

Refining SME Internationalization Strategies to Boost Innovation and Business Performance in Italian Healthcare Organizations

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Abstract

Nowadays, Italian Healthcare Organizations face mounting challenges in innovation and international integration. This study explores how Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise internationalization strategies can be adapted to IHOs to enhance service delivery, establish international collaborations and drive technological innovation. Based on the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Theory, this study argues that IHOs can leverage specialized medical expertise, digital transformation and strategic partnerships to strengthen global positioning.

Using a literature synthesis methodology combined with logical deduction, this study examines the feasibility, advantages and challenges of implementing SME-inspired internationalization frameworks in IHOs. The findings highlight three primary success factors: a) Specialization in high-demand medical fields to differentiate services and attract international patients; b) Digital transformation, including AI-driven diagnostics, telemedicine and data-driven healthcare models, to improve service efficiency and global accessibility; c) International partnerships with research institutions, technology firms and foreign healthcare providers to facilitate cross-border knowledge exchange and market expansion.

Despite the potential benefits, regulatory barriers, bureaucratic inefficiencies and technological adoption challenges may hinder implementation. The study highlights the need for organizational agility, policy reforms and investment in digital literacy to enable internationalization.

This study provides strategic insights for healthcare managers and policymakers, outlining managerial implications, challenges, and future research directions for integrating SME-based internationalization strategies into IHOs.

Keywords: Italian Healthcare Organizations, Business Paradigm transformation, Internationalization Strategy, SMEs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has had a profound impact on the healthcare sector, compelling organizations to adopt innovative strategies to ensure their competitiveness in an increasingly interconnected world (Porter & Teisberg, 2006; Dunning, 2000). The Italian healthcare system, distinguished by its provision of high-quality care and universal accessibility, is under pressure to modernise its operational frameworks in order to keep pace with technological advancements, evolving patient expectations and intensifying global competition (Knight & Liesch, 2016; Mezger, 2014).

As the demand for more efficient, patient-centred and cost-effective healthcare solutions grows, Italian Healthcare Organizations (IHOs) should reconsider traditional management and service delivery models. Technological innovations, including artificial intelligence, telemedicine, blockchain-based patient records and predictive analytics, have transformed healthcare systems worldwide, leading to increased efficiency and accessibility (Dwivedi et al., 2019; He et al., 2021). Concurrently, evolving patient expectations necessitate more personalised treatment options, seamless digital interactions and cross-border healthcare services (Covin & Miller, 2014). These shifts necessitate that IHOs adopt strategic frameworks that enhance their global positioning and adaptability.

A type of business that provides valuable insights into internationalisation strategies is Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise (SME). These enterprises have achieved success in expanding into foreign markets by utilising agility, market specialisation and strategic alliances. This enables them to overcome resource limitations and compete effectively on a global scale (Lu & Beamish, 2001; Cavusgil & Knight, 2015). Specifically, SMEs focus on niche markets, use cross-border collaborations and prioritise digital transformation to gain a competitive edge (Rialp et al., 2005; Au-Yong-Oliveira et al., 2024). Given these advantages, IHOs can adopt SME-inspired internationalisation strategies to drive innovation, increase competitiveness and expand healthcare services internationally.

The present study aims to develop a theoretical framework based on a qualitative evaluation of the existing scientific literature by answering the following research question:

How can IHOs adapt SME internationalization strategies to boost innovation and business performance?

This study explores how IHOs can implement SME-based internationalisation strategies to enhance their global integration and business performance. The analysis is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks:

- a) *Resource-Based View* (RBV), which highlights the importance of leveraging unique, valuable, and inimitable resources to gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). In the context of healthcare, these resources include specialised medical expertise, high-quality patient care models and strong institutional networks.
- b) *Dynamic Capabilities Theory* (DCT) (Teece, 2018) emphasises the need for organisations to develop strategic agility, adaptability and continuous innovation in response to external market changes. By embracing digital health solutions, forming global partnerships and restructuring operational workflows, IHOs can position themselves as leaders in international healthcare.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives aims to provide a strategic roadmap for IHOs seeking to expand their international footprint, foster innovation, and improve service delivery. This approach is not only aligned with global healthcare trends but also ensures long-term sustainability and resilience in an evolving international healthcare landscape.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The globalisation of healthcare systems demands continuous innovation, competitiveness, and adaptability particularly for IHOs. The mounting pressures from technological advancements, evolving patient expectations and global competition necessitate the development of new strategies by IHOs to ensure their continued competitiveness. A fruitful framework for enhancing global market positioning, fostering innovation and improving service delivery can be drawn from the internationalization strategies employed by SMEs. This strategic adaptation is underpinned by two key theoretical frameworks: Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Theory. To successfully navigate current challenges, IHOs should develop strategic approaches that enhance their business performance, drive innovation, and improve service delivery. SMEs provide a valuable model, having expanded their operations internationally by leveraging agility, innovation, and strategic alliances. Despite resource constraints, SMEs often achieve business success in international markets by focusing on niche segments, establishing cross-border collaborations, and incorporating digital solutions into their operational models (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; Lu & Beamish, 2001). These strategies enable SMEs to differentiate themselves, adapt to dynamic conditions, and build strong international networks - approaches that IHOs can adopt to boost their customer-centric performance and operational synergy performance.

This strategic adaptation is anchored in two key theoretical frameworks. The RBV theorizes that organisations achieve sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). IHOs, much like SMEs, possess a set of strategic assets that can serve as key differentiators in the international market. These include:

- Specialized medical expertise, particularly in high-demand fields such as oncology, neurology, and robotic surgery (Porter & Teisberg, 2006; Pisano, 2006).
- Strong institutional and research networks facilitate global medical collaborations and knowledge-sharing (Hennart, 2019).
- High-quality patient care models can be leveraged for medical tourism and cross-border healthcare partnerships (Connell, 2020; Lunt et al., 2014).

The effective utilization of these resources enables IHOs to achieve superior business performance by distinguishing themselves from competitors, enhancing their international reputation, and increasing patient volumes and research collaborations. However, RBV also highlights the need for continuous resource development, as static advantages erode over time unless organizations invest in innovation and capability-building (Hitt et al., 2016).

