

Digital Marketing and Social Media Use in B2B Exporting Firms: A Systematic Literature Review

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Research on the role of social media as a business marketing tool has been proliferating across disciplines, focusing on different types of firms and sectors. Nevertheless, research is still scarce regarding the B2B context, especially the export-oriented firms. This systematic literature review synthesizes insights from different International Business and International Marketing studies, to shed some light on the way social media can support B2B export-oriented firms to internationalize their activities and enhance their performance.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Social Media, Exporting, B2B firms

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that over the past two decades, marketing has undergone a significant transformation known as the 'Digital Transformation', a phenomenon extensively explored by both industry practitioners and academic researchers. Technologies such as digital marketing, e-commerce, mobile services, and artificial intelligence (AI) have ushered in a revolution in consumer interaction and product/service delivery (Li, Larimo, and Leonidou 2021).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst, accelerating the adoption of social media and various web applications for entertainment, socializing, shopping, and staying informed, among other activities. Particularly within the realm of marketing, the pandemic underscored the importance of social media and mobile marketing (Mason, Narcum, and Mason 2021). Furthermore, heightened competition in international markets compelled companies to swiftly digitize their organizational structures and adopt new communication approaches with stakeholders (Lee, Falahat, and Sia 2020). Through digital marketing tools and other digitalization processes, marketers now have access to real-time data, providing advanced insights into customer behavior, demographics, and preferences.

These data enable marketers to predict future customer behavior and make expedited marketing decisions, facilitating strategy implementation (Román and Iacobucci 2010).

Previous studies have indicated that information technology (IT), predominantly on the Internet, has emerged as a crucial facilitator of international business and marketing endeavors (Sinkovics, Sinkovics, and “Bryan” Jean 2013; Hannibal and Knight 2018). The increased adoption of social media has given international businesses opportunities to engage in direct and interactive communication with potential customers (Siamagka et al. 2015). Moreover, social media platforms have been also recognized as potent strategic marketing tools for exporting firms, aiding in international sales growth, branding, and business profitability (Fan et al. 2021).

An increasing number of internationalized business-to-business (B2B) firms have begun extensively utilizing social media, notably LinkedIn, Facebook, and X (formerly known as Twitter), as part of their export strategy, to facilitate information sharing with potential partners/buyers and establish effective brand awareness in foreign markets (Safari and Saleh 2020). The significant temporal and spatial barriers between countries pose challenges for export salespeople in gathering sufficient information about customers and selling situations. Social media can mitigate these barriers by providing a channel for export salespeople to access prospects and their relevant profiles (Constantinides, Romero, and Boria 2009; Okazaki and Taylor 2013; Alarcón-del-Amo, Rialp, and Rialp 2016), listen to existing customers, engage with them, and identify their needs and expectations (Lacoste 2016).

An increasing number of scholars are delving into the rapid advancements in digitalization, social media, digital marketing, and application-based marketing, along with the technological progress stemming from this transformation across enterprises of varying scales (Amiri, Kushwaha, and Singh 2023; Malik et al. 2020). However, research on digital marketing specifically tailored for B2B companies remains scarce (Mendonça Silva, Veiga,

and Sousa Pinto 2024; Pandey, Nayal, and Rathore 2020; Saura, Ribeiro-Soriano, and Palacios-Marqués 2021). Additionally, there has been limited exploration thus far into the relationship between social media usage and export performance of B2B firms (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019).

By synthesizing existing research on the topic, this literature review aims to provide a preliminary overview of if and how digital marketing tools and social media specifically can help B2B firms to internationalize their operations or enhance their export performance. In particular, our study answers the following research questions *1) Does digital marketing and social media, actually help B2B export-oriented firms in their internationalization efforts? 2) In what ways do B2B firms use social media and other digital marketing tools to support their exporting efforts?*

The findings illustrate that social media support B2B export-oriented firms by improving their ability to understand customers' views and preferences (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022), improving their international brand awareness (Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020; Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019), enhancing their international business contacts (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022; Deszczyński 2018), and better understanding international competition (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Rialp-Criado, Alarcón-del-Amo, and Rialp 2020).

