Internationalization of Niche Tourism SMEs: A Case Study of 'Join the Crew Sp. z o.o.'

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Abstract

Title: Internationalization of Niche Tourism SMEs: A Case Study of Join the Crew Sp. z o.o.

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Keywords: Internationalization; SMEs; Niche Tourism; Hybrid Internationalization Patterns; Emotion-Based Services

Standard internationalization frameworks often fail to capture the challenges faced by niche tourism SMEs that rely on emotion-based services. This case study of 'Join the Crew', a sailing trip provider for young adults, explores how such companies balance growth with preserving their community-based competitive advantage.

Using the Resource-Based View, Network Theory and the CAGE Distance Framework, the study analyses qualitative expert interviews and secondary data through an Antecedents–Patterns–Outcomes lens. JTC's journey reveals a striking 'hybrid internationalization' pattern: it delayed international expansion for 14 years (2007–2021), adopting Uppsala's cautious approach; then, from 2022 onwards, it rapidly scaled across European markets, exhibiting Born Global characteristics. This pragmatic hybrid strategy reflects real resource constraints and offers a viable third path for emotion-based providers.

The core paradox emerges clearly: JTC's greatest strengths (authentic community culture, personal relationships and language-rooted communication) become obstacles to scaling internationally. While networks and digital tools facilitate market entry, growth encounters significant limitations: cultural distance, retention difficulties, and restricted skipper capacity challenge authenticity. Lower international retention rates reveal the difficulty of sustaining emotional bonds across borders.

The study introduces the Community-Based Hybrid Internationalization Model to capture this dynamic, illustrating the quality-growth paradox empirically. For practitioners, the message is clear: prioritize network-driven market selection and cultural proximity. Operating within a deliberate 'safe expansion zone' enables selective growth without compromising the valuable aspects of these businesses. Ultimately, for SMEs driven by emotion, competing on quality and authentic relationships than speed and scale proves to be a strategic necessity.

Resumo

Título: Internacionalização de PMEs de turismo de nicho: um estudo de caso da Join the Crew Sp. z o.o.

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Palavras-chave: Internacionalização; PMEs; Turismo de nicho; Padrões híbridos de internacionalização; Serviços baseados em emoções

As estruturas padrão de internacionalização muitas vezes não captam os desafios das PMEs de turismo de nicho que dependem de serviços emocionais. Este estudo de caso da «Join the Crew», empresa que oferece viagens de veleiro para jovens adultos, explora como equilibram o crescimento com a preservação da vantagem competitiva comunitária.

Com base na Visão Baseada em Recursos, Teoria das Redes e Estrutura CAGE, o estudo analisa entrevistas qualitativas e dados secundários numa lente de Antecedentes-Padrões-Resultados. A trajetória da JTC revela um padrão de «internacionalização híbrida»: adiou a expansão por 14 anos (2007-2021); depois, a partir de 2022, expandiu-se rapidamente na Europa, exibindo traços Born Global. Esta estratégia pragmática reflete restrições reais e oferece um terceiro caminho viável para fornecedores emocionais.

O paradoxo é claro: os maiores pontos fortes da JTC (cultura comunitária autêntica, relações pessoais e comunicação enraizada na língua) tornam-se obstáculos à expansão internacional. Embora redes e ferramentas digitais facilitem a entrada, o crescimento enfrenta limitações: distância cultural, dificuldades de retenção e capacidade restrita dos skippers desafiam a autenticidade. Taxas internacionais mais baixas revelam a dificuldade de manter laços emocionais além-fronteiras.

O estudo introduz o Modelo de Internacionalização Híbrida Baseada na Comunidade para capturar essa dinâmica, ilustrando o paradoxo qualidade-crescimento. Para profissionais, a mensagem é clara: priorizar mercados impulsionados por redes e proximidade cultural. Operar numa “zona de expansão segura” permite crescimento seletivo sem comprometer aspetos valiosos. Para PMEs baseadas na emoção, competir em qualidade e autenticidade, em vez de velocidade e escala, é uma necessidade estratégica.

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Disclaimer on AI Usage

Generative AI tools were used in this thesis to ensure grammatical correctness and stylistic conciseness, as well as for supportive tasks in the methodology section. This usage occurred in transparency and consultation with my thesis supervisor.

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List of Abbreviations

APO: Antecedents-Patterns-Outcomes

BG: Born Global

JTC: Join the Crew Sp. z o.o.

SME: Small and medium-sized enterprise

USP: Unique Selling Proposition

DACH: Germany, Austria & Switzerland

1. Introduction

Problem Statement:

Internationalization remains a key strategic challenge for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). However, existing theoretical frameworks offer only limited guidance for companies that provide emotional services (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Especially for niche sailing tourism companies, whose advantage depends on human resources and emotional customer ties. Traditional internationalization theories were primarily developed and validated in the manufacturing and technology sectors. In these sectors, competitive advantages are based on tangible assets, reproducible processes, or scalable digital innovations. These frameworks assume that internationalization follows either incremental, experience-based patterns or rapid, technology-driven global positioning (Schweizer & Vahlne, 2022).

Sailing tourism presents fundamentally different challenges. Its products are experience-oriented and developed in collaboration with customers. Quality depends mostly on non-digitizable human factors such as the skipper's expertise, the authenticity of the leadership, and the culture of the community (Winckler, Zen, & Prevot, 2022). Internationalization requires new international customer acquisition and not geographical expansion, as the offering already exists.

Companies such as JTC operate in a specialized niche. They target young adults who are looking for authentic sailing experiences, community building, and active participation rather than passive consumption. To grow beyond the home market (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), international customers must be acquired (Shen, et al., 2021). However, expansion into culturally diverse markets brings with it fundamental tensions: the standardization necessary for scaling threatens the authenticity that constitutes the competitive advantage. Resource constraints limit simultaneous market presence, and legal and administrative differences between jurisdictions create barriers that do not exist in domestic markets (Turunen, 2006). These challenges are qualitatively different from those faced by technology start-ups or export companies.

Research Gap

There is limited understanding of the way in which SMEs in niche tourism function when their offerings are based on emotions, developed jointly, and culturally sensitive, and when the quality of their services is dependent on non-digitizable human resources and personal relationships (Winckler et al., 2022). Existing internationalization research has not sufficiently addressed the specific paradox faced by such companies. The factors that create competitive advantages in domestic markets, which are culturally anchored skippers, an authentic community culture, and personal service quality, simultaneously become obstacles that limit international expansion (Schweizer & Vahlne, 2022).

Research Questions:

How do internationalization patterns, company-specific resources, and industry-specific distances shape the ability of a niche tourism SME to attract and retain international customer groups?

Sub-Questions:

- To what extent can the internationalization journey of JTC be explained through incremental (Uppsala) versus born-global patterns, and in which areas do hybrid dynamics emerge?
- Which company-specific resources and capabilities enable or constrain the internationalization of JTC?
- How do internal and external networks influence the JTC's entry mechanisms and market development in international source markets?
- How do cultural, administrative, geographic and economic distances affect customer expectations and the need to adapt the product and service offering?

These specific questions remain largely unanswered in the literature on internationalization. This gap is particularly significant as niche tourism and emotion-based services represent a growing segment of European SMEs. These companies are under pressure to internationalize in order to expand their markets, but they lack strategic frameworks and practical guidelines that are tailored to their operational realities.

2. Research Note: Theoretical Background and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Definition of relevant Keywords

Small and medium-sized enterprises

SMEs are defined by the European Commission as companies with fewer than 250 employees and either an annual turnover of up to €50 million or a balance sheet total below €43 million. They make up about 99% of EU businesses and employ roughly two-thirds of the private-sector workforce. This makes them a key driver of innovation, regional development, and economic stability (European Commission, 2025).

Compared to large companies, SMEs usually work with fewer financial resources, smaller teams, and less international experience. This can limit their ability to respond to market changes (Bratio et al., 2021). However, their flat hierarchies and short decision-making paths often allow them to be adaptable and quick in seizing opportunities. Because they face ongoing resource constraints, strategic networks and innovative approaches are essential for long-term success (Telser, 2024).

Internationalization term

Internationalization helps to understand how organizations expand and operate beyond national borders. Knight defines it as integrating an "international, intercultural, or global dimension" into an organization's purpose, functions, or delivery. This means it is not just about entering new markets; it is also about including an international perspective in strategy (Knight, 2015).

For SMEs, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Entering foreign markets can increase the customer base and strengthen competitiveness. However, it requires flexibility and a good understanding of cultural and market dynamics. Therefore, internationalization is a continuous process. It builds market-specific knowledge, adapts products and services, and develops the skills needed to operate in various environments (Knight, 2015).

Sailing industry & sailing tourism

The sailing industry includes economic activities related to sailing, such as making, renting, and maintaining sailboats. It also covers sailing tourism and other maritime services. In terms of tourism, sailing holidays are recreational, educational, or adventure-focused, aiming at sailing experiences or teaching people how to sail. The industry can be split into two main categories: yacht sailing, which often includes overnight stays like bareboat and flotilla charters, and dinghy sailing, which is usually connected to learning or sports courses (Morgan, Langford, & Vassallo, 2022).

Profitability relies on specialized services, such as customized charter offers and training courses, as well as guided flotilla routes, technical support, and marina facilities. These serve both occasional sailors and experienced crews. Because of seasonality, providers often collaborate with international partners to adapt to changing demand, regional weather, and shifting customer needs (Gützel & Sevinc, 2020). Although sailing tourism is a niche, it drives economic growth in coastal areas. Its sustainability depends on flexible offerings and efficient international collaboration (Shen et al., 2021).

2.2. Theoretical models of internationalization

2.2.1 Resource-Based-View

The Resource-Based-View (RBV), a major strategic management theory, describes long-term business performance using internal resources. It emphasizes internal characteristics and assumes that companies with unique, hard-to-copy resources can acquire long-term competitive advantages (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991).

Company growth and profitability depend on efficient utilization of productive resources, according to Edith Penrose (1959). Wernerfelt (1984) developed the resource-based paradigm to analyze internal success variables. Jay Barney (1991) defined the conditions under which resources can provide an enduring competitive advantage.

The RBV relies on the VRIN framework, which states that successful resources must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. All conditions must be met for a resource to gain a competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). This model was expanded to add organization (O), creating the VIRO model. It shows that organizations must have strategically relevant resources and be organizationally capable of use them (Lockett et al., 2009).

In internationalization, the RBV suggests that organizations succeed if they have unique, hard-to-copy resources that give them a strategic edge (Peng, 2001). Small and medium-sized tourism enterprises might use several types of resources. It could be an emotional brand, a proven service strategy, or creative internal architecture (Turunen, 2006).

An empirical study by Winckler et al. (2022) shows that internal qualities like management quality and innovative capacity help small tourism enterprises overcome structural limitations. This applies especially to companies that rely on their own identity and value generation. Many service sector advantages are intangible. Turunen (2006) states that organization-specific knowledge, company reputation, and service quality drive international tourist success.