While RBV focuses on possessing strategic resources, DCT emphasizes the ability to continuously reconfigure and adapt these resources in response to changing conditions (Teece, 2018; Helfat et al., 2007). In the rapidly evolving global healthcare landscape, IHOs must cultivate dynamic capabilities that enable them to:

- Integrate digital health solutions - such as AI-assisted diagnostics, telemedicine platforms, and blockchain-secured patient records - to enhance service efficiency and patient outcomes (Agarwal et al., 2020).
- Form strategic international alliances to facilitate knowledge-sharing, joint research, and cross-border patient care, thereby expanding market reach and innovation (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).
- Restructure operational workflows to enhance organizational agility and regulatory adaptability, ensuring compliance with global standards and improving operational efficiency (Janssen et al., 2020).

DCT underscores that merely possessing resources is insufficient for sustained success; organizations must demonstrate the capacity for continuous adaptation and effective resource utilization to achieve long-term business performance. Consequently, IHOs must invest in workforce training, regulatory alignment, and digital literacy to build the agility needed for international growth.

This study aims to provide a strategic roadmap for IHOs seeking to expand their global footprint by integrating SME internationalization principles with RBV and DCT. It explores how IHOs can translate SME-inspired strategies into actionable insights to enhance business performance, focusing on:

- a) Developing specialized Centres of Excellence to attract international patients and research collaborations, thereby increasing revenue and global reputation.
- b) Investing in digital transformation to optimize healthcare delivery, reduce costs, and improve international accessibility.
- c) Forming cross-border partnerships to facilitate knowledge exchange, clinical trials, and joint ventures in medical innovation, driving innovation and operational synergies.

Applying SME internationalization strategies is expected to enhance IHOs' global competitiveness, drive innovation, and establish them as leaders in the international healthcare market. In an era of accelerated globalization and digital transformation, IHOs must transcend conventional paradigms and adopt strategies that deliver measurable business outcomes. By examining SMEs' success in foreign markets, IHOs can identify strategies - such as specialization, technology integration, and international partnerships - that strengthen their performance. Anchored in RBV and DCT, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how IHOs can cultivate competitive advantages, adapt to dynamic environments, and achieve sustainable international growth.

In the following sections, the theoretical background will be examined in greater depth, with reference to the RBV and DCT as they pertain to business performance in IHOs.

2.1 Resource-Based View and Its Application to IHOs

The Resource-Based View (RBV) provides a foundational framework for understanding how organizations achieve sustainable competitive advantage by leveraging VRIN resources (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993; Wernerfelt, 1984). Initially developed to explain firm-level strategic advantage in competitive markets, RBV has been widely applied to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to analyze how these firms overcome resource constraints, leverage niche expertise, and enhance business performance through innovation-driven strategies and network collaborations (Grant, 1996; Teece et al., 1997). This approach is particularly relevant for knowledge-intensive industries like healthcare, where business performance is driven by intellectual capital, research capabilities, and institutional partnerships rather than tangible assets (Newbert, 2007; Hitt et al., 2016).

In the healthcare sector, IHOs possess strategic resources aligned with RBV principles, such as highly specialized medical expertise, patient-centered care models, and a reputation for high-quality service delivery (Pisano, 2006; Lepak & Snell, 1999). These resources enable IHOs to achieve superior business performance by improving patient outcomes, increasing patient satisfaction, and attracting international patients and partnerships, which in turn enhance financial sustainability and global reputation. Technological innovation further amplifies these performance outcomes. Recent studies highlight how AI-driven diagnostics, digital healthcare platforms, and precision medicine improve operational efficiency, reduce costs, and expand patient reach, strengthening IHOs' market presence and revenue streams (Pisano, 2006; Agarwal et al., 2020).

Specialization and Centers of Excellence as Drivers of Business Performance

Specialization in high-demand medical fields is a key RBV-driven strategy that directly boosts business performance for IHOs by attracting international patients, increasing revenue, and enhancing global competitiveness (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; Hennart, 2019). Research shows that Centers of Excellence (CoEs) specializing in areas such as oncology, neurology, and advanced surgical procedures significantly improve performance outcomes for hospitals and clinics. These CoEs drive higher patient volumes, generate revenue from medical tourism, and foster clinical and research partnerships, all of which contribute to financial success and position IHOs as global leaders (Porter & Teisberg, 2006; Fahy, 2000; Naamati-Schneider & Gabay, 2022).

The rise of medical tourism amplifies these performance benefits. Patients worldwide seek treatment at institutions offering cutting-edge therapies and world-class expertise, leading to increased patient inflows and revenue for IHOs that prioritize specialization and quality (Connell, 2020; Lunt et al., 2014). By leveraging these strengths, IHOs enhance their financial sustainability and global market share, ensuring long-term business success.

Leveraging Digital Transformation for International Expansion

Digital transformation is another critical driver of business performance for IHOs. Technologies such as telemedicine, AI-driven diagnostics, and blockchain-based patient record systems improve service efficiency, reduce operational costs, and expand patient accessibility across borders (Agarwal et al., 2020). Research indicates that IHOs investing in AI-assisted treatment planning, real-time patient monitoring, and predictive analytics achieve measurable performance gains, including cost reductions, higher patient volumes, and improved service quality (Dwivedi et al., 2019; He et al., 2021). These advancements enable IHOs to maintain a competitive edge and achieve financial success in international markets.

However, maximizing these performance benefits requires addressing challenges such as regulatory barriers, interoperability of digital health records, and cybersecurity risks (Janssen et al., 2020). To optimize business performance, IHOs must invest in standardizing data governance, enhancing cross-border healthcare legislation, and building digital capabilities. These efforts ensure seamless operations, lower costs, and improve service delivery, further strengthening financial and market outcomes. By applying RBV principles, IHOs can achieve superior business performance through specialization, technological leadership, and international partnerships. Establishing Centers of Excellence in high-demand medical fields drives performance outcomes such as increased patient volumes, higher revenue from medical tourism, and enhanced global reputation. Similarly, investing in AI-driven innovations and digital infrastructure improves operational efficiency, reduces costs, and expands market reach, all critical for financial sustainability. To fully realize these gains, IHOs must address regulatory challenges, invest in digital skills, and strengthen collaborations, ensuring long-term success in the global healthcare landscape.

