

Key strategies to internationalization: The case of the Spanish olive oil industry

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Abstract

Olive oil is one of the most important products in the Spanish agri-food sector, with Spain accounting for 50 percent of world production. Despite Spain's leadership in global olive oil production, the sector faces significant challenges in commercialization, both domestically and abroad. This highlights the need to implement more effective international marketing strategies. This article therefore focuses on analysing the key internationalization actions of the Spanish olive oil industry. To that end, the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) method is used, applying the fuzzy set approach (fsQCA). The results show that for companies in the sector to internationalize they must: (1) have objective knowledge of the market and experience of other internationalization processes; (2) create international networks through relationships with prescribers, chefs and commercial distributors; (3) the founder must be innovative, proactive, have the autonomy and competitive aggressiveness to offer innovative products, and have commercial units abroad. It is also found that attending international trade fairs is not a key strategy for internationalization.

Keywords: Agribusiness, Olive oil industry, International Orientation Strategies, Internationalization, Analysis of cases, Fs/QCA.

1. Introduction

There are numerous positive effects of companies using exports as a way of internationalizing. From a macroeconomic perspective, it contributes to GDP and therefore economic growth and employment. From a microeconomic perspective, companies' access to foreign markets allows them to increase sales, diversify their client base and risk, avoid domestic competition, create economies of scale, and ultimately, grow and consolidate over time.

Domestically, exporting firms also exert a positive influence by boosting direct and indirect employment, prompting an imitation effect in other companies, increasing innovation, raising workers' qualification levels, and so on.

The Spanish olive oil industry is of a traditional nature, largely consisting of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), many of them family-owned. Furthermore, most of these companies are located in peripheral areas, such as Andalusia; or more specifically, the province of Jaén, which is the world's largest producer of ol-

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ive oil. Spain has had problems exporting olive oil despite being the world's leading producer. According to Mili and Bouhaddane (2018) there are a set of factors that condition the internationalization process of the olive sector and have led to a lower performance in the foreign market. These include: (1) the lack of marketing strategies and organization in the value chain; (2) the role of producers and marketers in providing a quality product (using appropriate phytosanitary products to guarantee the quality and traceability system) and preserving it throughout the chain; (3) exporters' implementation of new communication technologies and logistical improvements. The traditional trade barriers that this sector has presented need to be restructured in order to become more professional and market-oriented (López-Castro and Parrilla-González, 2024).

They therefore operate at a distance from the big markets. This set of features means that the industry has not substantially internationalized; as such, there is a need for research that helps companies to establish strategies that enable this process. All this, together with the scarcity of studies that pursue this aim, justifies the present study. Analysing the export activity of this industry is a task of vital importance in order to provide conclusions, guidance, resources and appropriate strategies to guarantee the success of olive oil companies and ensure the increased competitiveness of this economic activity (Parras-Rosa, 2022). Olive oil mills are beginning to respond to the demands and aspirations of a global world through internationalization (Parra-López *et al.*, 2016) and they are facing a unique opportunity to develop global initiatives that can harness the extraordinary richness of olive-growing.

In recent decades, the consumption of olive oil has undergone continuous growth worldwide and this oil is currently consumed on a regular basis in 164 countries (International Olive Council, 2023). However, olive oil consumption in the big producers, that is, Spain, Italy and Greece, still represents more than 42 percent of the global total, with a per capita consumption in these countries of 10.3 kg/year, 11.4 kg/year and 15.5 kg/year, respectively (Parras-Rosa, 2021). As indicated in an analysis of the olive

oil food chain conducted by Parras *et al.* (2023) and endorsed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (2023), the olive oil industry faces marketing problems reflected in a decline in consumption in domestic markets, which necessitates the search for new markets, and, therefore, the creation and development of internationalization departments in olive oil companies.

Given the importance of the Spanish olive oil sector and its weight in the overall global production and consumption (Mielke, 2020) it is necessary for companies to carry out a series of internationally oriented strategies that represent an important solution when marketing olive oils in foreign markets, since these strategic orientations are considered decisive for internationalization (Dimitratos *et al.*, 2004; Jantunen *et al.*, 2005; Cadogan *et al.*, 2012; Hagen *et al.*, 2012; Boso *et al.*, 2012; Gerschewski *et al.*, 2015; Monferrer *et al.*, 2021), and companies perform better (Acosta *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, in this paper we focus on the following international orientation strategies: (1) international market orientation strategies (IMOS) (Cadogan *et al.*, 2012; Chung, 2012; Boso *et al.*, 2013). (2) International network orientation strategies (INOS) (Moen and Servais, 2002; Sullivan-Mort and Weerawardena, 2006; Weerawardena *et al.*, 2007; Ripollés *et al.*, 2012). (3) International entrepreneurship orientation strategies (IEOS) (Hagen *et al.*, 2012; Deutscher *et al.*, 2016; Pehrsson, 2016; Escandón-Barbosa *et al.*, 2016; Ferreras-Méndez, 2021). All of them have been identified as the most relevant for business internationalization (Acosta *et al.*, 2018; Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2020, 2021, 2023, 2024).

There is limited research on the internationalization of the olive sector. Mili and Rodríguez-Zúñiga (2003) study the macro-factors that condition its global trade. Mili (2006) analyze olive oil marketing trends in traditional markets. Moral-Pajares and Lanzas-Molina (2009) examine the export dynamics of Andalusian olive oil companies. Moral-Pajares *et al.* (2015) focus on the relationship between the export efficiency of Southern European olive oil firms with websites. Mozas-Moral *et al.* (2016) study the favorable factors for the export of or-

ganic olive oil in Spain. Mili and Bouhaddane (2018) include the determinants and future strategies for the internationalization of Spanish olive oil from a value chain perspective. Cano-Rubio *et al.* (2021) delve into the internationalization strategies of olive oil mills.

