firm development.

This study also contributes to imprinting literature. In their conceptual study, Hoang and Gimeno (2010) argue that decision processes imprinted on a founder have implications for the firm's early development. In our study, we demonstrate that imprinting situations have long-term effects and are influenced by early experiences. Imprinting in early childhood and during school influences not only new venture creation but also the venture's long-term international development. We show that families, teachers and even prior employers exert an influence on how an entrepreneur's firm develops. In addition, we show that internationalisation is not always a goal per se, even if the firm internationalises. Internationalisation can be a strategic goal for an entrepreneur, but it can also result from other strategic objectives and actions or stem from personal passions. At Index Braille, Björn Löfstedt focused on developing the best products to assist blind individuals. However, the lack of demand for Braille printers in Sweden forced him to turn to markets outside Sweden to recover the investment in R&D. Our study also shows that a global mindset and the motivation to start an international firm can be developed through a personal passion for internationalisation, even without prior international experience or networks. Furthermore, such a mindset can play a crucial role in driving a firm's proactive international strategy. Staffan Preutz had a passion for internationalisation and the motivation to start a business with the aim of creating an international firm. When introducing a new, innovative product, possessing market knowledge alone is not the primary factor to successfully enter international markets; rather, it is the ability to be persistent and convince new customers about the unique qualities of the product. Coming from another country is not a disadvantage, as innovative ideas often originate from diverse sources. An entrepreneur with a strong drive, entering a dynamic market with a novel product, is likely to learn faster than someone adhering to traditional business practices, a notion described as a 'learning advantage of newness' (Autio et al., 2000; Hilmersson et al., 2023). On

the one hand, Preutz wanted to prove to his family and potential Swedish customers, who initially rejected the product, that he could establish a successful international firm. On the other hand, Gunnar Liljedahl, strongly influenced by his poor childhood and his start-up motivation, wanted to earn money to avoid future poverty; internationalisation was not his goal per se. In the beginning, the Swedish market was large enough for his ambitions, but later he slowly internationalised as the firm grew. The internationalisation pattern was risk-averse and resembles the Uppsala school (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 2009), with a slow incremental international development starting in psychically close markets.

Finally, this study contributes to strategic management literature and the discussion on micro-foundations and individual agency (e.g. the dynamic capability perspective; Teece, 2012, 2014). Our findings are in line with research that recognises individual actors and their actions as important for firm development (Gabrielsson et al., 2025; Hambrick, 2007; Kunisch et al., 2019; Niittymies and Pajunen, 2020; Teece, 2012, 2014).

Practical and policy implications

As this research shows, entrepreneurs should be aware of how their background, passion, motivation and mindset influence the development of their firms. These factors can serve as a driving force, guiding their organisation in a direction aligned with their visions and goals. That is, passion and motivation are important resources for both the entrepreneur and the firm, capable of compensating for a lack of knowledge and networks in international markets. For aspiring entrepreneurs, this suggests that international strategies can be a viable option to both pursue their passions and build growing businesses. Communicating their passion to the firm's stakeholders (e.g. employees, financiers, customers) is important to attract and keep those who share the same objectives. If the firm has a goal that reflects positively on its image, such as helping blind individuals, it should emphasise this in its communication with various stakeholders.

Entrepreneurial mindsets develop early on in life and influence business behaviour later in life. Entrepreneurs can develop capabilities and skill sets required for venture creation and internationalisation out of various situations and even necessity. Thus, education is a key area in which policymakers could intervene to influence the individual's mindset and improve the chances of creating international growth. For example, they could promote the inclusion of international activities in different stages of education programmes. An example is international activities such as an exchange programme between schools in different countries for students in primary and secondary levels of education. Similarly, at the college and university level, international elements could be included in business and entrepreneurship courses to develop international mindsets among students. For firms that want to develop employees for future international business situations, we recommend creating trainee programmes and other activities to prepare them for success in future international markets. As we show herein, a strong urge to start a business and internationalise can compensate for a lack of international experience and networks.

Limitations and future research

Our study has certain limitations that open avenues for future research. First, while our findings may be applicable to other national, industry and organisational settings, they are based on firms in Sweden, a small, open economy. Therefore, additional research is necessary to confirm whether our findings apply to entrepreneurs in countries with large domestic economies or those

that restrict foreign trade. Second, our discussion and insights rely on three cases. We therefore recommend that future studies extend the research scope to other samples of entrepreneurs and firms in different contexts. Different samples of entrepreneurs might identify other sources of imprint as particularly influential. We encourage future research to investigate whether these sources are dependent on different contexts (i.e. different regional, cultural, or industry contexts). Passion related to entrepreneurship is a growing field. However, passion in connection with international growth has attracted limited academic interest. We thus call for additional research in this area.

Conclusion


This study challenges the dominant view of firm internationalisation by showing that entrepreneurs without past international experience or networks can also launch international ventures. In particular, the study demonstrates that events from early childhood onwards influence and shape the mindset of business founders and their motivation to start their ventures. We identify these early, highly formative influences as fundamental imprinting episodes. Furthermore, the passion, mindset and motivation of these entrepreneurs affect the international development of their firms. Importantly, we also reveal a second layer – adaptive imprinting episodes – comprised of later, venture-specific events that can recalibrate the founder's outlook (e.g. a saturated home market prompting a shift towards foreign expansion). Together, fundamental and adaptive imprinting explain why founders are anchored by deep early experiences but are able to adjust their international strategies as new information emerges.

We identified three distinct types of entrepreneurs to better understand the varying internationalisation paths of new ventures. The personal international entrepreneur is involved in proactive rapid internationalisation, driven by a global mindset and strong passion and motivation to expand internationally at the outset. The social impact entrepreneur is involved in reactive rapid internationalisation as a consequence of developing a niche product that improves people's lives in a limited home market, making global expansion necessary for growth. The business entrepreneur is involved in a more gradual internationalisation process. This type of entrepreneur prioritises building a profitable and stable firm before pursuing international expansion. The differences among these three types are due to the interplay between fundamental imprinting (which shapes each founder's baseline orientation) and adaptive imprinting (which either reinforces or redirects that orientation as the venture unfolds). All three types of entrepreneurs and their firm's development and internationalisation patterns can be traced back to imprinting events from the entrepreneur's early life, which shaped their passion, mindset and motivation to pursue international business ventures. Recognising both imprinting layers broadens the understanding of how entrepreneurial intentions form, persist and evolve, and it highlights practical levers, such as international exposure programmes, that can purposefully introduce adaptive imprints to complement or refine the founder's fundamental base.

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