2.2 Dynamic Capabilities and Strategic Adaptation in Healthcare

The RBV focuses on static resource advantages, in contrast to DCT, which emphasizes organizational adaptability, strategic agility, and continuous innovation to achieve superior business performance in rapidly changing environments (Teece, 2007, 2018; Helfat et al., 2007; Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009; Naamati-Schneider et al., 2025). Dynamic capabilities enable firms to identify opportunities, capitalize on them, and reconfigure resources to maintain a competitive edge, particularly in industries facing technological disruptions and regulatory complexities (Winter, 2003; Kindström et al., 2013; Fainshmidt et al., 2016). For IHOs, these capabilities are critical to improving operational efficiency, enhancing patient outcomes, and ensuring long-term financial stability in a globalized healthcare landscape.

In the context of public healthcare systems, IHOs often face challenges such as bureaucratic rigidity and slow adoption of technological innovations (Zollo & Winter, 2002; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Lämsä et al., 2006). However, by embracing digital health innovations - such as artificial intelligence (AI), telemedicine, blockchain-based medical records, and digital patient management systems - IHOs can significantly enhance their business performance. These technologies streamline service delivery, optimize workflows, reduce operational costs, and improve patient care quality (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Fichman et al., 2011; Agarwal et al., 2020; Naamati-Schneider & Zaks, 2021). For example, AI-driven diagnostics and predictive analytics enable faster, more accurate treatments, leading to higher patient satisfaction and better health outcomes, which are key performance indicators for IHOs.

Research suggests that cross-border telehealth services, AI-driven diagnostics, and predictive analytics can serve as key differentiators for IHOs, directly contributing to their global competitiveness and financial success (Mezger, 2014; Knight & Liesch, 2016; Dwivedi et al., 2019; He et al., 2021). These technologies allow IHOs to attract international patients, reduce treatment costs, and improve clinical outcomes, particularly in response to aging populations, pandemic preparedness, and rising healthcare consumerism. By leveraging these innovations, IHOs can achieve measurable performance gains, such as increased patient volumes, higher revenue from medical tourism, and improved operational efficiency.

Furthermore, the ability to form strategic alliances and cultivate international partnerships is a critical driver of business performance for IHOs. Collaborative efforts between hospitals, research institutions, and technology firms facilitate knowledge transfer, accelerate innovation, and expand market access, leading to improved service quality and financial growth (Lu & Beamish, 2001; Narula & Dunning, 2010; Zahra et al., 2006). In healthcare, such partnerships have resulted in significant advancements, including AI-powered diagnostics, large-scale data-driven healthcare initiatives, and enhanced patient care models (Verhoef et al., 2021; Porter & Teisberg, 2006; Rialp et al., 2005). These collaborations enable IHOs to share resources, reduce costs, and innovate more rapidly, directly contributing to their competitive advantage and long-term sustainability.

The growing adoption of open innovation models in healthcare and biotechnology further enhances IHOs' business performance by accelerating the development and implementation of cutting-edge medical technologies (Chesbrough, 2003; Bogers et al., 2019). Through network-based collaborations, IHOs can overcome resource constraints, improve operational efficiency, and drive patient-centered innovation, positioning themselves as leaders in a globally competitive healthcare environment (Laursen & Salter, 2006; Hossain, 2022). These partnerships lead to faster innovation cycles, reduced research and development costs, and the ability to offer advanced treatments, all of which strengthen financial performance and market positioning (Naamati-Schneider & Zaks, 2021).

Finally, regulatory harmonization and cross-border healthcare agreements are essential for enabling IHOs to achieve optimal business performance through international expansion. Supportive policies allow IHOs to integrate emerging healthcare innovations—such as AI-driven medicine and digital health solutions - into global markets while ensuring compliance with ethical standards, data privacy, and interoperability requirements (Ekeledo & Sivakumar, 2004; Curley & Salmelin, 2018). By aligning regulatory frameworks, policymakers can help IHOs reduce operational barriers, lower compliance costs, and enhance their ability to deliver high-quality care across borders, ultimately improving their financial and operational performance (Reddy et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2020).

2.3 Digital Transformation and Strategic Adaptation for Business Performance in IHOs

Digital transformation has been identified as a key driver of business performance for both SMEs and IHOs. Research demonstrates that technology adoption significantly improves operational efficiency, scalability, and collaboration, leading to measurable performance gains such as cost reduction, enhanced service delivery, and increased market reach (Prajogo & McDermott, 2011; Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Fichman et al., 2011). Digital capabilities are also linked to higher levels of innovation and organizational adaptability, enabling firms to streamline workflows, optimize resource allocation, and expand their global presence (Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2021; Naamati-Schneider & Zaks, 2021).

SMEs leverage digital platforms, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence to achieve cost efficiencies, optimize supply chains, and increase revenue through international expansion (Dunning, 2000; Ohannessian et al., 2020). IHOs can replicate these performance-enhancing strategies by investing in:

- Cross-border telemedicine services, which improve patient access and reduce costs by enabling international consultations and care delivery (Dunning, 2000; Ohannessian et al., 2020). Telemedicine adoption bridges geographical gaps, lowers operational expenses, and expands healthcare access, particularly in emerging economies and underserved rural areas, leading to increased patient volumes and revenue growth (Henning-Smith, 2021).
- AI-assisted diagnostics and predictive analytics, which enhance clinical outcomes and reduce diagnostic errors through early disease detection and personalized treatment (Porter & Heppelmann, 2015; He et al., 2021). These AI-driven solutions are increasingly used in precision medicine, radiology automation, and patient risk stratification, improving patient care quality and operational efficiency while cutting costs (Reddy et al., 2019).
- Blockchain-based health record systems, which strengthen data security and interoperability, enabling seamless cross-border healthcare collaborations (Narula & Dunning, 2010; Engelhardt, 2017). Blockchain facilitates secure data exchange, ensures patient privacy, and enhances interoperability among global providers, reducing administrative costs and improving service delivery speed (Attaran, 2020).
- Strategic networking and international partnerships, which are critical for driving innovation, reducing costs, and improving patient outcomes. Research on SME internationalization shows that global collaborations accelerate market entry, foster innovation, and enhance service quality (Rialp et al., 2005; Kumar & Subramanian, 2017; Subramanian et al., 2019). In healthcare, partnerships with pharmaceutical firms, research institutions, and insurance providers lead to breakthrough innovations, knowledge-sharing, and revenue growth through joint ventures and cross-border initiatives (Curley & Salmelin, 2018; Hossain et al., 2022).