López-Castro and Parrilla-González (2024) focus on offers, providing new perspectives on the factors that affect the marketing and sale of olive oil. Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2021) study how four cases of companies in the olive oil sector can convert the advantages of the territory into competitive advantages in order to initiate a process of internationalization. In order to do so, they suggest that companies must achieve dynamic capabilities by following market-oriented strategies, networking and international entrepreneurship. Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2023) use a combination of case studies and Comparative Qualitative Analyses to analyze whether four companies located in Jaén have followed the strategies of market orientation, networking and international entrepreneurship for their internationalization.

The aim of this study is to find out the key internationalization strategies and activities that companies in the olive sector should carry out, as well as their combination in the internationalization process. The aim is to determine which are the most appropriate in order to obtain the best results when developing the export activity of these companies. Furthermore, our research is particularly important in terms of contributing to the literature, there are clear gaps in the literature on the strategies that olive companies must follow to become international, as well as on whether the strategies of market orientation, networking and international entrepreneurship are applicable to companies in this sector in a generalized way, since previous studies (Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2021, 2023) have only studied them in a very small number of cases (four), all located in the south of Spain (Jaén). Therefore, this work is a contribution to the literature as it analyses the strategic actions and the most used combination of 246 companies located at national level.

In summary, this article sheds light on the strategies that companies in the olive sector should

follow in order to become international, as well as the combination of key actions for the internationalization process. The analysis consists of the application of the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) method using the fuzzy sets approach (fsQCA) to establish the study variables. Thus, we include the exporting companies that make up the olive oil sector that the SABI (Iberian Balance Sheet Analysis System) database has available.

Thus, the present study, after this introduction, presents a brief analysis of the olive oil industry at national and international level. Subsequently, a theoretical review is carried out, taking as a starting point the theory of resources and capabilities, as well as the model of dynamic capabilities. Next, the methodological section explains the application of the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) method, using the fuzzy sets (fsQCA) approach to establish the study variables. The results are interpreted through a discussion and linked to our research objective, and we also note some practical implications. Finally, we set out a series of conclusions related to the necessary implementation and combination of internationally-oriented strategies in the olive oil industry as a key solution to the issue of commercializing this product in foreign markets.

2. Analysis of the olive oil industry

In some countries, such as Spain, Italy, Greece, Tunisia and Morocco, olive oil production is an important economic activity and has experienced growth in recent years. In addition, other countries such as Argentina, Australia and the United States have begun to produce substantial quantities of olive oil (EXTENDA, 2022). Equally, the rise in demand for olive oil has prompted greater investment in technology and an improvement in production processes, which has enabled greater production efficiency and a reduction in costs (Cubillo-Cobo, 2022).

Spain is the world's leading producer of olive oil, with an average annual production of about 1.5 million tonnes, representing approximately 50 percent of global production, followed by Italy as the second largest producer, and then Greece and Tunisia (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 2023).

According to IOC estimates, in the 2022/2023 season, global production of olive oil stands at around 2.73 million tonnes, while in the previous season it was 3.72 million, which represents a decrease of 19.7 percent. In the case of imports, Spain and Italy are identified as the leading countries in the European Union, with increases of 38.6 percent and 32.2 percent, respectively, relative to the 2021/2022 season.

In the case of exports in the 2022/2023 season, France registered a decline of 63.9 percent compared to the 2021/2022 campaign, followed by Spain with a drop of 35.8 percent, and Italy with 20.9 percent, while in Greece the figure has grown by 14.3 percent. Globally, there has been a 16.6 percent decrease in exports, which can be attributed to low levels of entrepreneurial initiative or difficulties in marketing the product. This, together with climatic factors such as droughts or frosts, and consumers' sensitivity to the variation in olive oil prices at the source, calls for further research and the development of internationalization strategies.

In terms of consumption, International Olive Council (2023) shows that global consumption in the 2022/2023 season is 5.7 percent lower than in the 2021/2022 season. Moreover, Spain heads up the list of countries that have seen a decline in this consumption, with a volume 27.6 percent lower than the previous season, whereas in other countries such as France and Portugal, the reduction is only 5.1 percent and 3.2 percent, respectively. Taking into account the fact that there is a wide range of consumption in olive oil producing areas such as the Mediterranean Basin and that this consumption is in continuous decline, as indicated by Yanguí (2022), it is essential to get back on track and develop key marketing strategies for this product through the internationalization of olive oil producing companies. The focus needs to be on new markets, especially given the opportunities that this product offers in terms of its nutritional benefits and its flavour (International Olive Council, 2023).

In this regard, key internationalization strategies are essential when developing these olive oil businesses and as an opportunity for encouraging growth and generating added value in olive oil producing areas.

Focusing on the research on internationalization in the olive oil industry, Mili and Rodríguez-Zúñiga (2003) explore the new economic context in which international olive oil marketing strategies are framed. They discuss the macrofactors that condition its trade on a global scale, examine the main changes in market regulation and the trend in global supply and demand for products.

Mili (2006) analyzes the current and expected trends in olive oil marketing in non-traditional markets. To that end, he investigates: (1) the justifications for the need to foster the international expansion of olive oil outside the producer markets, and (2) the means of access to markets and marketing strategies. Moral-Pajares and Lanzas-Molina (2009) study the export dynamics in which Andalusian olive oil companies play a role, describe the behaviour of the global demand for virgin olive oil, and analyze the volume, value and distribution by country of olive oil exports from Andalusia in the period 1995-2005. Based on the information obtained, they study the conditions in Andalusia that have shaped the commercial activity of its olive oil companies abroad.