2.2.2 Network Theory

Networking theory states that organizations are constantly part of a complex network of relationships in the market. Johanson and Mattsson proposed this in 1988. Markets were seen by them as networks, rather than as nameless spaces where supply and demand were important (Johanson & Mattsson, 1988). Companies in these networks are linked by established ties with consumers, suppliers, partners, and competitors. These contacts are vital to a company's international success. The assumption that a company could do everything alone was outmoded (Hadley & Wilson, 2003).

Later, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) included 'liability of outsidership'. Any 'outsider' without appropriate contacts in a new market faces mistrust, uncertainty, and inadequate information access. They encounter closed doors. Only 'insiders' in the worldwide network can create trust, understand the local market, and succeed faster (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

Key roles and connections:

- Bridging relationships (Granovetter, 1985): These connections are highly valuable. They expand one's network into other markets or fields. They promote innovation and growth by providing current information.
- Networks expedite start-up (Sharma & Blomstermo, 2003): Companies that think globally from the start profit greatly from a varied network. Good intercultural interactions can speed up and improve market entry.

Tourism relies heavily on networks. Companies succeed based on attractive items like travel and accommodation, as well as how quickly and reliably local partners can be incorporated and how flexible market needs can be met. As crucial as organizing specialist staff or access to new destinations is direct interaction with localized service providers like hotels and transport companies. A strong local network is essential for international scalability and high-quality services. In complicated marketplaces, cooperation and synergies between company's boost innovation and offering attractiveness. Thus, sustained tourist development and globalization depend on reliable partnerships (Turunen, 2006).

Travel companies are using online forums and social networks to increase their reach and establish trust. Satisfied passengers regularly provide reviews. Authentic trip reviews and social media recommendations entice new clients and connect the company to genuine emotions. This fosters company community (Wang & Yan, 2022).

Early internationalization relies on personal contacts and trust, especially in foreign markets (Sharma & Blomstermo, 2003; Han, et al., 2024). A referral or relationship with a local partner may be more useful than market potential. Many internationalization milestones come from spontaneous networking possibilities like a trade fair, a referral, or an existing partnership (Coviello & Munro, 1997).

2.2.3 CAGE - Framework

Pankaj Ghemawat's early 2000s CAGE framework provides a systematic way to understanding country characteristics that may affect international commercial activity. The concept analyzes the “distance” between a company's home market and a possible target market across four dimensions: cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic; it does not prescribe a process. These variables include language, culture, political and legal systems, distance, infrastructure, income, and consumer purchasing power (Ghemawat, 2007).

The CAGE framework was not originally created as an internationalization model, but it is now widely used in academia and practice to assess market potential and guide foreign market entry decisions (Hattangadi, 2023). CAGE analysis helps tourism company, identify cross-border differences like language adaptability in service delivery, administrative barriers to operating licenses, and consumer income disparities that affect travel demand. Understand these “distances” to succeed in international tourism, which typically requires culturally sensitive and service-oriented relationships (Li, et al., 2025).

2.2.4 Uppsala-Model

The Uppsala internationalization model is one of the most influential approaches to explaining the gradual internationalization of companies. The model is based on the empirical observation that Swedish companies did not typically manage their international expansion through a fixed strategy, but rather progressed successfully through incremental learning and increasing market experience (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009; Hult, et al., 2020).

Internationalization builds experience and trust, according to this viewpoint. Experience reduces uncertainty, allowing companies to venture abroad. The 1977 model identified market knowledge, commitment, current actions, and decision commitment (Cisneros-Reyes, 2021). Foreign business experience expands knowledge, guiding future decisions and commitments. Psychological distance, encompassing cultural, linguistic and institutional variations between the home and target markets, has the potential to hinder internationalization, according to the concept. Therefore, organizations tend to start in similar markets before expanding to more distant ones (Cisneros-Reyes, 2021).

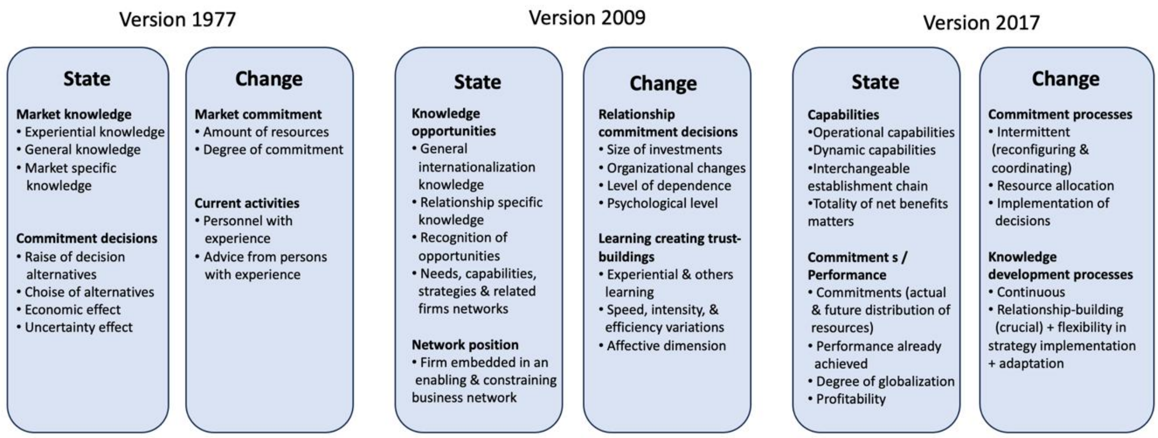

Figure 1: Key Stages and Extensions in the Uppsala Internationalization Model (1977–2017)

Source: Own illustration based on Cisneros-Reyes (2021)

The Uppsala model has been revised multiple times due to worldwide changes. Johanson and Vahlne stressed the relevance of corporate networks in the 2009 iteration, saying that corporations internationalize within a network of partners, customers, and institutions. Networks provide access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities, complementing internal learning 2009 (Johanson & Vahlne). In the preceding chapter, 'Network Theory', overcoming the 'liability of outsidership' the disadvantages enterprises face until they become 'insiders' in relevant networks is key.

Research increasingly views the Uppsala model as a flexible, dynamic framework that can be applied to diverse settings. Schweizer & Vahlne (2022) demonstrate that international expansion nowadays is typically opportunistic and non-linear.

2.2.5 Born Global

BG companies are those that start in international marketplaces and pursue a global perspective (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). These companies generally operate internationally before developing their domestic market and receive a large amount of their revenue from international operations (Knight & Cavusgil, 2005). This separates them from traditional companies that internationalize gradually using the Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). BG internationalize through entrepreneurial vision, technology expertise, and international networks, not incremental experience (Tanev, 2012) (Knight & Cavusgil, 2005). They want to use global competitive advantages early and realize development potential in foreign markets (Tanev, 2012).

BG have these characteristics (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994):

1. Early worldwide market launch (often within 2-3 years of creation).

2. A high percentage of foreign business in overall turnover (usually > 25%).

3. Use technical, digital, or knowledge opportunities for competitive advantage.

4. Internationally experienced founders or management teams lead.

5. Use global communication channels and network-based activities.

Internationalization phases of these companies often overlap and are accompanied by learning and adaptation. BG adapt swiftly to market shifts, exploiting opportunities and leveraging international cooperation partners, distributors and client networks rather than relying on years of foreign market expertise. These contacts help them enter new markets and create trust faster (Astuti, 2024).

According to Andersson (2025), recent study has greatly enlarged the conceptual foundation of the born global phenomena. Early internationalization is driven by knowledge intensity, innovation, and digital infrastructure, according to the study. Digital technologies enable emerging enterprises to function globally without a physical presence, accelerating this process. Digital distribution channels, social media, and platform economics help BG gain international awareness, scalability, and consumer loyalty. This study views BG enterprises as a “new normal” for entrepreneurs in worldwide markets. They represent a generation of enterprises that competes on openness, speed, and networking (Andersson, 2025).

2.3 Conceptual Framework

This case study examines SME internationalization using (Steinhäuser et al., 2021) three-phase analytical framework and Antecedents–Patterns–Outcomes (APO) logic. This framework allows a methodical evaluation of the complex relationship between internal company conditions, selected internationalization strategies, and the results, whether SMEs grow as BG or gradually according to Uppsala logic.

Including triggers and preconditions, antecedents have three analytical levels. Individual decision-makers' international experience, education, and networks influence "international orientation" and intrinsic openness to global markets. This analysis compares enterprises by examining company-level resources and skills like specialized knowledge, IT capacity, organizational structures, and ownership structures. The RBV (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) holds that these resources provide long-term competitive advantage. At the environmental level, competition, market saturation, institutional frameworks, networks, and information are crucial. The three levels of antecedents affect foreign market entry options.

SMEs' internationalization modes deviate from the classic Uppsala sequential model, with discontinuous, non-linear, or hybrid trajectories (Schweizer & Vahlne, 2022). Research distinguishes slow or incremental internationalizers, born globals, international new ventures (INVs), and discontinuous market entrants and exits. Individuals, company, and the environment influence patterns through network relationships, opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial orientation (including innovativeness and risk-taking), process innovations, flexible structures, and the simultaneous use of multiple market entry modes, and swift adaptation to market feedback and accessible network opportunities.

Financial, growth, export intensity, and geographic reach are used to evaluate results. Research shows that market orientation, knowledge development and commitment (investments in market knowledge), product innovativeness, and internationalization geography all affect success (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). CEO attributes including age, education, and international experience greatly moderate internationalization tendencies and performance.

The APO framework integrates studies on entrance modes, export impulses, networks and more to understand SME internationalization. It suggests managers use network building, capability development, internal governance, and market orientation. The current case study is systematically examined using this rationale.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design: Qualitative case study

The methodology follows Mayring's (2014) qualitative content analysis, a systematic, transparent coding-based method for interpreting complex textual data. By focusing on a real-life case, this approach allows for the examination of business phenomena within their authentic context, such as strategic internationalization decisions (Kohlbacher, 2006).

The case study method is particularly suitable for research questions that require a deep, contextualized understanding and is used to answer questions about the "how" and "why" of corporate behavior. In niche tourism research, qualitative case studies that combine expert interviews and secondary sources synthesize different data types and provide a comprehensive overview, while remaining grounded in real-world experience rather than abstract theory (Çakar & Aykol, 2021).

From Mayring's perspective, qualitative analysis is suited to uncovering decision-making processes, motivations and latent patterns of meaning instead of merely collecting isolated facts. Case studies capture complexity by highlighting local characteristics, industry-specific routines and unexpected events that are often overlooked by generic models (Mayring, 2014). Sailing tourism combines specific customer expectations, seasonal dynamics and intercultural encounters that are not fully reflected in standard models (Shen et al., 2021).

At the same time, the qualitative case study remains flexible: it allows unexpected findings to emerge without forcing insights into a rigid theoretical scheme, while the coding procedure keeps the analysis systematic and traceable. The findings remain closely linked to the material through structured categories and rules (Çakar & Aykol, 2021; Mayring, 2014). Finally, the case study aims for analytical rather than statistical generalization, refining theoretical concepts and offering practice-oriented implications for comparable niche SMEs in the tourism sector.