The adoption of SME-inspired internationalization strategies by IHOs offers a significant opportunity to transform healthcare service delivery and enhance global competitiveness. By leveraging the RBV strategic resource utilization and DCT adaptability principles, IHOs can achieve superior business performance through specialization, global partnerships, and digital innovations (Teece, 2007; Helfat et al., 2007). These strategies enable IHOs to overcome traditional barriers, resulting in improved operational efficiency, patient satisfaction, and financial sustainability.

Future research should explore empirical case studies of successful internationalized IHOs, analyze the financial impact of SME-inspired strategies in healthcare, and develop regulatory frameworks that support cross-border healthcare innovation. Harmonized policies on digital health, AI governance, and data-sharing standards are increasingly critical as global healthcare systems embrace digitalization (Janssen et al., 2020). Addressing these areas will enable

policymakers and healthcare leaders to create structured pathways for IHOs to achieve long-term business success in an interconnected global healthcare landscape.

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, a multi-method approach was employed, integrating literature synthesis and logical deduction as primary research techniques. This methodological triangulation enables a comprehensive analysis of how internationalisation strategies of SMEs can be adapted to IHOs, particularly in the context of innovation, strategic agility, and global competitiveness (Deyner & Tranfield, 2009; Snyder, 2019). The literature synthesis methodology was utilised to systematically examine academic research across multiple disciplines, including international trade, healthcare management, public administration, and strategic innovation (Cooper, 1984; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). This method aligns with the systematic literature review (SLR) framework, which involves identifying, synthesising, and evaluating relevant theoretical and empirical contributions to construct a holistic understanding of SME internationalisation and its impact on business performance in healthcare (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015). Specifically, key concepts related to SME-driven innovation, public-private partnerships, and international expansion were analysed to assess how they can enhance operational efficiency, patient outcomes, and financial sustainability for IHOs (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009).

In addition, logical deduction was employed as an analytical tool to apply established principles from SME internationalization research to address IHOs' structural and operational challenges (Popper, 1959; Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). The research process involves two key stages, each designed to systematically examine SME characteristics and their potential to improve business performance within IHOs.

Stage 1: Identifying SME Characteristics for IHO Business Performance

The first stage of this study involved identifying and analyzing the fundamental characteristics of SMEs that contribute to their successful internationalization and, by extension, their business performance. SMEs often face significant resource constraints and entry barriers, yet they compete effectively in global markets by cultivating distinct capabilities. The most critical among these are adaptability, resource efficiency, and niche specialization, which enable them to achieve operational agility, cost-effectiveness, and market leadership (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Hollenstein, 2005).

- **Adaptability:** This allows SMEs to respond swiftly to changing conditions, ensuring competitiveness in dynamic industries. For IHOs, adaptability translates into the rapid adoption of technologies like digital health solutions, telemedicine, and AI-driven diagnostics, leading to improved patient care quality, operational efficiency, and global competitiveness.
- **Resource Efficiency:** SMEs optimize limited financial and human capital through cost-effective decisions. For IHOs, this means reducing operational costs, improving resource allocation, and maintaining financial sustainability while delivering high-quality care.
- **Niche Specialization:** By focusing on specific domains, SMEs build strong reputations. For IHOs, specializing in fields like oncology or robotic surgery can attract international patients, boost revenue, and enhance global positioning through CoEs (Zahra et al., 2005).

This stage was conducted through a systematic review of SME internationalization literature, identifying patterns of success and strategic elements that can enhance IHOs' competitiveness, service innovation, and financial outcomes in a global healthcare landscape.

Stage 2: Applying SME Characteristics to Enhance IHO Business Performance

The second stage explored how SME characteristics - adaptability, resource efficiency, and niche specialization - can be applied to IHOs to improve business performance, particularly in patient care, technological adoption, and operational flexibility (Zucchella & Magnani, 2016; Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018).

- Patient-centered care and specialization: IHOs can enhance patient satisfaction and revenue growth by developing specialized programs (e.g., oncology, precision medicine) that attract international patients. This strengthens clinical outcomes and positions IHOs as leaders in high-demand services, improving global reputation.
- Technological adoption: SMEs use digital transformation to boost efficiency and reach. IHOs can adopt AI diagnostics, telemedicine, and blockchain to achieve operational efficiency, cost reduction, and expanded patient access, enhancing service delivery and financial performance (McKinsey & Company, 2021; Janssen et al., 2020).
- Operational flexibility: SMEs' agility helps them navigate change. For IHOs, lean management and agile decision-making reduce service delivery inefficiencies, improve patient care responsiveness, and foster innovation. Cross-border collaborations and public-private partnerships (PPPs) enhance knowledge-sharing, revenue streams, and technological advancements (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

By applying these strategies, IHOs can improve operational efficiency, patient satisfaction, and financial sustainability, establishing a strong global presence. The study posits that SMEs' ability to adapt swiftly can be emulated by IHOs to enhance business performance. By cultivating strategic agility, innovation-driven service models, and international collaborations, IHOs can achieve superior patient outcomes, operational efficiency, and financial growth (Teece, 2018; Narula & Verbeke, 2015). This approach provides actionable insights for IHOs to improve global competitiveness and financial sustainability through SME-inspired strategies.

4. FINDINGS

In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition among healthcare organisations, including those in the public sector, of the importance of internationalisation to innovation, market access and improved service quality. Strategies employed by SMEs in global expansion have been identified as valuable frameworks that IHOs can adopt to enhance their business performance on a global scale. The success of SMEs in international markets is typically attributable to targeted strategies that leverage specialisation, strategic partnerships, and adaptability, all of which contribute to improved operational efficiency, revenue growth, and global competitiveness. The capacity to enter foreign markets efficiently and respond to rapidly changing demands has been extensively researched in international business literature (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015).

The findings of this study highlight several interrelated dynamics that shape the IHOs capacity to internationalise and remain competitive in the global arena.