Moral-Pajares *et al.* (2015) analyze the relationship between exports and efficiency in Southern European olive oil companies with websites in 2012, investigating the effects of companies' age, export attitude, percentage of output sold abroad, website quality, and use of online commercial transactions on the companies' efficiency. The results confirm that the exporting companies are more efficient than the non-exporters.

Mozas-Moral *et al.* (2016) study the organic olive oil industry in Spain. As a result of their comparative analysis they identify factors that are favourable for the exportation activity of firms in this industry: the manager's qualifications, specifically a university education; selling the product through the corporate website; a knowledge of online markets; and a presence in online social networks. Medina-Viruel *et al.* (2016) conduct an in-depth exploration of export decisions in the Spanish organic olive oil industry. They analyze the training of those in charge, the legal form, the use of ICT and the probability that the organic olive oil of Spanish companies can be sold abroad.

Mili and Bouhaddane (2018) study the determining factors and future strategies for the internationalization of Spanish olive oil from the perspective of the value chain. Their study thus helps address the concern about how to enhance internationalization to strengthen the industry's competitive position in non-traditional markets. Among other findings, the results reveal the need to make structural and organizational changes, and to develop appropriate marketing and promotional strategies with public institutions. Cano-Rubio *et al.* (2021) delve into the internationalization strategies of olive oil mills, which are centred around social capital and developed within the context of the family business. Their study does not include the conditions for these companies to become international; that is, it does not address the strategies that companies must follow to enter the foreign market.

We find studies that identify a positive relationship between IMOS, INOS and IEOS strategies and internationalization; for example, the study by Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2021) examines how olive oil companies can convert the comparative advantages of their territory derived from the olive grove (culture and tradition, among others) into competitive advantages with which to rapidly internationalize and be Born Global (a firm that has internationalized within three years of its creation and that obtains a minimum of 10 percent of its revenues from foreign sales). They carry out an analysis of four cases of exporting companies (two Born Globals and two non-Born Globals) in southern Spain (Jaén). They include IMOS, INOS and IEOS in their analysis, as well as human, organizational, relational and technological capital. Their study does not indicate the actions that are most commonly used by the exporting companies of the olive oil industry in the internationalization process. In the present study, however, we analyze the combination of key actions within the IMOS, INOS and IEOS strategies that are most commonly used by companies in the olive oil industry to internationalize, regardless of when they begin their international expansion.

Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2023) explore whether companies have implemented IMOS, INOS and IEOS and have acquired

dynamic capabilities centred on knowledge, networks and innovation, as measured by their intellectual capital (human, relational and technological capital). In doing so, they study the determinants of the internationalization of four olive oil companies (two Born Globals and two non-Born Globals) that sell premium Extra Virgin Olive Oil (EVOO) (the highest quality olive oil). The companies are based in Jaén (the province with the highest production in the world). Their analysis is based on a combination of methods: a case study and QCA. However, the contribution made by the present study is that we analyze 246 companies located throughout Spain to identify the key actions undertaken in order to embark on the internationalization process. We also identify the combinations of actions that have been decisive for olive oil companies to begin their foreign market entry.

3. Key strategies for internationalization

One of the factors that can influence the internationalization of firms is the strategies they implement to adapt their business to the volatile foreign market environment (Falahat *et al.*, 2018). Strategic orientation determines firm behavior and is rooted in a set of values that guide the development of a business strategy. All of this facilitates the critical thinking of the firm to survive and thrive in a more competitive global marketplace (Caballero and Cavusgil, 2004).

Strategic orientations determine how the firm will adapt and position its internal resources, capabilities and activities and their combinations, both to deflect threats and to take advantage of opportunities present in an external environment (Venkatraman, 1989; Teece *et al.*, 1997). Thus, our starting point is the theory of resources and capabilities (Penrose, 1959), which implies that the differential endowment of organizational resources is an important determinant of strategy and performance. Resources include assets, capabilities, information, knowledge, technologies, etc., controlled by the firm that enable it to devise and implement strategies that improve its effectiveness and gain a differential advantage in foreign markets (Wernerfelt, 1984; Collis, 1991; Porter, 1991). This theory helps to

explain how strategic approaches can serve as important advantages in the international activities of firms (Knight, 2001).

Teece *et al.* (1997) highlight the importance of the evolution of resource and capabilities theory leading to the dynamic capabilities model, which focuses on a firm's ability to adapt and respond effectively to changes in its business environment. This model suggests that help firms flexibly manage and leverage resources for competitive advantage. Thus, firms that are able to develop and effectively deploy their dynamic capabilities are more likely to succeed in their internationally oriented strategies. This is because these capabilities enable them to adapt quickly to changes in the global environment, identify opportunities in foreign markets and manage the risks associated with internationalization.

In order to carry out the internationalization process, firms not only use their resources and capabilities, but also develop dynamic capabilities, they perform better in the international arena if they combine different strategic orientations (Laukkanen *et al.*, 2013; Paul *et al.*, 2017). Thus, we focus on: (1) international market orientation strategies (IMOS) (Boso *et al.*, 2013; Cadogan *et al.*, 2003; Chung, 2012). (2) International network orientation strategies (INOS) (Moen and Servais, 2002; Sullivan-Mort and Weerawardena, 2006; Ripollés *et al.*, 2012; Weerawardena *et al.*, 2007). (3) International entrepreneurship orientation strategies (IEOS) (Deutscher *et al.*, 2016; Ferreras-Méndez, 2021; Pehrsson, 2016; Escandón-Barbosa *et al.*, 2016; Hagen *et al.*, 2012). All of them have been identified as the most relevant for business internationalization (Acosta *et al.*, 2018, Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2020, 2021, 2023). Furthermore, international market, network and entrepreneurship orientation strategies can enable firms to possess competitive and dynamic advantages (Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2021), which facilitates the allocation of resources (He *et al.*, 2020) for higher international performance.