3.2 Case selection: Join the Crew Sp. z o.o.'

JTC meets all the relevant criteria for being used as a case study in this paper. Firstly, according to the EU definition, it is clearly an SME, since the company had an annual turnover of approximately 13.25 million EUR in 2024 and employed one person (BizRaport, 2025). All the other employees, or Skippers, are freelancers. JTC also operates independently and is thus a typical example of an owner-managed, agile SME that offers the classic resource advantages and decision-making processes of smaller companies (Join the Crew Sp. zo.o., Financial report for the fiscal year 2023, 2024).

JTC is also particularly well suited in terms of its relevance to internationalization issues and its niche aspect. The company specifically targets a specialized area of tourism, namely organized sailing vacations for young adults, which differs greatly from traditional yacht charter offerings. This niche segment combines a growing but clearly defined target group and requires innovative business models. Since 2022, JTC has also been successful in generating value-adding customer bookings beyond the DACH-market and establishing itself in several European target regions. This sets the company apart from its purely national competitors.

JTC is a suitable case study example because it clearly demonstrates the challenges typically faced by small tourism providers, such as seasonal fluctuations, the importance of networks and industry-specific barriers to entry. These conditions and success factors are at the heart of current tourism and SME research and reflect the central statements of the theoretical approaches selected for this work.

3.3 Data collection: Expert interviews

As part of this study, semi-structured expert interviews based on an interview guide were chosen as the main method of data collection. The aim was to gain in-depth, context-sensitive insights from professionals who do not only know the market in theory, but actively shape it in their daily work (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). Direct conversations with these experts were intended to reveal connections that are often only hinted at or not mentioned at all in written sources.

The decision to use semi-structured interviews was based on two key requirements of this case study. First, a common thematic basis was needed in order to compare the results systematically at a later stage. Second, it was necessary to remain flexible enough to account for the different backgrounds and perspectives of the interview partners. The interview guide was used as a structured pool of topics that ensured all relevant aspects were covered without unnecessarily interrupting the flow of the conversation (Ruslin, et al., 2022).

The main thematic blocks were derived from the research questions and were addressed in all interviews. These included, among others, assessments of market developments, key success factors in international sailing tourism, and strategic as well as operational challenges. Depending on the specific expertise of each interviewee, some topics were explored in more depth, while others were kept shorter. This adaptive way of conducting the interviews was crucial to capture both the breadth and depth of the assessments and to make the best possible use of the available expert knowledge (Gläser & Laudel, 2010).

The interview partners were chosen for their market and company roles. Strategic responsibility, operational management, and specialist knowledge (price, sales, fleet management) were considered. This variety of profiles was designed to provide a complete picture of the sailing tourism business and avoid blind spots (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). The following table summarizes the interviewed experts.

Interview ID	Internal/ External	Company	Role	Date	Duration
IP1	External	sailwithus	Founder & CEO	19.11.25	42:53
IP2	External	sailwithus	Marketing & Business Development	11.11.25	44:31
IP3	External & Internal	Sail2Lead - Join the Crew	Founder - Skipper & brand embassador	15.11.25	58:50
IP4	Internal	Join the Crew	Skipper	15.11.25	01:02:17
IP5	Internal	Join the Crew	Skipper & brand embassador	21.11.25	37:09
IP6	External	sailwithus	Fleet Manager	06.11.25	56:13
IP7	External	sailwithus	Sales & Partner Management	07.11.25	44:15
IP8	External	sailwithus	Customer Management	11.11.25	32:53

Table 1: Expert Respondents and Professional Roles

The interviews were conducted in German via video conferencing tools. This format made it possible to include experts regardless of their location, while still creating a setting in which non-verbal cues could at least partly be observed. The planned duration of around 40 minutes per interview was treated as a guideline rather than a fixed limit and was adjusted depending on how the conversation developed. This helped to avoid cutting off important topics too early or stretching the conversation unnecessarily (Ruslin, et al., 2022).

For transcription, a speech-to-text tool was used to support the process. The automatically generated transcripts were then checked, corrected and standardized manually. This ensured that the final data set accurately reflects the interviewees' original statements.

3.4 Secondary Data Collection

To contextualize the primary data, several secondary data sources were systematically examined, including the official JTC website, Financial annual report, press articles from industry media (e.g., Yacht Magazine), social media channels (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn), and customer reviews on platforms such as Trustpilot and Google. These sources provided insights into JTCs communications, branding, community dynamics, and international orientation, thereby supporting a comprehensive understanding of the interview data obtained subsequently.

3.5 Data analysis: Coding approach Mayring

The qualitative interview study followed a structured, multi-stage procedure to ensure analytical transparency and theoretical grounding. Building on the research question and the underlying conceptual framework, an initial, theory-driven coding scheme with deductive categories was developed in advance. These deductive codes were derived from internationalization theories (See chapter 'Research notes') and provided the conceptual framework for the subsequent analysis (Mayring, 2014).

During the first coding rounds, it became clear that some empirically important aspects of the interviews were not fully captured by these prior categories. The coding frame was therefore extended by inductive codes that emerged directly from the material. These inductive categories capture recurring, practically relevant patterns that go beyond the assumptions of the initial theoretical framework (Kuckartz, 2018). The final coding system comprised a clearly defined set of deductive and inductive categories (see Appendix A1).

All interviews were fully transcribed and coded in Excel. First, a computer-assisted evaluation was carried out using artificial intelligence based on clearly defined coding rules (see Appendix A1), after which all classifications were checked manually to ensure their validity. To preserve the complexity of the statements, multiple coding of individual text passages was expressly permitted (Gläser & Laudel, 2010; Mayring, 2014). In addition, each passage was manually checked and evaluated for its evidential value. The following analysis is based primarily on verified, strongly substantiated (e.g., supported by concrete examples) statements that were repeated by several interview partners in order to ensure a robust empirical basis for the results (Mayring, 2014).

For systematic evaluation, all coded segments were transferred to a structured Excel dataset, sorted by code, interview partner and evidential strength. This organization enabled frequency analyses and cross-case comparisons, making visible which topics were consistently emphasized across interviews and which appeared more selectively. The methodological approach is thus characterized by a combination of theoretical precision and empirical openness: the coding frame was initially developed deductively and then refined inductively, with all interviews systematically coded and each statement evaluated according to its evidential strength. In this way, the final analysis rests on robust, transparently documented patterns that are both theoretically informed and firmly grounded in the data (Mayring, 2014; Kuckartz, 2018)

3.6 Limitations of the Methodology

The insights presented in this study are based on a small, selected group of eight experts and are not intended to be statistically representative. As is typical in qualitative research, the aim was not to make claims that could be generalized to the entire sector, but rather to gain a detailed understanding of specific dynamics within sailing tourism (Yin, 2018). The logic of the case study relies on analytical rather than statistical generalization. This means that the findings can be transferred to similar contexts through their connection to established theory and the detailed description of the research setting (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021).

The interviewees came from the sailing tourism sector. Among them were representatives of direct competitor ‘sail with us’, current JTC skippers, and an industry expert who had founded a sailing company. Since JTC management declined to participate in interviews, comparable companies with similar business models and product structures were used as proxies. Therefore, the findings on JTC's strategic development are based in part on these external industry experts and not on internal sources. Furthermore, since JTC does not publish comprehensive annual reports but only discloses limited financial data, company information had to be reconstructed from press releases and public interviews. It is important to note that these sources are selective and naturally reflect the company's preferred self-portrayal. (Reddy & Agrawal, 2012). Some information is based on indirect accounts from industry experts who interact with, but do not represent, JTC; for example, skippers affiliated with the company are often unable to verify internal strategic decisions due to limited internal communication (Yin, 2018). To mitigate these risks, triangulation was employed by comparing multiple expert perspectives and integrating secondary data. This enabled coherent and plausible interpretations of the company’s internationalization approach to be developed (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021).

Despite these limitations, the combination of expert knowledge, secondary sources and theoretical grounding allows for a robust analysis and contributes to a deeper understanding of internationalization dynamics in the sailing tourism sector (Yin, 2018).

4. Case study - Empirical analysis

4.1 Introduction to Join the Crew Sp. z o.o.

4.1.1 Company History

Join the Crew Sp. z o.o. *(= Spółka z ograniczoną odpowiedzialnością*), is a limited liability company registered in Wrocław, Poland. Founded in 2007 by Dominik Grotowski with its aim of making sailing accessible to young adults who are not part of traditional organizations such as sailing clubs. The starting point was the observation that this target group had limited opportunities to participate in organized sailing trips. Since its founding, JTC has developed into one of the leading providers of organized sailing trips in German-speaking-countries (DACH-market) and targets 20- to 39-year-olds (Delfs, 2023).

The original product portfolio included sailing trips in the Mediterranean, particularly in Croatia and Greece. These regions are considered attractive sailing areas due to their favorable wind and weather conditions and well-developed maritime infrastructure. Additional destinations in the Mediterranean were subsequently added, including overseas areas such as the Caribbean, Thailand, and the Seychelles. However, the customer base remained German speaking (IP5).

In 2017, Grotowski also founded "Hüttenleben" *(=Lodge Life*), a product that initially focused on organized ski group trips and was later gradually expanded to include other adventure and activity vacation formats. The aim was to appeal more strongly to active and adventure-oriented travelers (Join the Crew (a), 2025).

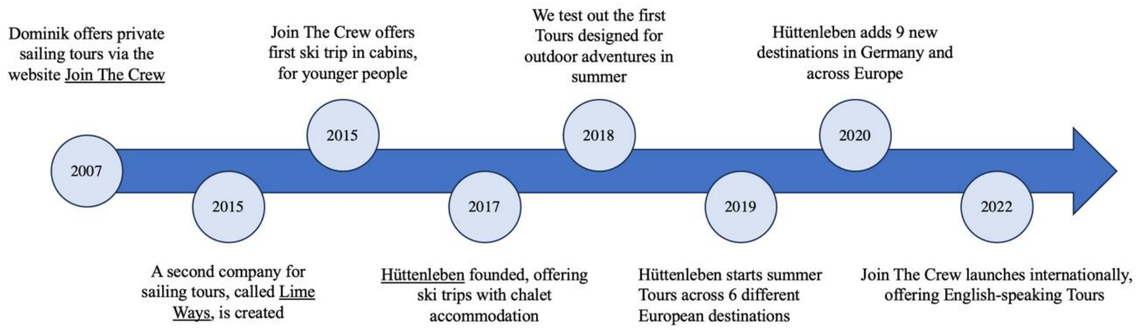

Figure 2: The Historical Development of Join the Crew z o.o.