A first aspect concerns the growing importance of specialisation in medical niches characterised by high international demand. Recent OECD data (2023) indicate that cross-border healthcare flows in Europe have been expanding at an annual rate of approximately 6%, driven predominantly by disciplines such as oncology, cardiology, and orthopaedics. In the Italian context, regional statistics confirm this trend: in 2022, more than 15,000 non-resident patients sought treatment in accredited hospitals in Lombardy, particularly in oncology centers of excellence (Regione Lombardia, 2023). These figures suggest that focusing on areas of advanced medical expertise enhances reputation and supports the financial sustainability of IHOs by positioning them as reference points within international healthcare markets.

Another relevant dynamic relates to the role of international partnerships and collaborative networks. The strategic collaboration is another essential aspect of SME internationalisation. SMEs frequently establish alliances, partnerships, and joint ventures to mitigate risk and leverage local market knowledge (Johanson & Vahlne, 1993). This logic applies equally to healthcare, where participation in transnational projects and consortia has proven instrumental. For instance, Italy has been involved in about 25% of Horizon 2020 projects on eHealth, benefiting from technology transfer, cost sharing in research and development, and knowledge spillovers that strengthen innovation capacity (European Commission, 2022). Concrete outcomes include the establishment of cross-border telemedicine networks, such as joint neurological emergency protocols between Italian and German hospitals, which demonstrate how collaboration enhances service delivery and contributes to competitiveness abroad.

Thus, it is possible to assert that IHOs have the capacity to form global partnerships with hospitals, research institutions, and healthcare technology companies with a view to enhancing operational efficiency, reducing costs, and improving service delivery. These collaborations facilitate knowledge sharing, cross-border patient referrals, and the expansion of telemedicine services, leading to better resource utilisation and patient care quality. The adaptability that allows SMEs to navigate market fluctuations can be integrated into IHOs by fostering more flexible governance structures, improving decision-making efficiency, and streamlining operations. This organisational agility enables IHOs to reduce operational costs, respond quickly to technological and regulatory changes, and maintain competitiveness in a dynamic global healthcare environment (Zucchella & Scabini, 2007).

The findings also emphasise the centrality of digital transformation in shaping international competitiveness. The adoption of interoperable electronic health records has been associated with a reduction of approximately 15% in average hospitalization times (Ministero della Salute, 2022), while the implementation of artificial intelligence in diagnostic imaging has increased diagnostic accuracy by about 12% in Italian pilot hospitals (Agenas, 2023). These cases illustrate how digital technologies contribute both to operational efficiency and to the quality of clinical outcomes. At the same time, however, regulatory fragmentation across European countries regarding health data exchange remains a significant barrier, limiting the scalability of such innovations and constraining the full realisation of their benefits.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the importance of human capital and intercultural competences. According to OECD (2021), hospitals that introduced structured training programs in cross-cultural communication reported a 20% increase in satisfaction levels among foreign patients. For IHOs aiming to attract international patients, investment in staff development and patient-centered approaches emerges as a critical complement to technological and organizational strategies. In combination, these findings reveal that the interplay between specialization, collaboration, digital transformation, and human resource development constitutes the foundation upon which IHOs can effectively pursue sustainable internationalisation (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Strategic levers, applications, empirical evidence, and expected benefits of IHOs internationalization.

Strategic Lever	Applications	Empirical Evidence	Expected Benefits
Specialization in medical niches	Provision of advanced oncology, cardiology, orthopedics	OECD (2023): 6% annual growth in cross-border flows; Regione Lombardia (2023): 15,000 foreign patients in oncology	Reputational positioning; consolidation of Italy as a hub for medical tourism
International partnerships and	Joint telemedicine protocols; shared	Johanson & Vahlne (1993) theory; EC (2022):	Cost-sharing, technology transfer,

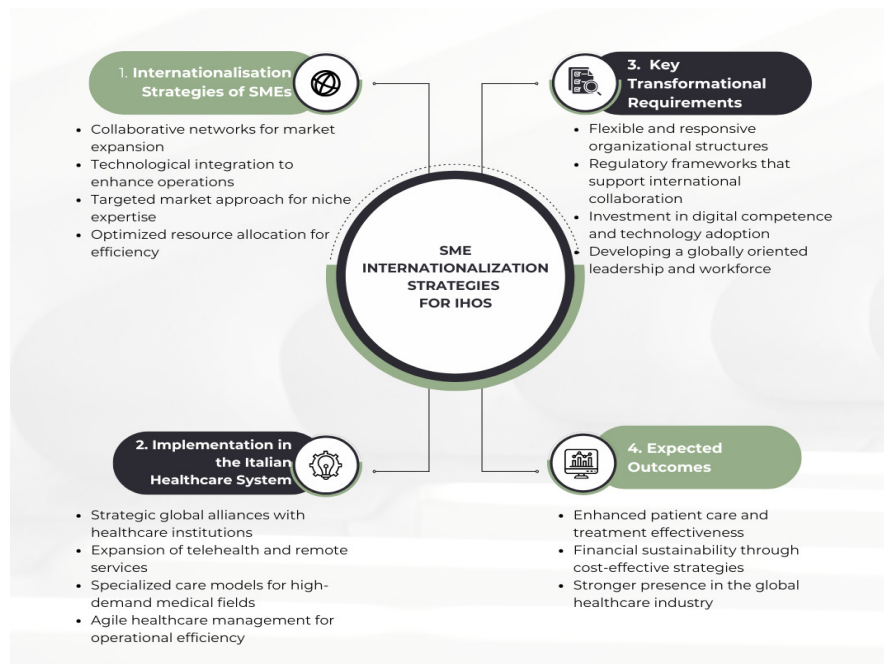
networks	emergency procedures; Horizon 2020 projects	Italy in ~25% of Horizon 2020 eHealth projects	knowledge spillovers; improved service integration
Digital transformation	Electronic health records; AI for diagnostics	Ministero della Salute (2022): -15% hospitalization; Agenas (2023): +12% diagnostic accuracy	Efficiency gains; improved clinical outcomes; enhanced patient care
Human capital development	Cross-cultural training; international HR practices	OECD (2021): +20% foreign patient satisfaction	Better patient experience; stronger international reputation

Source: our elaboration

In conclusion, for IHOs to successfully internationalize and enhance their business performance, they should develop a structured strategic process that incorporates: the benefits of SME-inspired strategies, such as opportunities for revenue growth, cost savings, and improved patient outcomes; the challenges of adapting SME frameworks to healthcare, ensuring strategies are tailored to overcome barriers to efficiency and innovation; the governance changes that enhance organizational agility, reduce operational costs, and improve regulatory adaptability and digital literacy and a global mindset within IHOs by fostering innovation-driven healthcare solutions through incentives and policy adjustments, leading to better patient outcomes and financial success.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, a roadmap for healthcare organizations to expand their operations beyond domestic borders and integrate into global healthcare networks is outlined. This roadmap delineates the pivotal steps involving in adapting SME internationalisation strategies to enhance business performance for IHOs.