Therefore, in this work we try to verify the

combination of strategies that are necessary for the internationalization of the olive sector, as well as to know the key actions that these companies have followed to start their expansion into the foreign market. In this way, we will reflect on determining strategies to guide companies in the sector to become international. Specifically, we focus on a set of strategies oriented towards internationalization from the perspective of the market, the network and entrepreneurship. On this basis, six propositions are put forward and tested through the methodology centred on QCA analysis.

International market orientation strategies (IMOS)

These strategies are customer-centric, and are coordinated and planned in relation to the, market knowledge can influence the adaptation of the product to the customer's needs, based on the information obtained about the size of the market, product characteristics, existing infrastructures, working conditions, type of currency or financial transactions (Zakery and Saremi, 2020). Implementing IMOS entails attaining objective knowledge of the foreign market (for example, through market studies), as well as knowledge drawn from the experience that the founder and/or the head of exports may have of participating in previous internationalization processes (for example, knowledge of customers, markets, competitors, institutions, etc.); as such, companies that wish to internationalize should review their employees' experiential knowledge of foreign markets, since it influences and improves market orientation (Faroque *et al.*, 2021). All this makes it possible to adapt the product to the needs, tastes and demands of potential customers. In line with the theoretical approach, companies that develop internationally with experience in internationalization thanks to the export initiatives belonging to any external promotion institution. For example, among the institutions supporting internationalisation, we name the Spanish ICEX¹-Next programme aimed at supporting internationalisation or EXTENDA-An-

¹ ICEX: Spanish Institute of Foreign Trade, the national public agency dedicated to promoting Spanish companies' export activity.

dalucía export and foreign investment,² will be developing initiatives oriented towards the international market (IMOS). The large amount of data gathered about international customers, competitors and potential partners should be leveraged by companies seeking an internationalization strategy (Reimann *et al.*, 2022).

IMOS are therefore necessary for the internationalization of olive oil companies. In line with the above arguments, we put forward the following propositions:

P1: To be international, companies in the olive oil industry need to have managers with international experience (IMOS1).

P2: To be international, companies in the olive oil industry need to participate in internationalization support programmes provided by public foreign trade promotion agencies (IMOS2).

International network orientation strategies (INOS)

According to Kurniawan *et al.* (2020), networking allows companies to acquire, create and share knowledge, and establish and consolidate strategic partnerships with key stakeholders, including customers; it also allows them to rapidly attain information and skills, which consequently makes them strategically agile, as they are well positioned within the core of their strategic network. Attendance at international trade fairs is especially important for acquiring knowledge, experience and information. Not only do companies establish contacts at trade fairs, but they also gain direct knowledge of the tastes of customers and distributors, which allows them to add value to the product on offer. The socializing that occurs at trade fairs plays an important role in building and developing relationships (Gopalakrishnan *et al.*, 2021; Mendonça *et al.*, 2022).

Therefore, INOS are necessary for the internationalization of olive oil companies. In line with the above arguments, we put forward the following propositions:

P3: To be international, companies in the olive oil industry need to create networks with

brand advocates, chefs and commercial distributors (INOS1).

P4: To be international, companies in the olive oil industry need to attend international trade fairs (INOS2).

International entrepreneurship orientation strategies (IEOS)

These are the strategies centred around the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit of the founder and his or her creative capacity (Daengs and Asep, 2020). The propensity to innovate, the attitude towards risk and proactivity affect progress in the early stages of company growth (Zahoor and Lew, 2022) and in the search for opportunities (Silva *et al.*, 2021). As such, the implementation of IEOS becomes a conduit for the company to achieve the competitive advantages needed for internationalization, since innovative behaviour allows it to offer new products/services and capabilities ahead of its competitors (Dias *et al.*, 2021; Zahoor and Lew, 2022).

Therefore, the founder must have the following characteristics: (1) autonomy, referring to the independence and freedom to conceive an idea and carry it to a conclusion; (2) innovativeness, which is the tendency to produce and support different ideas, novelty, experimentation and creative processes that can give rise to a variety of products, services or technological processes that in turn can facilitate the internationalization process, such as the creation of ecological products to break into new markets; (3) proactiveness, which is a forward-looking perspective that accompanies an innovative activity and allows the founder to see new means and ends before others do; (4) proclivity, referring to the inclination to enter foreign markets, which is associated with the founder's values; and (5) competitive aggressiveness, which is the propensity to successfully enter the international market while challenging competitors, for example, engaging in entrepreneurship and developing international business by opening commercial offices and new locations in other countries (Kreiser *et al.*, 2002).

² EXTENDA-Andalusia Export and Foreign Investment: Andalusian public company for the promotion of foreign trade.

Table 1 - Keys to business internationalization.

Key strategies	Author/Authors	Brief description	Variables
IMOS	Andreou <i>et al.</i> (2020) Daengs and Asep (2020) Zakery and Saremi (2020) Kamarulzaman <i>et al.</i> (2021) Faroque <i>et al.</i> (2021) Kalil-Reimann <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Managers and/or head of internationalization having experiential knowledge	Managers with experience of internationalization
		Objective knowledge of the international market	Participation in internationalization support programmes (public foreign trade promotion agencies,* such as ICEX-Next in Spain)
INOS	Kalafsky and Gress (2020) Kurniawan <i>et al.</i> (2020) Sanyal <i>et al.</i> (2020) Kryeziu <i>et al.</i> (2021) Mendonça <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Creation of international networks	The olive oil company has brand advocates, chefs, international distributors
		Attendance at international trade fairs	The olive oil company attends international trade fairs
IEOS	Paul and Rosado-Serrano (2019) Zahoor and Lew (2021) Dias <i>et al.</i> (2021) Silva <i>et al.</i> (2021) Forcadell and Úbeda (2022)	Characteristics of the founder: innovation (offering innovative products)	Offer innovative products (for example, organic EVOO or related to sustainability)
		Characteristics of the founder: proactiveness, proclivity, competitive aggressiveness	International business units as an example of entrepreneurship (new commercial offices to develop the brand abroad)

Source: Own elaboration.