Source: Own illustration, based on Join the Crew (a) (2025)

The development of the brand can be traced in a chronological company overview (figure 2). Although not immediately apparent, it is important to understand that Hüttenleben has not been operating as an independent brand since March 2024, but has been fully integrated into JTC. As a result, JTC no longer positions itself exclusively as a sailing tour operator, but as a provider in the broader segment of adventure tourism in the market (jointhecrew_de, 2024, IP5). In addition, the founder established a sister company, Wild Ventures, in 2024 as part of a strategic corporate restructuring and risk segregation. Wild Ventures operates as the active tour operator and contractual partner, while the legacy entity remains limited to non-operational assets (Okredo, 2025).

Since 2022, the company has also pursued English-speaking sailing trips as an internationalization strategy in the European market, launching its own trips in English on a new website. While the international offering focuses primarily on sailing tourism, the German-language portfolio is significantly broader due to the integration of the offerings previously managed under Hüttenleben (e.g., trekking, skiing, surfing, canoeing, and expedition trips) (Join the Crew (a), 2025).

Against this background, this case study refers exclusively to JTC's sailing tourism segment and does not consider other forms of vacation offered by the company.

4.1.2 Product and Service

JTC currently offers internationally oriented, English-speaking sailing trips to nine destinations worldwide. The Mediterranean routes usually follow a Saturday-to-Saturday schedule. Participants spend the week aboard a sailing yacht or catamaran and typically book a berth in a gender-segregated shared cabin (Join the Crew (b), 2025). A detailed product and service overview can be found in Appendix A2.

Unlike traditional forms of vacation such as hotel stays, where the experience is often characterized by static amenities, a sailing trip is a highly emotional and intense experience. The confines of the boat, traveling with the wind, and the direct encounter with the elements create a unique social dynamic that intensifies the travel experience. Depending on the destination chosen, JTC offers specific emotional focuses: from exuberant parties and adventures to deep relaxation, nature experiences, and cultural discoveries. Potential customers receive detailed route descriptions in advance with the daily stages and program highlights in order to meet these expectations (Join the Crew (c), 2025).

A key distinguishing feature is the concept of flotilla sailing: several yachts sail together, anchoring in the same bays in the evening or mooring in the same ports. This strengthens the community spirit and allows interested parties to see in advance how many yachts and fellow sailors they are likely to be traveling with (Join the Crew (a), 2025).

Pricing

Similar to typical seasonal patterns in tourism, the prices for sailing trips vary depending on the destination and travel time. Prices range from €890 to €2,190 (Join the Crew (a), 2025).

4.1.3 Target Group

JTC clearly defines its target group as young adults aged 20 to 39. Its communications emphasize that the offering is aimed at open-minded, adventure-oriented, and socially interested individuals who value shared travel experiences. The “Join the Crew Community” is seen as a central component of the brand's image (Join the Crew (d), 2025). According to the company, this community has over 50,000 members *(1 million in the German-speaking-market)* who remain connected with each other even after the actual trips are over. This is supported by regular end-of-season events, local meetings, and the use of digital platforms, and contributes to strengthening customer loyalty and forming a stable network of regular customers and referrals (Join the Crew (e), 2025).

4.2 Analysis of Antecedents: Resources, Networks, Distances

The antecedents of internationalization encompass those fundamental resources, relationships, and distances that exist prior to strategic market entries and either enable or constrain a company's international activities. This section analyzes JTC's internationalization prerequisites through the theoretical frameworks: the RBV, Network Theory, and the CAGE Distances. The analysis draws on systematic qualitative content analysis of expert interviews and secondary data.

4.2.1 Resources & Capabilities

Skippers as the Central Strategic Resource

The skippers themselves are the most frequently mentioned resource across all interviews. IP1 highlights their importance: “A large part of our greatest assets are our skippers. That's just the way it is” and “The skippers are our backbone”. These statements make clear that skippers are not merely operationally essential but form the core of the business model. Their ability to create a safe yet community-building sailing week is difficult to imitate and meets Barney's (1991) VRIN criteria.

IP5 highlights: “One of the main tasks as a skipper is, of course, to ensure the safety of the crew,” while IP4 emphasizes that “the main point is, of course, the navigation of the ship and also the leadership of the crew.” The combination of nautical skills, pedagogical talent, and emotional intelligence makes skippers a unique resource that cannot be replaced by technology or standardized processes.

Particularly relevant for internationalization is the skippers' language proficiency. Multilingual skippers already within the company offer an additional competitive edge, as they understand JTC's established concept and thus eliminate the immediate need to recruit new skippers (IP4).

The "Lots of love to everyone" Concept as Cultural and Brand Resource

Another key intangible resource is the “Lots of love to everyone” concept, which serves as JTC's brand core. IP1 describes: “I see a USP in customer service, in the skippers, and also in marketing.” This concept is more than just a marketing slogan; it represents the company's lived culture, as demonstrated by how skippers interact with guests, resolve conflicts and build the community. IP5 confirms: “This concept of love, I mean, I would say that I carry that within myself too.” The internalization of this philosophy by skippers creates an authentic, hard-to-copy brand identity that holds significant value for international markets, as it fosters emotional connection across language and cultural boundaries.

Digital Infrastructure and Marketing

JTC’s strategy strongly focuses on paid social media advertising. As one interview partner (IP4) mentioned, they have “been doing a lot of advertising on social media,” especially in recent years. Their primary customer acquisition channel is Instagram Ads, which specifically target young adults aged 20 to 39 using Meta’s advertising tools. In addition, after booking, customers gain direct access to an exclusive digital portal where they can interact with fellow sailors and skippers. This platform fosters a sense of community and loyalty well before the trip begins. This digital infrastructure is crucial as it enables JTC to scale its operations internationally without needing to increase staff proportionally, supporting sustainable growth.

Customer Service and Advisory Competence

Another competitive advantage is the intensive customer care, which starts even before the trip begins. As described above, customers can connect directly with fellow sailors and skippers in the digital portal after booking, clarify expectations early and reduce uncertainties. IP5 notes: “You have to guide the customers a bit, maybe go through the offer from the website together with them once again. That’s very helpful”. This advisory support is particularly valuable for first-time sailors without prior experience and for international guests who are unfamiliar with the specific “co-sailing trip” product.

International Team Experience and Industry Expertise

Most JTC employees have international experience and a professional background in tourism. The company was founded by Grotowski, who is originally from Poland. Even when the company served exclusively German-speaking customers in 2007, internal communication frequently took place in English. Although most employees and skippers are native German speakers, this international team composition helps the company deal effectively with issues related to internationalization and language (IP4).

Moreover, JTC was among the first sailing tour operators in the DACH-market to offer co-sailing trips for young adults without prior sailing experience. This pioneering role can be viewed as a strategic resource that generates competitive advantages, particularly through early brand recognition and well-established internal processes.

4.2.2 Network Theory

External networks play a central role in the internationalization of niche tourism SMEs such as JTC, as they provide access to new markets, reduce risk and enable economies of scale. Strategic partnerships can lower upfront investments and thus make stepwise international market entry more feasible for resource-constrained companys.

Strategic partnership models and institutional networks

A strategically important network for JTC consists of established charter companies. One central partner is Dream Yacht Charter, one of the world's largest yacht charter providers; over several years a robust relationship has developed that supports JTC in sourcing yachts across different sailing areas, improves purchasing conditions and thereby creates a relative competitive advantage in both procurement and commissions (IP4). Dream Yacht Charter is only one example among several fleet partners; overall, a well-maintained network of charter companies represents a key institutional resource for scaling into new regions.

The interview partners clearly highlight the importance of such networks: "In summary, networks are really important; without a network, a lone fighter will never become truly big" (IP1). IP7 adds that personal relationships can be decisive for doing business in this industry: "If people already know each other within the industry, I think a lot of things run primarily through personal relationships" (IP7). Against this backdrop, traditional industry events and international trade fairs such as ITB Berlin[1] retain an important function even in the digital age, as they help to build and maintain contacts and to create trust for cooperation in new markets.

Collaborations to increase visibility

In addition to institutional partners, JTC uses external networks in a targeted way to build reach and brand awareness. A central instrument is the JTC Creator Club, within which selected content creators are invited to participate in specific trips and to share their experiences on social media. For 2024/2025, for example, a sailing event in Dalmatia with several selected creators has been announced (Join-the-Crew, 2025).

This form of collaboration follows an influencer marketing logic: the invited participants independently produce content (reels, stories, vlogs) and share it with their communities, while JTC emphasizes that there are no rigid content guidelines and that authentic impressions are paramount. As a result, the company gains organic reach in relevant target groups (young, travel-affine adults) without relying on heavily scripted advertising campaigns, so that external networks become directly integrated into brand communication and act as a lever for international visibility (Join-the-Crew, 2025).

Skipper networks

Another central element of the network infrastructure concerns relationships with skippers and experienced sailors. As outlined in the resources section, qualified skippers are among the most important intangible assets of a sailing tour operator, and JTC therefore places great emphasis on maintaining and expanding this network.

A concrete instrument here is the regular organization of community and skipper meet-ups. IP3 describes monthly skipper (and customer) meetups in various cities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, to which active and potential skippers are invited; these events serve not only to retain existing skippers, but also to stimulate word-of-mouth within the customer base. IP3 therefore pointedly refers to this format as “the best customer loyalty programme” (IP3), as these activities both stabilize the operational backbone (the skipper pool) and function as an informal channel for customer acquisition and retention.

[1] ITB Berlin (= Internationale Tourismus-Börse Berlin) The World’s Leading Travel Trade Show

4.2.3 Cage Framework

Culture distance: Cultural differences become evident in expectations and behaviors related to trips. As IP2 emphasizes, markets such as the UK and the US tend to have "completely different expectations of holidays" compared with German customers. Markets that are culturally closer to Germany are generally easier to serve, while greater cultural distance increases the likelihood of misunderstandings and conflicts (IP2).

The perception of the co-sailing concept is significantly influenced by cultural backgrounds. While guests from the core DACH-market generally expect to actively participate in sailing and daily tasks, this shared responsibility can clash with more traditional or conservative expectations in other cultures. For example, the need to perform physical sailing maneuvers or shared household chores such as cooking and cleaning often contradicts established gender roles and can therefore lead to tensions with the product. Clear communication about tasks on board is therefore essential to manage these expectations (IP5).

In addition, cultural preferences influence the expected role of the skipper and the type of vacation chosen. While in some markets the skipper is primarily the driver of the means of transport, the model of the company studied is based on a skipper who provides emotional support and is part of the group and the trip. Customers looking for purely party-oriented or service-intensive experiences ultimately tend to gravitate toward competitors. This illustrates how strongly cultural values determine market choice (IP6).

Administrative and legal distance: From a legal and administrative perspective, JTC is firmly integrated in the German and EU package travel regime (§§ 651a ff. BGB), including mandatory insolvency protection and contractual limitations of liability, as reflected in its published terms and conditions for package tours (Join the Crew (f), 2025). At the same time, the company increasingly serves customers from Western common-law jurisdictions such as the UK and the US. In the case of the United States in particular, interview partners emphasize significantly higher perceived litigation risks. IP5 puts this pointedly: "I personally do not like having Americans on board, also because legally it is more difficult again, as Americans can sue you for anything forever". This subjective perception is consistent with comparative legal literature, which frequently characterizes the US as a comparatively "litigious" environment and highlights the availability of broad access to courts and punitive damages that go beyond mere compensation (Lovells, 2025). Taken together, this constellation increases the legal and administrative distance for an expansion into these markets, since JTC's current risk management and contractual architecture is primarily designed for the German/EU context (IP5).