FIGURE 1: Framework for SME-Inspired Internationalization Strategies in IHOs.



Source: our elaboration

5. THEORETICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the advancement of strategic management, international business and healthcare policy research through the application of the RBV and DCT to enhance the business performance of IHOs. Conventionally, RBV has been utilised to elucidate how firms maintain a competitive advantage through unique, rare, and inimitable resources (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). This research reframes RBV in the healthcare sector, demonstrating that specialised medical expertise, patient-centred care models, and institutional partnerships serve as strategic assets that can drive revenue growth, patient volumes, and market leadership for IHOs. The study emphasises that by strategically leveraging these core competencies, notably through CoEs, research collaborations, and digital health infrastructure, IHOs can enhance their value proposition, resulting in increased patient inflows, higher revenue streams, and improved market share in the global healthcare sector (Pisano, 2006). Furthermore, this research contributes to DCT by illustrating how IHOs must develop strategic agility to improve business performance in international markets (Teece, 2018; Helfat et al., 2007). Unlike SMEs, which are inherently flexible, IHOs often operate within heavily regulated environments constrained by national policies, funding limitations, and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

This study makes a novel theoretical contribution by suggesting that IHOs can cultivate dynamic capabilities through digital transformation, cross-border partnerships, and regulatory adaptability, leading to cost reductions, improved service delivery, and enhanced patient outcomes. Furthermore, the findings align with emerging research in the field of telemedicine, artificial intelligence-driven diagnostics, and blockchain-based patient records, which demonstrate the potential of these innovations to enhance operational efficiency and international competitiveness (Dwivedi et al., 2019; He et al., 2021).

It also underscores the critical role of healthcare policies in shaping IHOs' ability to achieve business performance goals through internationalisation. Despite the presence of strong clinical expertise and high-quality care standards, regulatory barriers, legal restrictions on cross-border telemedicine, and rigid healthcare policies often impede IHOs' capacity to expand internationally, thereby limiting their revenue potential and operational scalability. The research recommends that governments and policymakers implement regulatory reforms that directly contribute to IHOs' business performance by:

- Facilitating cross-border healthcare collaborations through mutual recognition agreements for medical credentials and treatment protocols, thereby reducing operational barriers and enabling IHOs to expand their service offerings, attract international patients, and increase revenue streams.
- Supporting interoperability in digital health by aligning with global standards for electronic health records, telemedicine regulations, and patient data privacy laws, which can lead to cost savings through streamlined operations and reduced compliance burdens (Janssen et al., 2020).
- Investing in digital infrastructure and workforce training to enhance IHOs' operational efficiency, enabling them to integrate AI-driven healthcare models that improve diagnostic accuracy, reduce treatment times, and ultimately lower costs while increasing patient satisfaction and loyalty.

By advocating for these policy changes, the study contributes to the healthcare governance literature, demonstrating that regulatory innovation is crucial for IHOs to achieve sustainable financial performance and competitive advantage in global markets.

Healthcare-specific Roadmap

The results extend the literature on healthcare management by offering a set of actionable, sector-specific roadmaps that address the heterogeneous institutional, financial, and regulatory

environments within which IHOs operate. While the general strategies derived from SMEs, such as strategic specialisation, digital transformation, and international partnerships, are broadly applicable, their translation into practice requires differentiation between public hospitals and private clinics, given their distinct governance structures, funding mechanisms, and strategic orientations (Guerrini et al., 2018; Moscone et al., 2020).

For public hospitals, whose activities are largely shaped by regional health authorities and state-level regulations, the roadmap emphasises operational efficiency and system integration. The adoption of lean healthcare models can directly reduce administrative redundancy and optimise patient flow management, thus addressing the structural inefficiencies that often characterise the public sector (Guerrini et al., 2018). Digital health technologies, particularly interoperable platforms for electronic health records, are critical for enabling smoother coordination across regional systems and improving continuity of care for international patients (Dal Mas et al., 2023). Furthermore, public hospitals can leverage PPPs to overcome funding constraints and accelerate the introduction of advanced diagnostic technologies. At the strategic level, selective development of centres of excellence in high-demand fields can serve as a competitive lever for attracting medical tourism, thereby augmenting revenue streams and partially offsetting dependence on public funding. Policymakers should also consider regulatory reforms that streamline compliance procedures, thus reducing overhead costs and enabling faster responsiveness to global healthcare trends.

Private clinics, by contrast, operate in a more competitive, market-driven environment where differentiation and brand positioning are central. For these organisations, the roadmap highlights strategic specialisation and international branding as core levers for achieving market leadership (Lepore et al., 2018). Establishing “boutique centres of excellence” in fields such as orthopaedic surgery, cosmetic procedures, or fertility treatments allows private providers to attract international patients willing to pay premium prices. In this context, reputation-building through partnerships with renowned international hospitals or accreditation bodies (e.g., Joint Commission International) becomes essential for enhancing credibility and securing global competitiveness (Moscone et al., 2020).

Private clinics also benefit disproportionately from early adoption of digital innovations, such as telemedicine platforms and AI-driven diagnostic support, which not only enhance patient experience but also create scalable revenue models. Flexible decision-making structures enable these clinics to implement such innovations rapidly, unlike their public counterparts (Invernizzi et al., 2021). Finally, workforce development initiatives focusing on cross-cultural competencies and international regulations are particularly salient for private organisations that actively target foreign markets and rely on patient satisfaction for growth.