* Public foreign trade promotion agencies: ICEX-Spain, export and investment (at national level). An example would be EXTENDA-Andalusia, export and foreign investment (at regional level). These agencies help companies by offering information, training and internationalization support programmes. Henceforth they will be referred to as ICEX and EXTENDA.

IEOS are therefore necessary for the internationalization of olive oil companies. In line with the above arguments, we put forward the following propositions:

P5: To be international, companies in the olive oil industry need to offer innovative products (for example, organic EVOO or sustainability-related products) (IEOS1).

P6: To be international, companies in the olive oil industry need to have commercial offices abroad as a form of entrepreneurship (IEOS2).

In summary, as shown in Table 1, in this paper we will study the combination of key actions within the strategies cited in the propositions—IMOS (experiential knowledge and objective knowledge of the international market), INOS (network of international contacts and attendance at international fairs) and IEOS (founder's characteristics: offering innovative products and international business units)—that are necessary for olive oil companies to be international.

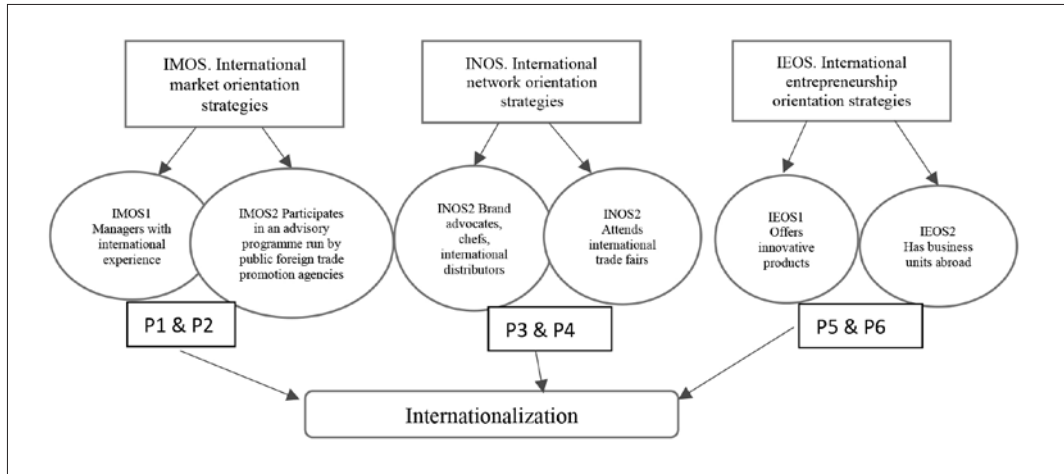
Below, we use the QCA method to examine

the key actions – encompassed within the IMOS, INOS and IEOS strategies – and the combinations thereof needed for the internationalization of olive oil companies. This paper is an empirical novelty for the following reasons. The few studies that jointly study the above propositions in the olive sector apply them to four cases located in southern Spain (Jaén) (Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2021; 2023). In contrast, in this paper we extend the sample (246 exporting firms) and the scope of application (Spain).

4. Methodology

This study focuses on analysing the conditions for the internationalization of Spanish olive oil companies. To do so, we have used information from the SABI database, which is produced by Informa D&B, a company responsible for Spanish company databases, and contains the characteristics and financial and marketing information of companies from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal).

Figure 1 - Internationalization strategies.



Source: Own elaboration.

To define the population under study, we obtained a register of the entities listed under CNAE code 1043, “Olive oil production”. Furthermore, from the olive oil producers and traders listed under code 1043, we selected those with international activity. The total number of companies selected as exporters was 246 out of a total of 541 available companies, which represents 45.47 percent of the total. The criterion for classifying them as exporters was an affirmative response given by these olive oil companies (yes, they export).

We study the variables included in the different internationalization strategies:

- IMOS (strategies oriented towards the international market): managers with experience of internationalization (IMOS1); guidance provided in internationalization support pro-

grammes through initiatives run by public foreign trade promotion agencies (for example, ICEX in Spain and EXTENDA in Andalusia) (IMOS2).

- INOS (strategies aimed at building international networks): the olive oil company has brand advocates, chefs, international distributors (INOS1); the company attends international trade fairs (INOS2).
- IEOS (entrepreneurship strategies for the internationalization of companies): the company offers innovative products (IEOS1); the company has commercial offices abroad as a form of entrepreneurship (IEOS2).

By way of summary, they are set out in Figure 1.

The characteristics of this study are summarized in the Table 2.

Table 2 - Technical data sheet of the study.

<i>Study universe</i>	Olive oil mills in the SABI database listed under CNAE code 1043: the analysis focuses on 246 internationalized organizations out of a total of 541 companies.
<i>Geographical scope</i>	Spain
<i>Time frame</i>	March 2022 to May 2022
<i>Population register</i>	Iberian Balance Sheet Analysis System (SABI)
<i>Sample size</i>	246 olive oil mills considered exporters according to CNAE code 1043 in the SABI database
<i>Sample unit</i>	Olive oil producer and trader with international activity registered under «olive oil production» National Classification of Economic Activities (CNAE) number 1043.

Source: Own elaboration.