Definitions of key concepts

Digital marketing refers to the strategic use of digital technologies, online channels and data-driven techniques to promote products, services, brands and ideas to target customers (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick 2019; Ryan 2016). It involves promoting products or services through digital channels, such as social media, search engines, or email marketing (Hoffman and Fodor 2010). It could be defined as the use of digital technologies to provide channels for marketing

and attaining corporate objectives by meeting and exceeding clients' expectations (Tabuena et al. 2022).

Social media are a fundamental component of digital marketing, encompassing computer-mediated technologies that enable the creation and dissemination of information. Examples include widely used platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Snapchat, among others (Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020). Businesses worldwide are increasingly leveraging social media to achieve various objectives, including raising awareness, enhancing brand image, acquiring new customers, engaging with existing customers, fostering interactions and conversations with both current and potential customers, cultivating a positive word-of-mouth (WoM) reputation, establishing leadership within the industry, nurturing customer relationships and relationships with other stakeholders, and expanding networks (Salo 2017; Pentina, Koh, and Le 2012; Ahi et al. 2017).

Exporting is widely regarded as a strategic avenue for firms to expand internationally, remaining the preferred mode of foreign market entry (Ngo-Thi-Ngoc and Nguyen-Viet 2021). Kannan (2017) suggests that digitalization and social media can expedite a firm's internationalization efforts by enhancing international marketing activities, particularly when supported by the firm's organizational capabilities.

Methodology

In order to address the aforementioned research questions, we conducted a systematic literature review to detect, analyze and synthesize the existing literature in a rigorous and replicable way (Vrontis and Christofi 2019; Paul and Criado 2020). First, we used some inclusion criteria to identify the relevant studies (e.g. Vrontis and Christofi 2019) and proceeded with a qualitative content analysis approach, which allows for fresh conceptual understanding that is grounded on empirical data (e.g. Yaghmaie and Vanhaverbeke 2019).

The databases used were Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, the two most well-known bibliographic databases (Zhu and Liu 2020). The combination of search terms was (("social media" OR "digital marketing") AND ("Business to business" OR "b2b" OR "B-to-B") AND ("export*")), to include all the relevant results, filtered by "English" language. To avoid never-ending results, the end date chosen was February 2024. No other exclusion criteria were applied, in order to encompass the maximum possible breadth of research on the specific topic. The initial research on Web of Science yielded ten results and Scopus yielded nine results. Since some papers were common in both databases, the final number of publications was only 14 (see Table 1), further highlighting the scarcity of research on this topic, as other studies have previously stated (Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020).

Next, we proceeded by independently and separately analyzing these 14 studies through a coding scheme capturing the theories used in the studies, the research purposes and research questions, the methodology used, and the main findings. The articles were published between 2018 and 2024 in popular academic journals, namely *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, and *Journal of Strategic Marketing*.

Findings

In general, most studies from our data pool revealed that social media are increasingly important in the context of international marketing, not only towards consumer (B2C) markets but also B2B markets, (Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020; Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Deszczynski, 2018), since they improve key processes of the firm when operating abroad (Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022) and hence improve their overall competitive position (Mendonça Silva, Veiga, and Sousa Pinto 2024). According to Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag (2019), social media use has a catalytic influence on several international marketing activities, with the most important ones being the understanding of

competition in different markets, followed by both the understanding of customers' views and enhancing of the quality and quantity of international business contacts.

Regarding the overall online presence of a B2B firm, the online reputation appears to be crucial for increasing the firm's competitiveness in business transactions, not only at the domestic but also at the international level (Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023). Therefore, B2B exporting firms need to understand the key factors that determine their online reputation. More specifically, the total online reputation (the capability in the online context, the balance between the positive and negative impact of the firm's digital activities) of their firm, the volume of publications related to their company indexed on the internet, the quality of their website, and their presence on social media and B2B marketplaces, have a significant positive effect on their export volume (Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023).