Geographic distance: The geographical distance between sailing destinations affects both operational processes and the underlying cost structure. However, since these factors arise independently of internationalization, they are of limited relevance for the core argument of this case study. IP6 highlights pronounced country-specific cost differences: "There are considerable differences depending on the country. For example, Greece is significantly cheaper in terms of ancillary costs such as eating out or provisioning," whereas "Italy is traditionally more expensive but offers high quality. Croatia has increased its prices considerably in recent years and is in some cases even more expensive than Italy" (IP6). In addition to these cost variations, time-zone differences and different working rhythms across destinations also affect day-to-day operations.

Economic distance: The economic disparity is particularly evident in the significant variations in purchasing power and willingness to pay across Europe. Despite sharing a common currency, per capita income and price-adjusted net salaries vary greatly from region to region. Germany, with a per capita purchasing power of around €29,500, far exceeds the EU average of approximately €20,000, while countries such as Italy, France, Spain and many Eastern European states fall below this figure (GfK, 2025). These inequalities directly influence customers' travel and consumption behavior, posing challenges for companies such as JTC. Consequently, differentiated pricing models and tailored offers are necessary to adequately address the varying willingness to pay across markets (IP4).

According to IP6, the economic distance manifests itself in different consumer preferences: the higher purchasing power of the German market promotes demand for experience-oriented learning and community, while other markets prioritize material luxury or relaxation in relation to cost. The limited geographical size of the German-speaking market forces companies to expand internationally. Despite its economic power and large population, the overall target group remains limited, as IP1 puts it, because it is a niche industry: "Germany is ultimately a small country." At the same time, effective risk management and adapted pricing strategies are necessary to avoid resource overload and misinvestment in this niche.

4.3 Processes and Mechanisms of Internationalization

4.3.1 Organizational Learning

The development of international activities is strongly experience-driven and follows less a predefined master plan. IP1 characterizes tourism companies in general as “chaos shops” and emphasizes that, despite thorough preparation, unexpected problems keep arising because the product is a strongly emotion-based experience that is perceived differently by everyone. At the same time, IP1 underlines that these recurring challenges generate substantial learning over time and therefore argues for investing “an enormous amount of time in processes” and becoming more conscious of capacity limits. Organizational learning thus manifests above all in the gradual professionalization of internal procedures and in a more sensitive handling of human resources, as highlighted by IP1 and IP3.

At the operational level, recurring, hard-to-plan problems each season and an increasing reliance on experiential knowledge instead of formal manuals are central. Decisions regarding charter companies, age limits for yachts or quality criteria are increasingly based on established rules and “gut feeling” (IP6), which contributes to the continuous refinement of partner selection, quality standards and risk policies.

In parallel, systematic learning loops are emerging: in marketing, creatives and campaigns are tested in continuous A/B tests and “constantly challenged” to arrive step by step at the best-performing ads, complemented by ongoing customer feedback (IP2). At skipper level, repeated experience with international crews leads to adapted briefing structures, stronger expectation management and earlier intervention in conflicts (IP4).

4.3.2 Adaptation of Product and Service

The interviews show that the product, in which guests actively participate in sailing, cooking and everyday tasks on board, cannot simply be transferred to international customers. While German-speaking crews tend to expect or accept the idea of shared responsibility, international guests are sometimes surprised or irritated when they are confronted with everyday tasks during their holiday; IP4 notes that some international guests “initially think they are on an all-inclusive holiday and not on a shared sailing trip” (IP4). Skippers report that on international trips they more often have to “chase people up” and follow up more actively to ensure participation in on board duties (IP4, IP5).

This discrepancy leads to several adjustments. On the one hand, skippers adapt their leadership and communication style: they rely less on implicit assumptions and provide more explicit explanations of the concept and its logic, combined with clearer expectation setting at the beginning of the trip (IP4, IP5). On the other hand, the level of service and information is increased, for example through more intensive pre-trip communication, going through the website information together during consultations, more detailed FAQs and additional explanations of roles, daily routines and tasks on board; in parallel, external sales teams are trained so that the product is not mistakenly sold as a classic full-service yacht holiday (IP2, IP7)

Adaptation also affects internal dimensions. This includes language, systems and partner communication. Employees must be able to advise customers in English, IT systems must be configured for multiple languages and agencies must receive targeted training materials and webinars. This adaptation includes both external product and service adjustments and internal structural adjustments (IP2, IP7).

4.3.3 Strategic Decisions

JTC pursues a deliberately chosen niche strategy and maintains this logic in its internationalization activities. IP1 emphasizes that particularly successful companies are often niche players that "dig into" a clearly defined segment and aim for market leadership there; he sees JTC moving in exactly this direction (IP1). Accordingly, the strategic goal is to position the company as clearly as possible in the chosen segment and to be perceived as the dominant player (IP1).

JTC's internationalization follows a test and scale logic. New sailing areas, formats, or target groups are first tested on a limited basis, for example, "only in selected weeks at the beginning," before the offering is expanded (IP4). Only when a recognizable product-market fit and stable service quality have been achieved are additional capacities built up. Existing regular customers and established sailing areas serve as a buffer in case new international offerings do not prove as popular as expected (IP2, IP4).

Budget constraints and risk considerations play a central role in these strategic decisions. IP1 and IP2 emphasize that aggressive business growth (BG) approaches involving high upfront investments are not realistic for niche SMEs that are not venture-capital-financed, and that a gradual approach involving 'trial balloons' is preferable (IP1, IP2). Conversely, respondents emphasize that it usually takes two to three years for demand, operations and service quality to stabilize at a new sailing destination, and that this timeframe is deliberately taken into account, exhibiting born-global characteristics (IP4, IP6). Quality assurance with regard to the condition of the yachts, the competence of the skippers and the performance of the partners acts as an important filter; a market will only be expanded if these quality standards can be guaranteed in the long term (IP4 and IP6).

4.3.4. Entry Mechanisms

JTC accesses new international markets and segments primarily through capital-light market entry routes. In parallel, the English-language website, social-media channels such as Instagram ads and creator collaborations, as well as email, serve as central sources of first contact, which are complemented by personal advice via contact forms, email or phone when information needs are higher (IP2).

Alongside these digital and partner-based routes, network-driven paths play an important role. Skipper communities, repeat customers and personal recommendations mean that new groups or countries sometimes emerge "from the inside", when crews book again, bring their own networks or recommend the product within their circles of friends and colleagues (IP3, IP4). At the same time, the interviews stress that such expansion steps are only sustainable if operational preconditions are met:content and booking processes must be legally compliant and available in multiple languages, skippers need to be linguistically and interculturally prepared or specifically recruited, and customer service and operations must not be overstretched by rising international demand (IP2, IP6).

4.4 Analysis of Patterns: Internationalization Patterns (Uppsala, Born Global)

Building on the interviews and the available secondary data on JTC, characteristic internationalization patterns can be identified. Overall, the material indicates a predominantly gradualist, Uppsala-like process marked by deliberate delay and a strong focus on organizational "readiness." At the same time, BG-like elements become apparent, particularly in the use of digital platforms and engagement with multiple countries after the start of internationalization.

4.4.1 Uppsala

JTC was founded in 2007 and it took 14 years before the company actively entered international source markets. The interviews show that this delay was not primarily due to a lack of demand but rather to deliberate prioritization and risk management. Initially, the focus was on growth within the DACH-market before prioritizing international expansion. They started to expand sailing offers and destinations as well as other outdoor activities like hiking.

One interviewee (IP3) describes this phase as a testing or building phase in which new steps were “kept deliberately small” in order “not to take major risks” (IP3). IP2 characterizes internationalization as a “step-by-step” process: internationalization may be “the biggest lever in the end,” but one should “expand step by step rather than go all out and then need to scale back” (IP2).

The establishment of new sailing areas is described in the interviews as a process taking “two to three years,” during which demand, operational capacity, and profitability are monitored and adjusted (IP6). During this phase, the established DACH-market functions as an important safety net: if international demand turns out lower than expected, the planned or already reserved yachts can still be filled with German-speaking customers. This cautious, experience-based approach, starting with limited scale, closely observing performance and only then gradually expanding the presence in a new area, closely reflects a Uppsala-type pattern of internationalization.

4.4.2 Born-Global

At the same time, BG-related characteristics can be observed. Respondents report that the international share of business was established relatively quickly in the first three years (2022–present) after the start of internationalization (IP3). The market approach was international from the outset: instead of a sequential focus on a single test market (e.g., only the Netherlands), JTC simultaneously addressed several European countries. IP4 notes that shortly after the launch, there were guests from “different countries of origin” on board (IP4). Europe is thus viewed more as an integrated opportunity space rather than as a set of markets to be entered one by one.

Digital channels further reinforce this pattern. With the English-language website, social media presence and booking platforms, JTC is visible and bookable in multiple countries without needing a physical presence in each source market. At the staff level, the company is well positioned for this, as internal communication had already been conducted largely in English from an early stage (IP4). Taken together, these elements reflect a born-global logic in the post-entry phase: several markets are addressed in parallel and the company has gained international relevance in a comparatively short period of time.

4.4.3 Hybrid Patterns and Resource Limitations

At the same time, the interviews emphasize that a purely BG strategy is considered unrealistic for bootstrapped niche providers. IP2 points out that BG strategies involve “very high upfront costs” and are more suited to “scale-ups with investors” (IP2). Against this backdrop, JTC follows a hybrid form: Uppsala-like caution (delays, test markets, use of risk buffers) meets BG elements (digital reach, parallel market engagement, rapid establishment of international revenues after launch).

Networks act as opportunistic accelerators in this regard. Recommendations from satisfied repeat customers, skipper communities and online platforms generate international demand even in the absence of a fully developed global strategy. At the same time, JTC's approach combines strict risk management with the use of digital technologies to run processes in parallel across markets. While these features are characteristic of resource-constrained niche service providers, the organization cannot be clearly assigned to a single existing ideal type.

4.5 Analysis of Outcomes

The outcomes of JTC's internationalization are captured through three central codes: Financial Outcomes, Customer Success as positive outcomes and Challenges as barriers and problems the company faces during international expansion. Together, these three dimensions provide a realistic picture of the practical impacts of the internationalization strategy.

4.5.1 Financial Outcomes

A look at of the audited financial statements of JTC's from 2022 to 2024 yields quantitative insights into the company's growth during the internationalization phase. The financial data shows two main trends: how big a business is and the amount of money it makes.