By distinguishing between public and private trajectories, this study emphasizes the necessity of differentiated governance strategies in Italian healthcare. While public hospitals should prioritise system-wide efficiency, regulatory reform, and resource optimisation, private clinics should focus on market-driven differentiation, global patient engagement, and rapid digital innovation. Together, this sector-specific roadmap contributes to enhancing the resilience and competitiveness of Italian healthcare at both national and international levels, thereby reinforcing Italy’s position as a global leader in high-quality medical care (Dal Mas et al., 2023; Invernizzi et al., 2021).

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide actionable insights for healthcare managers, policymakers, and administrators seeking to enhance the business performance of IHOs. In an era of increasing globalisation in healthcare, the adoption of strategies inspired by SMEs offers a practical

framework for improving operational efficiency, driving revenue growth, reducing costs, and achieving global competitiveness.

In order to drive revenue growth and establish market leadership, IHOs should focus on strategic specialisation. The development of centres of excellence in specialised medical fields such as oncology, neurology, or orthopaedic surgery is recommended, with the aim of attracting a larger volume of international patients and increasing revenue streams. Managers should focus on branding IHOs as global healthcare leaders by leveraging Italy's reputation for high-quality care and forming partnerships with international medical institutions. This enhances reputation, leading to higher patient trust and potentially premium pricing, which improves financial performance.

Another critical strategy for IHOs is to strengthen international partnerships, which can lead to significant cost reductions and foster innovation. Strategic alliances with global hospitals, research institutions, and technology firms foster knowledge exchange and research collaboration, enabling cost-sharing in R&D and reducing expenses while driving innovation. Engaging in PPPs provides access to funding and cutting-edge technologies, lowering financial burdens and accelerating the adoption of solutions that improve service quality and patient outcomes.

Thus, accelerated digital transformation is essential for IHOs aspiring to enhance operational efficiency and patient satisfaction. By investing in advanced technologies such as AI-driven diagnostics, telemedicine, and blockchain-based health record systems, IHOs can streamline their operations, reduce administrative costs, and significantly improve the speed of service delivery. Furthermore, the implementation of interoperable digital health solutions facilitates the streamlined management of international patients, a crucial aspect in enhancing patient satisfaction and retention. These factors are vital for ensuring the long-term financial success of the organisation.

Achieving cost-effectiveness in healthcare systems is contingent on the agility exhibited by IHOs. This objective can be realised through the implementation of lean healthcare models, which emphasise flexible decision-making processes, reduce administrative complexity, and facilitate more rapid adaptation to technological advancements. Such measures have been shown to reduce operational costs and improve the quality of services provided. In addition, the promotion of regulatory reforms by management is recommended, with the aim of reducing compliance costs and enhancing the organisation's capacity to respond with greater alacrity to evolving market trends, thus contributing to its enhanced global competitiveness within the context of the healthcare sector.

The development of international talent is of crucial importance for IHOs, if the quality of their service is to be improved and their market reach expanded. In order to achieve this, it is essential to initiate workforce development initiatives which place particular emphasis on the training of healthcare professionals in such areas as international patient care, cross-border regulations, and the use of digital health technologies. This focus on enhancing skills has been shown to result in higher service quality, which in turn increases patient satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, the promotion of programmes that encourage language proficiency, cultural sensitivity, and participation in global exchange programmes can facilitate the diversification of IHOs' patient bases. The expansion into diverse international markets has the potential to increase market share and revenue.

In order to thrive in an era of internationalised healthcare, managers of IHOs must adopt an approach that is oriented towards the future, and which integrates SME-inspired strategies into the realms of governance, operations and technology. By focusing on specialisation, strategic partnerships, digital transformation, and organisational agility, IHOs can overcome barriers to entry, attract international patients, and establish themselves as leaders in the global healthcare

sector. This approach not only improves operational and financial performance but also ensures sustainable growth in a competitive environment.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The internationalization of the Italian healthcare sector presents a significant opportunity for IHOs to drive innovation, expand their market reach, and improve service efficiency, ultimately leading to increased revenue, cost savings, and enhanced global competitiveness. By adopting strategic approaches inspired by SMEs - such as specialization in key medical fields, forming international partnerships, and embracing an agile operational model - IHOs can overcome domestic constraints and achieve sustainable financial and operational performance in the global healthcare landscape (Verbeke & Ciravegna, 2018; Teece, 2018).

One of the most effective pathways toward enhancing business performance is through network-based collaborations, which facilitate knowledge-sharing, access to cutting-edge medical research, and joint technological advancements. These partnerships enable IHOs to reduce research and development costs, accelerate innovation cycles, and improve patient outcomes, directly contributing to revenue growth and market leadership (Rialp et al., 2005; Baldwin, 2016). Furthermore, digital transformation plays a pivotal role in improving operational efficiency and service delivery. By integrating telemedicine, AI-driven diagnostics, and data analytics, IHOs can lower operational costs, enhance patient care quality, and increase patient satisfaction, making them more competitive internationally (Mezger, 2014; Wang & Siau, 2019). These advancements also expand healthcare accessibility, particularly for underserved populations, leading to higher patient volumes and additional revenue streams.

Strategic specialization is another critical driver of business performance. By focusing on niche markets such as geriatrics, rare disease treatment, and precision medicine, IHOs can position themselves as leaders in high-demand healthcare services. This approach attracts international patients, secures research funding, and fosters industry partnerships, resulting in increased revenue, cost efficiencies through economies of scale, and a stronger global reputation (Covin & Miller, 2014; Deloitte, 2022). This strategy mirrors the SME approach of leveraging unique strengths to achieve competitive advantage and financial sustainability. Additionally, applying lean management principles and prioritizing resource efficiency optimizes operations, reduces waste, and ensures long-term financial stability, which is especially vital given budget constraints and aging population demographics (Porter & Teisberg, 2006; Pisano, 2017).

Beyond financial and operational gains, internationalization fosters a global mindset within healthcare institutions, promoting cultural competence and facilitating the adoption of best practices from global leaders. This enhances service quality, leading to higher patient satisfaction and loyalty, which are essential for sustained revenue growth. However, to maximize business performance, IHOs must address structural challenges such as regulatory barriers, digital literacy gaps, and leadership adaptation. Studies suggest that harmonizing regulations, investing in digital health training, and strengthening leadership capabilities are critical to reducing compliance costs and improving operational agility in a globalized healthcare market (Kumar & Subramanian, 2017; Subramanian, 2019; Janssen et al., 2020).