The QCA technique, which is based on Boolean algebra, uses a verbal, conceptual and mathematical language that yields both qualitative and quantitative results, combining the main advantages of the two (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). The application of this technique enables the systematic analysis of a set of cases to determine causal patterns in the form of relationships of necessity and sufficiency between a set of conditions and an outcome (Schneider and Wagemann, 2010).

The QCA allows researchers to identify complex interactions and address equifinality, the notion that different combinations of explanatory variables can explain the same outcome of interest. In contrast, statistical analysis allows quantifying the net effect of individual explanatory variables and the causal relationships between explanatory variables and outcome variables (Meuer and Rupietta, 2017). This is why the QCA method has been chosen to find out the different combinations of actions that can lead a company in the olive sector to become international.

The theories included in this paper (EOMI, EORI and EOEI) have been tested through the in-depth study of four cases. Thus, Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2021) carry out a qualitative case study and Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2023) include the combination of the 4-case study and the QCA. Moreover, these cases are located in southern Spain (Jaén). Therefore, previous research has focused on the in-depth study of cases located in a geographical area with specific characteristics. However, in the current study we have expanded the number of cases (246 and the geographical scope to the peninsula).

The QCA was originally developed for the analysis of small and medium-sized samples (Ragin, 1987). However, more and more researchers are using this method to analyse large datasets (Cooper and Glaesser, 2010; Meuer and Rupietta, 2017; Thomann and Maggett, 2017). Traditional case-oriented analysis is the thorough analysis of particular cases using deep contextual and intensive knowledge of the cases with a small sample size N (e.g. studies by Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa, 2021; 2023). However, QCA can be applied to different sample sizes

and case numbers alone do not justify its use (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012; Thiem, 2017). Therefore, QCA is applied at large N when the research is oriented towards conditions comprising cases primarily in terms of a well-defined set of conditions. In this way, results are interpreted as patterns across cases and are not complemented by an in-depth qualitative analysis of individual cases (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2013; Seawright and Collier, 2010). Thus, while the case-oriented approach (small N) is oriented towards the complementary use of within-case knowledge, the condition-oriented approach (large N) is based on: (1) inference of cases, (2) in relations between sets, (3) in knowledge of conceptual relations rather than particular cases. Thus, a large N sample does not preclude an interest in particular cases (Thomann and Maggetti, 2017).

Fuzzy-set QCA (fsQCA) has become established as one of the most widely-used QCA variants as it overcomes one of the main drawbacks and critiques levelled at the original model, known as csQCA; namely, its strictly dichotomous approach (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). The fsQCA method is widely used in business and management research (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012; Rihoux *et al.*, 2013; Denk and Lehtinen, 2014), as well as in entrepreneurship and innovation studies (e.g., Cheng *et al.*, 2013; Dai and Huang, 2015; Mas-Verdú *et al.*, 2015; Wu and Huarng, 2015; Covin *et al.*, 2016; Kraus *et al.*, 2016). Unlike more quantitative methods that rely on correlation, fsQCA seeks to establish logical connections between combinations of causal conditions (conjunctural causality) and an outcome, resulting in rules that summarize the sufficiency between subsets of all possible combinations based on their causal conditions and the outcome. In this sense Woodside (2010) points out that fsQCA achieves both high generalization and professionalization.

One of the main reasons why fsQCA has been used in this work is because it connects qualitative and comparative analysis (Kent, 2005; Crilly, 2011; Aguilera-Caracuel *et al.*, 2014), allowing us to understand which actions are relevant for the internationalization of the olive sector and how to combine internationalization strategies to achieve it. Ultimately, fsQCA is well suit-

Table 3. Variables used for the fsQCA technique

<i>Outcome variable</i>	<i>Description</i>	
Oleo_export	Exporting olive oil organizations according to CNAE code 1043 in the SABI database	Dichotomous variable
<i>Condition variables</i>	<i>Description</i>	
IMOS1	Managers with experience of internationalization	Dichotomous variable
IMOS2	The company participates in internationalization advisory programmes run by public foreign trade promotion agencies	Dichotomous variable
INOS1	The olive oil company has brand advocates, chefs, international distributors	Dichotomous variable
INOS2	The olive oil company attends international trade fairs	Dichotomous variable
IEOS1	The company offers innovative products. To do this, it develops ecological products and products for new niche markets such as those related to sustainability	Categorical variable
IEOS2	Number of business units abroad or commercial offices opened abroad (with commercial offices considered elements of international entrepreneurship)	Categorical variable

Source: Own elaboration.

ed for social science studies due to its ability to meet the generality and precision of the results, as well as to capture the complexity of causally relevant conditions (Kraus *et al.*, 2018).

For the correct application of this technique, we follow the stages recommended in the literature (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009): the calibration, where needed, of both the condition and the outcome variables; the subsequent analysis of necessity; and finally, the analysis of sufficiency. It is not necessary to a priori assume linear or other types of relationships between the explanatory and the explained variables. Compared to multiple regression, fsQCA has greater explanatory power and can be used alone provide more nuanced information on the relationships under study (Gligor and Bozkurt, 2020). In addition, fsQCA assumes asymmetry, equifinality and causal complexity, thus addressing some of the limitations of multiple regression (Ragin *et al.*, 2006).

In short, fsQCA yields one or several combinations sufficient for a specific outcome; for example, $X1 \sim X2 * X3$ is sufficient for the outcome (Y). Employing the symbolic notation of this technique

$$X1 \sim X2 * X3 \rightarrow Y$$

where $X1$, $X2$ and $X3$ are antecedents; Y , is the outcome; $*$ the union and \sim the absence or nega-

tion, in this case the opposite value to $X2$ ($1 - X2$).