Metric	2022	2023	2024
Balance Sheet Total (Total Assets)	8,769,248.82 (≈1.869.816 EUR)	9,040,617.73 (≈ 2.079.259 EUR)	9,728,292.17 (≈ 2.276.691 EUR)
Net Profit / Loss	+664,315.14 (≈ +141.648 EUR)	-2,488,170.45 (≈ - 572.256 EUR)	-53,752.89 (≈ - 12.580 EUR)
Average Employment	1.00	0.25	N.A.

Table 2: Overview of Financial Performance and Employment Structure of Join The Crew Sp. z o.o. (2022–2024)

Source: Own illustration based on the financial reports of Join The Crew Sp. z o.o. (2022–2024).

First, the total on the balance sheet, which shows the overall business volume and asset base, has been going up steadily. The total assets went up from approx. 1.87 million EUR in 2022 to approx. = 2.28 million EUR in 2024. This means that the operational base has grown steadily over the past three years, even though the market has been unpredictable (Financial report 2022-2024).

Second, the net financial result (profit or loss) changes a lot. The company made a net profit of 141.600 EUR in 2022. The next year (2023), the result changed to a big net loss of 572.000 EUR. However, the data for 2024 shows that this deficit has decreased significantly, and losses have fallen by 97.8% compared to the previous year (Financial report 2022-2024).

The financial statements show that there is consistently a low level of internal employment when it comes to resource structure. The average number of employees was 1.00 FTE in 2022 and 0.25 FTE in 2023. In the 2024 report, the table on employment is empty ('Not available').

4.5.2 Success

The interview data shows that JTC has achieved significant success in acquiring international customers. IP3 confirms that around one third of growth in 2025 is attributable to international customers. In addition, IP4 reports that around 1,500 yachts have been occupied by English-speaking, predominantly European customers. No specific statements were made regarding repeat rates. Nevertheless, IP4 aptly describes the strength of the group bonds: 'The (international) crew ends up getting matching tattoos because it was simply the best week of their lives.' This behavior indicates an exceptionally intense emotional experience that goes beyond the classic product and leads to customer loyalty.

JTC fosters already a strong DACH community that extends beyond sailing trips. This is achieved through regular monthly meetings held in various cities across German-speaking countries. These gatherings, which are organized about once a month, serve as important mechanisms for customer loyalty and promote word-of-mouth advertising. IP5 emphasizes their effectiveness: "I find this very positive. It's the best customer loyalty program, so to speak." He refers to events such as sailing and barbecue gatherings with around 40 participants. IP8 confirms: "We definitely have regular meetings. We offer them at different times in different cities." Additionally, the first international meeting took place in Barcelona this summer, which suggests that the international JTC community meet-ups are a success (IP4).

Finally, it becomes clear that customer service itself functions as a USP. IP1 explains that in the tourism sector, in particular, consulting and service are extremely important, since there is no physical product. This statement shows that intensive, personally-oriented service is a key differentiating factor against competitors, particularly relevant in international markets where standardized or digital offerings dominate.

4.5.3 Challenges

Parallel to success factors, substantial challenges exist that manifest specifically during international expansion. These prove to be structurally conditioned and partly difficult to overcome.

The first challenge is the discrepancy between international customer expectations and the product concept. IP4 observes: "When international guests are used to something different, that is, when they do not help with certain tasks on board." This is not a trivial operational issue, but rather touches on the core business model, which is based on shared sailing experiences and shared responsibility. Many international guests, by contrast, expect a classic all-inclusive format. IP5 concretizes this conflict: "When international guests are used to something different, that is, when they do not help with certain tasks on the ship." A resulting challenge is group dynamics issues: "One toxic person on the boat is enough to spoil the whole atmosphere." This statement underscores that the success of international tours depends not only on the quality of the service offering, but also on external, difficult-to-control factors such as group composition.

Another significant challenge arises from legal and reputational risks, particularly regarding American customers. IP4 expresses clear concern: "I personally do not like having Americans on the boat, also because it is legally more difficult, because Americans can sue you for anything." This statement reflects a real risk that goes beyond cultural distance and concerns legal liability.

Operational capacity limitations are also articulated. IP2 points out: "If you now launch internationally and many people are calling all the time, we certainly have a problem." This points to a fundamental resource limitation: The intensive personal customer service that is a key success factor in the home market cannot scale proportionally with customer volumes without either compromising quality or building substantial additional infrastructure.

An overarching challenge lies in brand establishment, particularly in the international context. IP4 identifies this as "the biggest challenge": "The biggest challenge is actually brand establishment, so that people can really imagine what they are getting." In international markets where JTC is an unknown name and where established competitors like Yachtweek dominate, brand building is time- and resource-intensive.

Additionally, challenges emerge in the realm of skill requirements for personnel. The necessary competencies require a different skill level than for the DACH-market. Compensation is limited: "That is already a challenge, especially when you look at this brand ambassador for the salary that is paid." This remark points to a classic SME problem: higher personnel requirements but limited budgets for corresponding salary increases.

5. Results and Teaching Notes

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This section summarizes the empirical findings from Chapter 4 considering the research questions. It focuses on how internationalization patterns, company-specific resources, networks and industry-specific distances influence JTC's capacity to attract and retain international customer groups. The discussion first addresses each sub-question in turn before zooming out to reflect on the overarching main research question.

Q1: To what extent can the internationalization journey of Join the Crew be explained through incremental (Uppsala) versus born-global patterns, and in which areas do hybrid dynamics emerge?

JTC exhibits a distinct hybrid internationalization pattern that resists simple categorization. The company delayed international expansion for 14 years (2007–2022), reflecting the Uppsala model's incremental, risk-averse logic of taking deliberate small steps, accumulating market knowledge, and utilizing the home market as a strategic buffer. However, post-entry (from 2022 onwards), JTC entered multiple European markets simultaneously, a behavior characteristic of BG patterns. This rapid divergence was enabled by a scalable English-language digital infrastructure (website, booking system, social media, customer portal) established prior to the push.

This hybridity emerges primarily from resource constraints. For a service SME dependent on non-standardizable human resources and emotional connection, classic BG strategies involving high upfront capital were unrealistic. Instead, Uppsala like caution determined the timing of market entry, while BG like simultaneity determined the implementation once the decision was made. Network effects and digital channels acted as accelerators, allowing JTC to test markets with limited capacity rather than executing a rigid master plan. This aligns with recent Uppsala extensions emphasizing non-linearity, network-embedding, and the digital enablement of faster cycles (see Appendix A3 for visualization).

Financial Evidence of the Hybrid Strategy: The financial outcomes analysis (referencing JTC reports 2022–2024) offers empirical support for the viability and challenges of this strategy:

- Steady Balance Sheet Expansion: The balance sheet total grew from EUR 1.87 million (2022) to EUR 2.28 million (2024), representing an 11.0% increase. This consistent upward trajectory confirms that international markets served as viable growth channels, expanding the operational scale despite internal tensions.

- The "J-Curve" and Corporate Structure: The profitability metrics illustrate the financial strain of hybrid expansion. For example, a net profit of ~EUR 142k in 2022 turned into a significant loss of ~EUR 572k in 2023. This correlates with intensified marketing and possibly the 'liability of outsidership' in foreign markets. However, the extent of the fluctuations alongside asset growth suggests the influence of the corporate holding structure. Internal financial transfers or reallocations of resources (e.g. involving the affiliated company Wild Ventures) may have affected the Polish company's reported results. This suggests that the hybrid model uses cross-border financial flexibility to finance expansion.
- Stabilization and Agility: The data for 2024 signals successful consolidation, with the net loss reduced to ~EUR 12k (a 97.8% recovery). This rapid stabilization within a single fiscal year demonstrates high organizational agility in absorbing expansion shocks.
- Resource Orchestration: Finally, the consistently low average employment (0.25–1.0 FTE) quantitatively validates the RBV analysis. It confirms that JTC scales via external network orchestration (freelancers, skippers) rather than fixed internal costs. This lean model drives efficiency but highlights the "quality-growth paradox": the capacity to serve growing international demand is constrained not by capital, but by the availability of trusted network partners to maintain service quality.

Q2: Which company-specific resources and capabilities enable or constrain the internationalization of Join the Crew?

Section 4.2.1 identifies four interrelated resources that represent a competitive advantage in the DACH-market. They are all intangible, service-based, and culturally rooted, as is the case with many other tourism service providers. This is a huge opportunity, but also a challenge to achieve the same success with those resources in the international market as in the domestic market.

Skippers as Central Resource Skippers meet Barney's VRIN criteria: valuable (safety + navigation + leadership), rare (expertise + pedagogy + emotional intelligence), inimitable (authenticity cannot be standardized), non-substitutable (no technology replaces their role). However, this capital is paradoxical: on the one hand, multilingual skippers facilitate rapid expansion into new markets, but on the other hand, international growth is fundamentally limited by the availability of skippers. Since the product ultimately depends on the skipper, it is not possible to simply acquire e.g. 100 new skippers. They must have the concept, image, and personality that fits JTC. This makes this resource difficult to obtain or standardize externally. This is especially true since international customers require customized training due to different expectations and cultural differences.

"Lots of Love" Brand and Community The 'Lots of Love to Everyone' philosophy sets JTC apart in the DACH-market, but as an emotional concept, its appeal is limited to a specific geographical area. According to interview partners, customer loyalty is primarily achieved not through digital channels, but through monthly community meetings in German, Swiss and Austrian cities. These meetings are considered the “best customer loyalty programme”. However, this model is difficult to implement internationally. JTC has not yet established a systematic infrastructure for community meetings in source markets such as European countries and their feasibility remains unclear. The geographical distribution of international customers makes regular meetings logistically impossible. This creates a paradox: the very resource that drives domestic customer loyalty is the most difficult to implement internationally. Whether JTC can achieve equivalent loyalty effects through alternative mechanisms, such as digital platforms or large-scale annual meetings, remains an open strategic question that goes beyond its current operational capacities.

Digital Infrastructure and Team Composition Aggressive Instagram advertising and communication portals after booking enable international reach without the need for additional staff. This supports simultaneous market entry. The Polish origin of founder Dominik Grotowski and internal communication in English facilitate intercultural management. Although many employees and skippers are native German speakers, some are also fluent in English, which does not really limit the reach.