Furthermore, exporting firms must comply with adequate sensing and reconfiguring capabilities to seize market opportunities and become successful in their international expansion (Hossain et al. 2022). More specifically, B2B export performance is positively influenced by an understanding of competition in different markets, an understanding of customers' views, the building of brand awareness, and the enhancement of the quality and quantity of international business contacts (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019). In these processes, digital marketing tools and social media could have a catalytic role (Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020; Rialp-Criado, Alarcón-del-Amo, and Rialp 2020). While using social media, export salespeople can better identify and qualify customers, by focusing on specific customer traits and thereby deciding which selling strategies are appropriate for specific customer categories (Zhou and Charoensukmongkol 2021; Itani et al., 2020).

In their research, Rialp-Criado, Alarcón-del-Amo, and Rialp (2020) note that the more rapidly social media tools are integrated into the activities of the firm, the higher the speed of its internationalization. More specifically, a faster social media adoption allows the reduction

in the costs of communicating with foreign customers and suppliers, and of gathering information about foreign competitors, allowing the firm to obtain a common language with its international ties and thus develop a faster internationalization process (Rialp-Criado, Alarcón-del-Amo, and Rialp 2020).

Nevertheless, the findings reveal that it is not the use of social media per se, but rather the efforts of the firms' staff, that lead to faster and enhanced export performance. The use of social media indirectly affects export performance by improving the firms' overall ability to better understand international competition, customers' views and needs, and enhance international business relationships (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022; Deszczyński, 2018). Moreover, it is not just a matter of being present on social media, but also selecting those that are most appropriate for the positioning of the company and the profile of its customers in B2B contexts (Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023) Also, publishing appropriate content on each channel is needed to ensure the corporate way of brand image abroad that will enhance their export performance (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022).

As Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag (2019) note, the marketing managers of B2B who perceive social media marketing to be useful in conducting their international marketing activities are more likely to adopt it in their day-to-day international marketing activities. However, even though many firms have recognized this usefulness, and the fact that social media opened a new way of communication with existing and potential customers worldwide (Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022), they still have not implemented social media in their strategy. Many managers understand that online engagement is important for their firm's internationalization, but as studies reveal, they lack knowledge of how to manage their social footprint or they lack time to share interesting content, participate in discussions, and fully take advantage of social media (Deszczyński, 2018). This point is further supported

in the study of Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou (2022), where the vast majority of the exporting firms' managers admitted the need for a social media specialist inside their company. Moreover, older firms are less likely to adopt digital tools than younger counterparts due to their incapability to adopt new technologies in general (Amornkitvikai et al. 2022).

Apart from social media use, presence in online marketplaces should not be neglected either. In this case, the challenge is to offer agile and efficient channels that foster e-markets in B2B contexts, with up-to-date information on products, prices, and other factors that can be decisive for the success of exports (Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023). Finally, as AI technologies emerge, the adoption of AI in marketing analytics will accelerate firm performance in sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring the market. Marketing analytics capability and AI's appropriate implications further equip managers to seize the market, find a buyer-centric solution, adopt best practices to capture the market, respond to any market imperfections, and capture every single opportunity from the international market (Hossain et al. 2022).

Conclusions and Limitations

Nowadays, social media exert a decisive influence on opinions, attitudes, and purchasing behaviors, creating a large number of connections and broad information bases that are shared by all participants (Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023). As our study highlights, social media have an increasingly crucial role in international marketing in the case of B2B exporting firms. (Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020; Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Deszczyński 2018). Social media, in combination with the firm's website, constitute a crucial online strategy in generating the online reputation of exporting companies (Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023), further enhancing their exporting efforts. Overall, the existing research agrees on four ways

that social media positively affect the export performance of B2B firms: i) by improving the firm's ability to understand customers' views and preferences (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022), ii) by improving their international brand awareness and reputation (Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020; Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023), iii) enhancing their international business contacts, prospective and existing (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022; Deszczynski, 2018), and iv) better understanding competition in international markets (Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019; Rialp-Criado, Alarcón-del-Amo, and Rialp 2020).