The fsQCA technique is applied to the different variables related to strategies oriented towards internationalization. The variables that make up the proposed model are detailed in Table 3. The result variable is: exporting companies in the olive oil sector, which leads to the purpose of the analysis, which is to find out the combination of actions followed by internationalized companies in the sector. The purpose of this variable is to find out the actions taken by companies that do not export in order to initiate their internationalization process.

The categorical variables considered have been calibrated according to Rihoux and Ragin (2009), who stress the importance of careful calibration to ensure the validity and accuracy of the results. To do so, we have followed: (1) Identify the set of cases to be analyzed and define the membership criteria. (2) Determine the thresholds. (3) Use the thresholds to assign membership values to the cases.

The categorical variable EOEI1 “the company offers innovative products” has been identified as developing environmentally friendly products and new niche markets such as those related to sustainability. In this case, following Rihoux and Ragin (2009), the variable has been created from a combination of variables related to internation-

al entrepreneurship and innovation; namely, the production of ecological and sustainable products (econ), the focus on new international activities such as olive oil tourism or oleotourism (oleotur), and belonging to agri-food innovation collectives such as the British Retail Council or Industrial Food Standard (innova). So, $IEOS1 = (econ + oleotur + innova)$ divided by 3, giving a weight of 33% to each simple variable that comprises the complex variable IEOS1. The categorical variable EOEI2 number of business units abroad and commercial offices opened abroad (with commercial offices considered elements of international entrepreneurship).

5. Results and discussion

To obtain the results, a QCA has been carried out, specifically using the fsQCA approach. The aim of this analysis is to identify the most commonly used actions and combinations thereof that are most beneficial for exporting olive oil companies in their internationalization process. The actions in question are those included within the international market (IMOS), international network (INOS) and international entrepreneurship orientation strategies (IEOS).

It should be noted that, as an initial step, an analysis of necessity was performed to confirm that no single condition variable exceeds the recommended limit of 0.9 established by Ragin (2006). Then, following the analysis of the truth table, Table 4 presents the results of the fsQCA for the key internationalization factors of the analyzed olive oil organizations taken from the SABI database. The findings allow us draw attention to these factors for other companies

seeking to internationalize. The solution table includes set-theoretic consistency scores for each configuration as well as for the overall solution, with a value above the recommended minimum threshold of 0.75 (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). The causal configurations have been ordered from highest to lowest raw coverage.

Overall, the model presents a total coverage of 66.44 percent, which denotes the proportion of exporting olive oil organizations explained by the six variables included in the analysis, and a total consistency of 92.47 percent of the cases, which indicates the reliability of the model. Thus, the most commonly used combination of actions in the largest number of internationalized companies are presented in the first three configurations, as these are the ones that have the greatest coverage.

The results reveal that the first configuration, which has a raw coverage of 0.34, includes key factors such as managers' experience in internationalization; the company having brand advocates, chefs, journalists and distributors at its disposal; and, lastly, a commitment to offering innovative products (developing ecological products and products for new niche markets, such as those related to sustainability).

In the second configuration, which comes close to the first with a raw coverage of 0.30, the key factors considered in the analysis are the company's participation in advisory programmes for internationalization, such as the internationalization support offered by the public organizations ICEX and EXTENDA at national and regional level; the company having brand advocates, chefs, journalists and distributors at its disposal; and lastly, the company opting to

Table 4 - Results of the fsQCA.

	<i>Raw coverage</i>	<i>Unique coverage</i>	<i>Consistency</i>
IMOS1*INOS1*IEOS1	0.348259	0.144129	0.945946
IMOS2*INOS1*IEOS1	0.300249	0.081096	0.916818
IMOS2*INOS1*IEOS1*IEOS2	0.268358	0.053235	0.932734
IMOS2*IEOS1*IEOS2	0.18408	0.068109	0.918114
Model coverage	0.6644		
Model consistency	0.9247		

Source: Own elaboration.

diversifying its international activity by offering innovative products, as well as ecological products and products aimed at new niche markets such as those related to sustainability.

Given the close values for the configurations of the different models, we comment on the third, with a raw coverage of 0.26. In this combination, the key factors for internationalization are participating in public advisory programmes run by public foreign trade promotion entities; having access to brand advocates, chefs, journalists and distributors; offering innovative products (developing ecological products and products for new niche markets such as those related to sustainability); and lastly, opting to open commercial offices and business units abroad.

The results show that in order for companies in the olive oil industry to consider pursuing the goal of exporting, they must have a manager or head of internationalization with experiential knowledge of other internationalization processes (IMOS1) as well as objective knowledge of the foreign market through participation in advisory programmes run by public foreign trade promotion agencies (IMOS2); they must also create international networks through relationships with brand advocates, chefs and commercial distributors (INOS1); and the founder must have the traits of innovativeness, proclivity and proactiveness, as well as the autonomy and competitive aggressiveness to offer innovative products (IEOS1) and open business units abroad (IEOS2). We also find that the variable capturing attendance at international trade fairs (INOS2) has not been used by exporting companies to start their internationalization process, so proposition 4 is the only one out of the six that is not confirmed.

The strategic action that international olive oil companies in this study have not used is creating international networks by attending international trade fairs. However, there are studies that highlight the positive relationship between attending international trade fairs and business internationalization. For instance, Gerschewski *et al.* (2020) state that networking at trade fairs can have positive implications for the company, especially when it comes to entering international markets. Similarly, according to Bettis-Outland

et al. (2021) international trade fairs are considered important events for promoting exports, as they make it easier to adapt to the customer. Silva *et al.* (2022) highlight the positive implications of attending international trade fairs for business internationalization, since companies make maximum use of networks to access foreign markets. Therefore, it would be worth further exploring this variable in future studies.