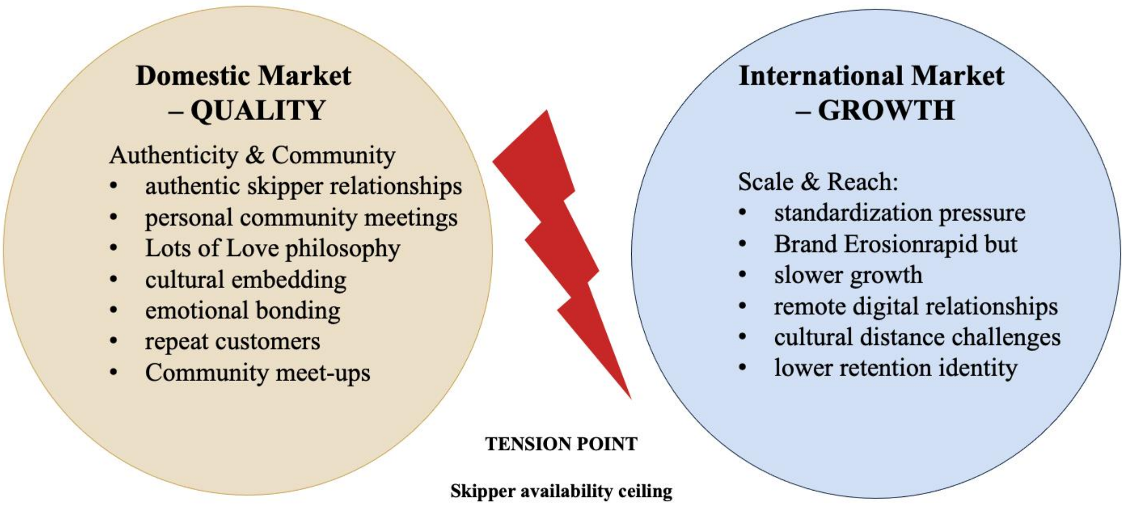

Figure 3:The Quality-Growth Paradox: How Emotional Authenticity Limits Scalability in Niche Tourism SMEs
Own illustration based on empirical findings from JTC case study (expert interviews & secondary data)

This tension constitutes an ‘Quality-Growth Paradox’: JTC's core resource (emotional connection) is inherently non-scalable. Unlike standardized services, maintaining the 'Lots of Love' philosophy requires slower, network-driven growth, limiting rapid internationalization despite digital readiness. Their most important strategic advantages are difficult to replicate because they resist simple standardization. Paradoxically, this makes them a structural obstacle to rapid and large-scale internationalization.

Q3: How do internal and external networks influence the company’s entry mechanisms and market development in international source markets?

Chapters 4.2.2 and 4.3.4 document networks as opportunistic accelerators of internationalization, enabling JTC to overcome resource constraints and enter new markets with minimal upfront investment.

Internal and External Networks JTC uses skipper and employee networks to gain market knowledge and customer insights. Multilingual skippers act as internal bridges, reducing the need for external recruitment and enabling faster adaptation. Externally, organic network effects, repeat customers and skipper communities drive international customer acquisition more effectively than planned strategy. This community-driven model aligns with the concept of overcoming 'liability of outsidership' in Network Theory. JTC insiders legitimize the company in new markets, building trust more quickly than formal marketing alone.

Digital Platforms as Network Infrastructure Digital platforms reinforce these networks. After booking, online portals are created that attract customers from across the region and simultaneously build a guest-skipper network. Early digital contact with other sailors helps beginners to create clear expectations and get a sense of community.

Entry Mechanisms and Pragmatic Approach Market entries often arise spontaneously, for example through trade fairs, recommendations, or skipper contacts, rather than according to a strict plan. JTC reduces risk through partnerships with charter companies: yacht bookings continue regardless of how many international guests arrive. This allows them to enter different markets flexibly without risking financial losses. This shows that SME internationalization works through active relationships and spontaneous opportunities, not through rigid plans.

Networks act as accelerators of JTC's internationalization, facilitating entry with minimal initial investment. Internally, multilingual employees overcome barriers to outsider ship and build trust more quickly than formal channels do. Externally, repeat customers and communities drive acquisition. Market entries emerge spontaneously through relationships and partnerships rather than rigid plans, enabling flexible deployment without sunk costs.

Q4: How do cultural, administrative, geographic and economic distances affect customer expectations and the need to adapt the product and service offering?

Chapters 4.2.3 and 4.3.2 document that internationalization exposes JTC to substantial cross-border CAGE distances, requiring strategic adaptation decisions.

Cultural Distance Language barriers are the most immediate obstacle. Although English-language digital portals provide basic access, the core service remains dependent on language. Skippers must instruct guests on safety issues, community norms and shared sailing expectations. This is not just an everyday communication issue, but a technical one. Most international guests are not native English speakers, which can lead to misunderstandings, particularly with regard to technical sailing instructions.

Cultural expectations also vary considerably. For example, German speaking guests expect to participate actively in sailing and share responsibility for tasks, whereas international guests often find this demanding or unusual. Additionally, gender norms in different cultures influence the division of labour on board. These differences require adapted communication protocols, a differentiated leadership style and clearer expectations. Skippers must find the right balance between clear instructions and an authentic sense of community. This tension can be especially strong in culturally heterogeneous groups.

However, marketing positioning is a key issue. JTC's Instagram campaigns emphasize the party, adventure and lifestyle aspects of all-inclusive vacation, appealing to those who want passive leisure with an entertainment focus. Yet the core requirements of co-sailing (active participation, personal responsibility and genuine sailing skills) are not sufficiently emphasized in international communications. This creates an expectation gap: international guests book based on lifestyle imagery, not realizing that they will be active co-sailors. Cultural conflicts therefore arise not only from cultural differences, but also from unclear product positioning in international markets.

Administrative and legal distance JTC is subject to German and EU travel law (651a ff. BGB). However, expansion into countries with common law, such as the US, carries a significantly higher risk of litigation. This would require newly drafted contracts, extended liability insurance, and modified operating procedures, which have not yet been implemented. In contrast to cultural challenges, which can be overcome through adaptation, legal distance represents a fundamental structural discrepancy. This makes certain markets strategically unprofitable under the current business models.

Geographical and economic distance Geographical distance manifests itself in different ancillary costs and challenges in operational work. This influences cost structures and the selection of partners. However, this is independent of internationalization. It is a factor that existed even before expansion and now has no significant impact.

Economic distance is even more significant for internationalization: per capita purchasing power in Germany (~€29,500) is well above the EU average (~€20,000). This has a direct impact on pricing strategies and customer travel budgets in all markets.

CAGE distances have an uneven impact on JTC's internationalization prospects: cultural differences can be overcome by repositioning marketing and communication protocols. However, legal and administrative distances from Anglo-Saxon jurisdictions represent fundamental constraints that require restructuring at the corporate level. Geographical distance is operationally neutral, while economic distance represents a limitation on market size rather than a barrier to market entry.

Main Question: How do internationalization patterns, company-specific resources, and industry-specific distances shape the ability of a niche tourism SME to attract and retain international customer groups?

As already described, JTC has successfully implemented a hybrid internationalization model: a combination of incremental learning and parallel expansion in European markets. This model is well suited to an SME in a niche market with limited resources. At the same time, the company's competitive advantage is based on emotional attachment, personal service, and a sense of community, which are difficult to standardize and therefore structurally incompatible with rapid scaling. Legal and cultural distances, resource constraints, and a strong dependence on networks and regular customers limit JTC's growth potential without the company losing its distinctive character. Ultimately, the key question is whether JTC can maintain this authenticity over the long term and translate it into stable customer loyalty beyond its core DACH-market.

5.2 Teaching Notes

5.2.1 Theoretical Implications

The JTC case study confirms the key assumptions of the Uppsala, resource-based and network theories of internationalization. However, it also reveals a hybrid pattern, combining gradual learning with selectively accelerated expansion. As an emotion-based service provider, JTC creates value primarily through experience, community and personal relationships, rather than functional product features. This creates a structural tension that classic models overlook scaling up and maintaining authenticity are competing goals.

Existing frameworks (Uppsala, Born Global and Network Theory) assume that scalable advantages do not undermine their basis. However, emotion-driven services are different in that their core value is relational and human, creating a 'human scalability ceiling'. Networks therefore act as both market participants and growth restrictors, as the capacity and quality of connections limit expansion.

These findings necessitate a refined framework that integrates emotional value creation and selective rather than maximum growth. Based on this, the 'Community-Based Hybrid Internationalization Model' was developed (see Appendix A3). This model visualizes strategic delay (Uppsala) and digital acceleration (BG) moderated by the 'quality–growth paradox' of service scalability (Figure 3 in Key Findings). JTC's blue line shows a 14-year focus on the DACH region, followed by growth through networking and digitalization. However, this growth is limited by the red scaling limit and a falling quality index.

5.2.2 Practical Implications

Market selection and growth rate: When acquiring international customers, the focus should be on psychologically proximate markets rather than on broad, aggressive scaling in heterogeneous regions. New markets should initially be developed through small test regions and existing networks, so that the product can be positioned and emotionally anchored in a similar way as in the DACH market. Only when repeat bookings and recommendations, which are also visible in the form of online reviews, can be observed does it make sense to increase paid acquisition. This protects the emotional product quality and avoids purchasing volume that the organization cannot handle operationally.

Organizational and skipper readiness: Before actively acquiring customers in a new country, the organization must demonstrate a minimum level of readiness and preparation. Documented on-board processes and clear quality standards must be in place, and there must be enough experienced, multilingual skippers who can deliver on the brand's promise to the community. A quality-first mindset must be culturally embedded in the organization, ensuring that growth targets never override the emotional authenticity that defines the brand. Paid campaigns should only be launched when sufficient capacity (skippers, office support, language skills) is available to provide a consistent experience. Otherwise, first-time customers may be lost instead of becoming repeat customers.

Adaptation of product and communication: For international guests, the concept of "co-sailing" and the idea of shared responsibility must be explained much more clearly in marketing materials and in pre-trip communications to stand out from the competition. Clear expectation management (level of comfort, group dynamics, routine tasks on board) reduces disagreements and the risk of complaints. Digital communities can be used before the trip to answer questions, build trust, and create a sense of belonging that later leads to referrals and repeat bookings.

Network-based acquisition: Customer acquisition should be done more through networks. Regular guests, skipper networks, and selected creators (e.g., Creator Club) should be deliberately treated as acquisition channels and not as a side effect. This, combined with a targeted performance marketing strategy and increased visibility on digital platforms, can lead to long-term, loyal international customers.

6. Conclusion

The case of JTC is a useful example for small tourism businesses that target a specific group of people in a market driven by emotions and personal preferences. Their journey demonstrates that there is a viable path to sustainable internationalization without choosing between the slow, ultra-sequential hesitation of traditional models and the capital-intensive, high-risk speed of venture-backed startups. However, it should be noted that this analysis of strategy is based primarily on external data and competitor comparisons, since there was no direct access to internal strategic planning documents. Despite this limitation, the combination of public documents, financial reports, and expert interviews allowed for an informed and triangulated approach to understanding the company's development journey.

JTC pursues a carefully coordinated, combined approach: the company uses the caution of the Uppsala model when selecting the right time to enter new markets, but also leverages the digital flexibility and opportunistic market sensing of Born Global companies to implement expansion rapidly. However, this internationalization came with risks. As the financial analysis revealed, the expansion incurred significant initial costs and operational volatility. Yet, the company's ability to stabilize these fluctuations within a single fiscal year demonstrates that a network-embedded strategy creates organizational resilience. By leveraging skipper networks, repeat customers, and digital communities as organic accelerators, JTC managed to grow its operational footprint without compromising financial stability.