When it comes to B2B export selling contexts, salespeople should leverage social media to improve the effectiveness and appropriateness of cross-cultural communication to achieve success in export sales (Zhou and Charoensukmongkol 2023). Moreover, the role of the pandemic should not be neglected in the importance of digital and social media marketing in exporting activities. COVID-19 has changed global consumer behavior toward online channels, permanently changing the market landscape (Amornkitvikai et al. 2022) and creating a need for online trade in many fields. For example, during the pandemic, many B2B international trade fairs went from a face-to-face format to a virtual or hybrid format, evidencing the weakness of many firms to position themselves in the digital field efficiently (Luo, Ma, and Wang 2022; Sarmiento and Simoes 2018). Hence, COVID-19 highlighted also the need to strengthen the research on the digital transition in the context of B2B trade (Sarmiento and Simoes 2018; Ballesteros-Bejarano et al. 2022).

Of course, this study is not without limitations. It is important to acknowledge them as they provide opportunities for further research and indicate areas where future studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The main limitation emanates from the restriction of reviewing the 14 studies identified. Nevertheless, this is not unusual in

literature review articles because of the emerging nature of the topic (Yaghmaie and Vanhaverbeke 2019). Future studies should include more papers in their analysis, in order to have robust and applicable findings. Furthermore, the studies included in this systematic literature review were selected based on the results of two specific databases, namely Web of Science and Scopus, and with some specific inclusion criteria applied. Future studies could use different or broader criteria, in different databases, to identify more relevant studies and thus provide more findings regarding the subject. In addition, for the same purpose, scholars could use different keywords in their research formula (e.g. “social networks” instead of “social media”).

Finally, due to its nature, the literature review relied solely on existing studies and did not involve primary data collection. While this approach provides a comprehensive overview of existing knowledge, it limits the ability to delve deeper into specific research questions or explore nuances that can only be captured through primary research. More empirical studies should be conducted in the future to explore the actual role of social media in the context of B2B exporting activities, leading to robust conclusions and managerial implications.

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Table 1. Results of Web of Science and Scopus Databases

Authors & Year	Title	Journal	Keywords
Amiri, Kushwaha, and Singh 2023	Visualization of global research trends and future research directions of digital marketing in small and medium enterprises using bibliometric analysis	Journal Of Small Business and Enterprise Development	Digital marketing; Small and medium enterprises; Bibliometric analysis; Co-citation analysis; Bibliographic coupling
Amornkitvikai et al. 2022	Barriers and Factors Affecting the E-Commerce Sustainability of Thai Micro-, Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs)	Sustainability (Switzerland)	e-commerce; food and beverage; micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs); retail; sustainability; Thailand
Deszczynski 2018	Business networking in social media: A case study of Polish export professionals	Journal of Eastern European and Central Asian Research	Business networking; Business relationships; GoldenLine; LinkedIn; Social media; Trust
Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019	Antecedents and consequences of social media marketing use: an empirical study of the UK exporting B2B SMEs	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing	B-to-B; Export Performance; SMEs; Social media marketing; Structural equation modeling (SEM)
Hossain et al. 2022	Marketing analytics capability, artificial intelligence adoption, and firms? competitive advantage: Evidence from the manufacturing industry	Industrial Marketing Management	Marketing analytics capability; AI adoption; Market sensing; Market seizing; Market reconfiguration; Manufacturing industry; B2B export market
Itani et al. 2020	Social media and customer relationship management technologies: Influencing buyer-seller information exchanges	Industrial Marketing Management	Social media; CRM; Information communication; Information sharing; Buyer-seller
Kidiyoor and Yatgiri 2021	Sushruth Ayurved Industry: strategies for growth	Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	B2B marketing; Brand management/equity; Channel management/relationships;