Focusing on research related to the internationalization of the olive oil sector, Mili and Rodríguez-Zúñiga (2003) explore the new economic context in which international olive oil marketing strategies are framed. Mili (2006) analyses the current and expected trends in the marketing of olive oil in non-traditional markets. Moral-Pajares and Lanza-Molina (2009) describe how world demand for virgin olive oil is behaving. Moral-Pajares *et al.* (2015) analyse the relationship between export efficiency of southern European olive sector firms with websites. Mozas-Moral *et al.* (2016) study the organic olive oil sector in Spain. Mili and Bouhaddane (2018) study the determinants and future strategies for the internationalization of Spanish olive oil from a value chain perspective. Cano-Rubio *et al.* (2021) delve into the internationalization strategies of olive oil mills, which are focused on social capital and in the context of the family business. Finally, we find works that positively relate EOMI, EORI and EOEI strategies to internationalization, as in the work of Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2021, 2023), who carry out a study of four cases located in southern Spain (Jaén).

In short, after the study carried out here, we observe the shortage of research on the internationalization of the olive oil industry, especially papers related to strategic actions that facilitate this international expansion. Thus, our contribution is that the present paper includes the key actions and the combinations thereof most commonly used by exporting olive oil companies, which are then presented in recommendations for managers or entrepreneurs to put into practice in their international expansion. To that end, we have used a wide-ranging sample of companies throughout Spain that produce and export olive oil. This reinforces the

results obtained, since the only related studies we are aware of are those by Martos-Martínez and Muñoz-Guarasa (2021, 2023), which analyze the IMOS, INOS and IEOS strategies of four companies in the olive oil industry of the province of Jaén. Therefore, the main contribution of the present paper is the analysis of the strategic actions and combinations thereof most commonly used by 246 olive oil companies located throughout Spain.

6. Conclusion: practical implications and limitations

This study examines the strategic actions and combinations thereof most commonly used by olive oil companies in their internationalization process. Our starting point has been the internationalization strategies from a previous theoretical framework: IMOS, INOS and IEOS. The analysis focuses on the companies that manufacture olive oil in Spain, since this country is the world's largest producer of olive oil.

Therefore, if the owners/managers of olive oil companies want to be international these actions are shown to be the most commonly associated with successful internationalization and should be considered by managers:

- On the one hand, they should carry out the actions most commonly used by companies in this industry in their foreign market entry process. They should thus (1) acquire experiential knowledge from the founder's and/or manager's experience of having participated in internationalization processes with other companies; (2) create contacts in the foreign market through relationships with international brand advocates, chefs and distributors; and (3) offer innovative products by creating ecological products and products for new niche markets, such as those related to sustainability (for example, organic oil or olive oil-based cosmetics), as well as developing actions related to sustainability (such as olive oil tourism or oleotourism).
- On the other hand, they should adopt other strategic actions that have been carried out, albeit by relatively fewer by international-

ized companies. Said actions are as follows: (1) gain knowledge of clients, competitors and international partners through participation in internationalization support programmes run by foreign trade promotion agencies (for example, ICEX in Spain); and (2) the owner/manager should be proactive and open business offices or business units abroad. Finally, the one action that the analyzed companies have not used to become international is attendance at international trade fairs; this finding feeds into the gap on whether or not attending international fairs is important for internationalization.

Introducing sustainability into trade relations is dominating the international debate with the aim of creating fairer links between areas and countries. Thus, the social dimension is both an economic and environmental challenge facing the agricultural sector (Fort *et al.*, 2025). The olive sector is characterized by rural areas with small-holder farmers, and increasing the power of these farmers through capacity building initiatives, access to financial resources and technical training will enable them to fully participate in ecological and technological developments to cope with the effects of climate change (Ballet *et al.*, 2009) and the dynamism of the international market. As a result, rural areas would benefit from improved infrastructure, education and access to markets (Grumiller *et al.*, 2018). This will enable them to have a more internationally competitive sector. Therefore, it is recommended that institutions promote the following economic policies:

- Transform the olive sector into an inclusive segment, boosting exports with an equitable distribution of benefits (Fort *et al.*, 2025).
- Promote national marketing and branding strategies for bottled oil exports and boost quality assurance (Fort *et al.*, 2025).
- Create incentives for sustainable production and promote sustainability certifications.
- Promote sustainable trade agreements such as environmental protection and labour rights to ensure that international trade in olive oil is fair and sustainable.
- Provide education and training programmes for producers and workers in the olive sector on sustainable practices and environmental

management, which improves the efficiency and competitiveness of the sector.

This paper makes a threefold contribution. First, we test for the IMOS, INOS and IEOS strategies in a sample of 246 companies located in Spain. Second, we identify the key actions that the internationalized olive oil companies have implemented. Thirdly, we determine the combinations of actions most commonly used by these companies for their international market entry. Finally, we formulate a set of recommendations for companies' owners/managers that can guide them in the process of business internationalization. We also propose a set of public policies to promote the sustainable development of the sector, which contributes to the social and economic inclusion of the territory. Furthermore, after conducting this analysis, we confirm the scarcity of research on the determinants of olive oil companies' internationalization. As such, our research contributes to and complements the existing literature with new knowledge

Finally, in future research, efforts should be made to study new key actions (for example, based on digitalization) within the IMOS, INOS and IEOS strategies which can lead to olive oil companies becoming international. The coverage of the model has been high (66 per cent). Despite this, there are approximately one third of exporting companies that do not follow any of the combination of actions proposed. Therefore, it is proposed to analyze the generalization of the results to other olive oil producing countries and other agrifood sectors. Thus, it is proposed to apply these results in companies located in the producing countries of the Mediterranean Basin, since olive oil is produced, consumed and exported to more than 165 countries. In this study, some contextual variables such as size, age, legal form have not been considered, which is why in future research it is proposed to carry out the study applying some control variable.

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