Ultimately, the study culminates in a critical synthesis: JTC's success is built on intangible assets, emotional bonding, a lived "community spirit," and highly personalized service. Paradoxically, these are the very factors most endangered by internationalization. Expanding abroad demands standardization and scaling, yet the company's competitive advantage relies precisely on maintaining non-standardized, personalized relationships. Cultural distances and limited operational resources further complicate the transfer of this authentic philosophy to new markets.

This case contributes meaningfully to internationalization theory by demonstrating that the traditional Uppsala-versus-Born Global dichotomy is insufficient for emotion-based service providers. Instead, a new model ‚the Community-Based Hybrid Internationalization Model‘ better captures how niche SMEs can internationalize while preserving their core value proposition. This model emphasizes selective market entry, network-driven growth, and the primacy of emotional authenticity over rapid scaling. The findings suggest that existing frameworks must be refined to account for the unique constraints and opportunities of experience-driven businesses.

Importantly, JTC's internationalization journey remains in its early stages. With only three years of active international operations (2022–2025), the long-term sustainability of this hybrid model has yet to be fully tested. The company's ability to maintain quality and community authenticity through continued scaling, potential market saturation, or economic headwinds remains an open question. Future longitudinal research should track whether JTC can sustain its current growth trajectory and whether the Community-Based Hybrid Model demonstrates resilience under extended competitive and operational pressure. This will ultimately determine whether selective, emotion-centered growth can be a viable long-term strategy for niche tourism SMEs.

Therefore, the defining challenge for JTC and similar emotion-based service providers is not merely overcoming administrative or logistical barriers, but solving the fundamental tension between reach and depth. This case highlights that precise brand positioning, clear expectation management, and authentic differentiation are indispensable. The measure of success in this specific niche is not how rapidly a company can expand its territorial footprint, but how well it can grow without diluting the authenticity that made it successful in the first place. JTC's experience suggests that in the business of emotions, slower, quality-focused growth is not a lack of ambition, but a strategic imperative for sustainable competitive advantage and long-term organizational survival.

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Appendix

A1 Structure of the coding system

Deductive
Inductive

A. ANTECEDENTS			
Code		Definition	Coding Rules
A1	Resources (RBV)	Statements about unique, valuable, rare (VRIO criteria) or hard-to-imitate internal resources or capabilities that secure a competitive advantage. Examples: proprietary digital knowledge, unique founder skills, strong skipper network, established brand, customer loyalty.	Statements about external relationships (partners, agencies) must be assigned to A2: Network, NOT A1. Rule: Generic advantages (low cost) do NOT qualify - must be rare/inimitable.
A2	Network	Statements about the use of external relationships (partners, community, former employers, customers, alumni networks) for international market entry, knowledge generation, or compensating for resource limitations.	Mere mention of partners without reference to internationalization or market advantage is NOT coded. Rule: Distinguish between: (a) partners for direct sales, (b) partners for capability/knowledge, (c) networks for credibility.
A3	Distances (CAGE)	Statements about challenges or decisions resulting from the psychic, geographical, cultural, or administrative distance between home and target market. Includes: language barriers (I2), regulatory complexity, payment delays, visa requirements, time zones, cultural work styles.	If distance is actively overcome by a resource (A1) or network (A2), A1/A2 takes priority. Rule: Language barriers are always A3. Rule: Distinguish abstract distance (theoretical) from operational distance (behavioral impact).
B. INTERNATIONALIZATION PATTERNS			

B1	Uppsala (Gradual)	Statements describing step-by-step market entry, motivated by successive knowledge building and gradual resource commitment abroad. Includes: testing markets, starting small, scaling slowly, learning from each step.	If internationalization occurred without explicit goal (only reacting to requests), B1 is preferred over B2. Rule: Distinguish: (a) testing before full launch, (b) starting with limited offering, (c) building capabilities over time.
B2	Born Global (Early & Fast)	Statements about fast or immediate market entry, early global orientation, or use of digital technologies enabling large steps in short time. Includes: rapid expansion, multiple markets simultaneously, global vision from founding.	Only code if international entry occurred within first 3 years AND was intentional/rapid. Rule: If multiple markets entered simultaneously (vs. sequential) → B2. Rule: Digital enablement that shortcuts learning → B2.
C. PROCESSES & MECHANISMS			
C1	Organizational Learning	Statements about the PROCESS of knowledge generation from foreign experiences, adapting internal structures based on experience, or developing new routines for better internationalization. Focuses on HOW learning happens, not WHAT is known.	Mere description of market knowledge (what one knows) goes to B1. C1 codes only the PROCESS (how one learned it). Rule: Distinguish: (a) learning from failures, (b) learning from partner feedback, (c) learning from customer interactions.
C2	Adaptation	Statements about necessary modifications of core product/service to meet target market requirements. Emerged FROM DATA - not pre-coded from theory. Examples: language translation, product format changes, pricing adjustment, service level modification, communication style adaptation.	General marketing/communication channel changes are C3 (Strategic Decisions), NOT C2. Rule: C2 is about product/service CORE modifications. Rule: Distinguish: (a) product changes, (b) service level changes, (c) communication format changes.

C3	Strategic Decisions	Statements about selection of target markets, positioning against competitors, or general strategic planning that do not fit B1/B2. Includes: which countries to enter, when to enter, how to position vs. competitors, niche strategies.	If market selection is DIRECTLY influenced by CAGE factors → A3 takes priority. Rule: Distinguish: (a) market selection rationale, (b) competitive positioning, (c) timing decisions, (d) resource allocation decisions.
C4	Entry Mechanisms	Statements about specific operational instruments used to enter markets: direct export, e-commerce platforms, partnerships, local representation, joint ventures, franchising. Focuses on WHICH VEHICLE used, not SPEED (B1/B2) or STRATEGY (C3).	Code the TYPE of vehicle (platform, partner, direct), NOT the speed. Rule: Distinguish: (a) direct channels, (b) indirect (partner), (c) hybrid (platform).
OUTCOMES			
D1	Customer Success	Statements referring to positive outcomes of internationalization measured by loyalty/retention of international customers and resulting economic success. Includes: repeat bookings, customer satisfaction, word-of-mouth, revenue growth from international segment.	General revenue figures without reference to INTERNATIONAL customers are NOT D1. Rule: Focus on CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS, not just revenue. Rule: Distinguish: (a) retention metrics, (b) satisfaction metrics, (c) economic metrics.
D2	Challenges	Statements about specific CHALLENGES, OBSTACLES, or PROBLEMS encountered during internationalization - emerged from data. Examples: language barriers, staff capability gaps, operational bottlenecks, timing pressures, quality maintenance at scale, regulatory complexity.	Must be about ACTUAL challenges encountered or ANTICIPATED challenges, not theoretical concerns. Rule: Distinguish: (a) resource gaps, (b) process gaps, (c) market gaps, (d) timing gaps.

A2. Service of Join the crew trips

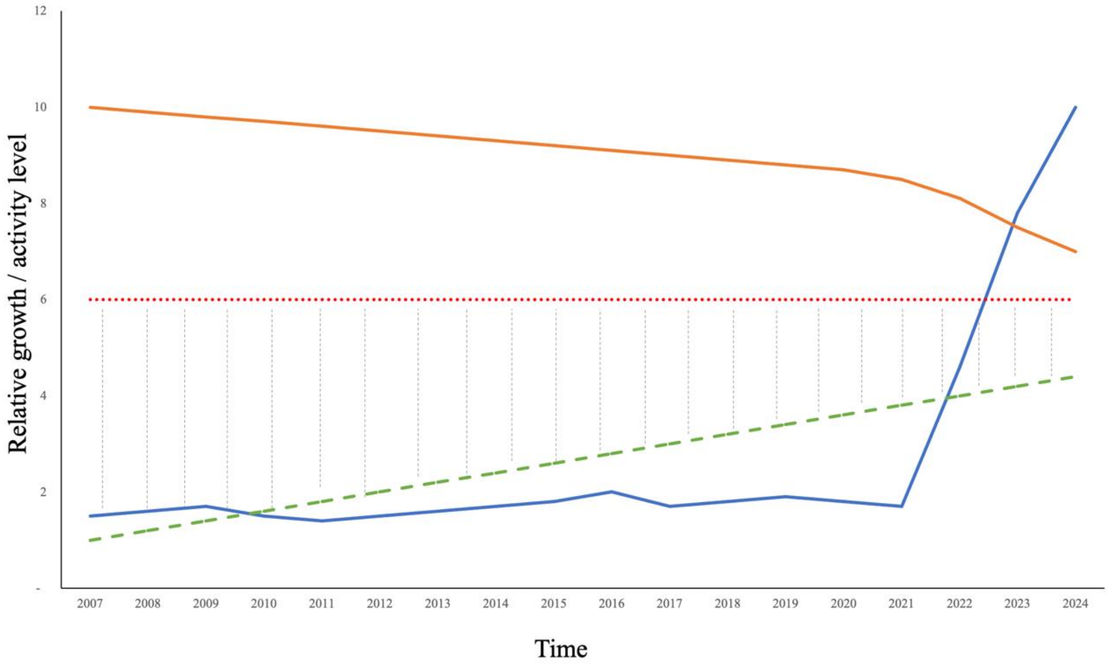
The service provided focuses primarily on organizational management and ensuring a structured itinerary. The services included are (Join the Crew (c), 2025):

- 7 nights aboard the yacht
- 6 days of sailing
- Services of a JTC skipper
- Beginner sailing course
- Dinghy with outboard motor
- Teaching of basic sailing skills (Sailing ABC)
- JTC mileage confirmation (Mileage Logbook)
- Provision of bed linen and towels
- Final cleaning of the yacht
- International travel health insurance with coverage of up to €20,000

The following are not included in the tour price (Join the Crew (c), 2025):

- A board cash fund of approx. €300 per person (for food, skipper's meals, 2–3 restaurant visits, harbor fees, and fuel)
- Arrival and departure
- An excess of max. €50 per person in the event of damage

A3. Own illustration: Community Based Hybrid Internationalization Model from JTC (2007-2025)



Blue solid line (JTC Real): Join the Crew's observed hybrid trajectory: 14 years of DACH-focused development (2007–2021), followed by accelerated international expansion from 2022 onwards driven by digital infrastructure and network effects.

Green dashed line (Uppsala model): Ideal-typical gradual internationalization: characterized by very slow, incremental increase over extended periods (risk-averse, experience-based, psychologically proximate market entry).

Orange line (Born Global): Ideal-typical rapid global rise: steep growth within first few years, then plateau (characteristic of tech-driven or digitally native start-ups with capital-backed acceleration).

Red horizontal line (scaling limit): Human capacity ceiling: represents the boundary imposed by skipper availability, operational capacity, and the risk of authenticity erosion. Beyond this threshold, growth becomes unsustainable.

Grey Zone (Shaded 'Safe Expansion Zone): Visualizes JTC's strategic operating corridor between Uppsala's cautious incrementalism (green line, lower) and the human scalability ceiling (red line, upper). This zone represents the optimal path for emotion-based service providers:

fast enough to capitalize on market opportunities, yet slow enough to preserve community authenticity and maintain quality standards.