Ultimately, IHOs must commit to long-term investments in digital infrastructure, workforce development, and regulatory adaptation to fully capitalize on internationalization opportunities. By doing so, Italian healthcare institutions will be well-positioned to expand their global reach, enhance patient care quality, reduce operational costs, and establish themselves as leaders in the international healthcare ecosystem, achieving sustainable financial and operational success.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Whilst the present study provides valuable theoretical insights into the adaptation of SME internationalisation strategies to IHOs, several limitations must be acknowledged, thus paving the way for future research opportunities.

A significant limitation of this study is its reliance on theoretical frameworks and literature synthesis, rather than empirical validation through case studies, field research, or primary data collection. While the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) provide a solid foundation for understanding how IHOs can enhance their operational efficiency and strategic agility, the practical application of these theories remains underexplored in the context of healthcare internationalization. It is recommended that future research focus on conducting qualitative and quantitative studies, such as in-depth interviews with healthcare managers, patient surveys, and comparative case studies of internationally successful IHOs. By collecting real-world data, researchers can assess the feasibility of SME-inspired internationalisation strategies and refine theoretical frameworks to better align with sector-specific challenges.

Regulatory and Policy Barriers

A further critical limitation pertains to the complexity of regulatory frameworks governing international healthcare operations. The highly regulated nature of healthcare, particularly with regard to cross-border telemedicine, patient data privacy, and medical licensing, presents significant barriers to internationalisation. Regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe, country-specific telemedicine policies, and ethical concerns regarding AI-driven healthcare solutions vary widely across jurisdictions. Consequently, there is a necessity for future research to concentrate on policy analysis and legal frameworks, with the aim of identifying best practices that can harmonise cross-border healthcare regulations, facilitate international partnerships, and encourage digital health adoption. Comparative studies of healthcare systems that have successfully navigated internationalization challenges (e.g., Germany, Singapore, or the United Kingdom) could provide insights into how Italy can adapt its regulatory policies to foster global competitiveness in healthcare.

Strategic Differentiation and Institutional Constraints

Another significant limitation is the assumption that SME internationalisation strategies can be universally applied across all IHOs. However, it is important to recognise that different types of healthcare institutions - private hospitals, public health systems, specialised clinics, and research institutions - face unique constraints in their internationalisation efforts. Private hospitals may possess greater financial flexibility to invest in global expansion, whereas public healthcare systems often encounter bureaucratic inertia, funding limitations, and policy restrictions. Conversely, specialised clinics may encounter more favourable conditions for internationalisation, given their niche expertise and the high demand for their specialised treatments. Future research should adopt a sector-specific approach, analysing how various types of IHOs can tailor SME-inspired internationalisation frameworks based on their financial structures, governance models, and technological capabilities. Understanding how institutions can leverage competitive positioning, strategic alliances, and differentiated service offerings will be crucial in enhancing business performance.

Technological Innovation and Digital Infrastructure

Technological advancements, notably AI-driven diagnostics, blockchain-enabled patient records, and telemedicine solutions, are recognised as pivotal drivers of global competitiveness in healthcare. Nevertheless, significant barriers to progress are presented by technological infrastructure gaps, concerns regarding cybersecurity, and resistance to the adoption of AI. A survey of Italian healthcare institutions reveals a paucity of digital infrastructure, hindering the integration of advanced AI tools, ensuring secure cross-border patient data sharing, and

complying with international cybersecurity regulations. Future research should explore the financial and operational feasibility of large-scale digital transformation projects in the healthcare sector. Specifically, researchers should examine the cost-effectiveness of AI-enabled healthcare solutions, the scalability of blockchain technology for secure patient data management, and the legal and ethical implications of cross-border digital health platforms. Understanding how digital investments translate into performance improvements and patient outcomes will provide valuable insights for IHOs seeking sustainable international growth.

Cultural and Linguistic Challenges in International Healthcare Expansion

A frequently disregarded facet of healthcare internationalisation pertains to the influence of cultural and linguistic disparities on patient experience, service delivery, and global branding. A significant proportion of international patients seeking treatment abroad encounter challenges such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and differences in medical protocols. These factors have the potential to adversely impact patient satisfaction and healthcare outcomes. Future studies should explore how IHOs can develop culturally competent international patient services, including:

- The establishment of multilingual support systems to facilitate communication with international patients.
- The development of culturally adaptive treatment protocols that align with the expectations and traditions of foreign patients.
- The development of global branding strategies to enhance the international reputation of IHOs and attract patients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, an analysis of medical tourism trends and cross-border healthcare networks is recommended in order to understand how Italy can enhance its positioning as a global healthcare hub. Examining how patient-centered service models, branding strategies, and international referral networks contribute to business performance will be essential for IHOs aiming to expand their global reach.

Future directions

In order to construct a more comprehensive and data-driven framework for healthcare internationalisation, future research should explore the following areas:

- Empirical validation of SME-inspired strategies in IHOs through real-world case studies and quantitative performance assessments, ensuring their practical applicability and impact on business performance.
- Comparative policy analyses to determine how different countries enhance healthcare internationalisation, identifying regulatory efficiencies and best practices that can be adapted to Italy's healthcare sector.
- Sector-specific investigations to examine how public hospitals, private institutions, and specialised clinics can uniquely leverage international expansion strategies based on their financial structures, governance models, and competitive positioning.
- Technological readiness assessments to evaluate the feasibility of AI, blockchain, and telemedicine adoption in cross-border healthcare operations, ensuring their alignment with infrastructure capabilities and cost-effectiveness.
- Development of cultural competency frameworks, aimed at improving international patient management, enhancing global branding, and adapting service delivery models to diverse patient needs, thereby strengthening the global presence of IHOs.

Thus, the subsequent stage of this study will involve the collection of empirical data, case studies, and interviews with healthcare organizations in Italy to validate and enrich the proposed

qualitative framework. Future research should explicitly discuss limitations of applying SME logic in healthcare and how existing literature addresses such translations.

By addressing these limitations and exploring future research directions, scholars and policymakers can develop more effective internationalisation strategies for IHOs, enhancing Italy's competitiveness in the global healthcare sector.

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