			Digital marketing; Marketing strategy/methods
Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022;	The use and effectiveness of social media marketing on firm's performance and value creation on stakeholders: evidence from Greek B2B exporting firms	International Journal of Technology Marketing	B2B; business-to-business; exporting firms; performance; social media marketing; value creation
Mendonça Silva, Veiga, and Sousa Pinto 2024	Should private-label supply manufacturers invest in digital strategies? A study on Portuguese manufacturers	Journal of Strategic Marketing	B2B; business performance; digital strategy; network capacity; Private label; supply
Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020	Examining the Importance of Social Media and Other Emerging ICTs in Far Distance Internationalisation: The Case of a Western Exporter Entering China	Palgrave Studies of Internationalization in Emerging Markets	China; Entry strategies; Export marketing; Facebook; Internationalization processes; Internet of things; Social media; YouTube
Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023	Online Reputation for Food Sector Exporters in the B2B Context: The Importance of Sustainability	FOODS	agri-food exports; online reputation; business to business; sentiment analysis; sustainability; certifications
Rialp-Criado, Alarcón-del-Amo, and Rialp 2020	Speed of use of social media as an antecedent of speed of business internationalization	Journal of Global Information Management	Multi-Group Analysis; PLS-SEM; Social Media; Speed of Internationalization
Zhou and Charoensukmongkol 2021	The effect of social media use on customer qualification skills and adaptive selling behaviors of export salespeople in China	Journal Of Asia Business Studies	Facebook; Sales management; Social media; International business; Customer qualification skills; Adaptive selling behaviors
Zhou and Charoensukmongkol 2023	How Social Media Use in B2B Export Selling Contributes to Sales Performance: The Media	International Journal of Business Communication	cross-cultural communication performance; experience; Media Synchronicity Theory; sales performance; social media use; training

	Synchronicity Theory Perspective		
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Table 2. Methodology, Theories/Frameworks and Research Purposes of the Analysed Papers

Authors & Year	Methodology	Theories/Frameworks	Research Purpose
Amiri, Kushwaha, and Singh 2023	Literature review	n/a	A bibliometric analysis of digital marketing research in small and medium enterprises (SMEs).
Amornkitvikai et al. 2022	Empirical - Quantitative	Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework	Examination of the factors and barriers affecting the e-commerce sustainability of Thai MSMEs.
Deszczynski 2018	Empirical - Qualitative	n/a	Exploration of how/what extent Polish export professionals use social media for professional purposes?
Eid, Abdelmoety, and Agag 2019	Empirical - Quantitative	Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT)	Comprehensive description of the antecedents and consequences of social media use in international B2B SMEs and how this use affects their export performance.
Hossain et al. 2022	Empirical - Mixed	Resource-based view (RBV), Dynamic Capability (DC) theory.	Investigation of how the marketing analytics capability of an export-oriented manufacturing firm assures sustained competitive advantage
Itani et al. 2020	Empirical - Mixed	Social Exchange theory, Task-Technology Fit theory	Examination of how B2B salespeople use different forms of sales technology to meet their boundary-spanning roles.
Kilipiri, Markomichelakis, and Papaioannou 2022;	Empirical - Mixed	Strategic social media marketing framework (Felix et al, 2017)	Social media marketing effectiveness on Greek B2B exporting firms' performance and stakeholder's value.
Mendonça Silva, Veiga, and Sousa Pinto 2024	Empirical - Mixed	n/a	Research of the private label from a supplier's perspective, including the

			challenges of digital communication, that helped promote the offer of manufacturing customised products for third parties (wholesalers or retailers) to sell under their private label.
Moen, Rialp, and Rialp 2020	Empirical - Qualitative	n/a	Examination of the use of social media by a Norwegian exporting firm, targeting the Chinese market.
Puma Flores and Rosa-Díaz 2023	Empirical - Mixed	Resource-based View (RBV), Stakeholder theory	Identification of the variables that determine the online reputation of food companies operating in B2B markets, and analysis of their relationship with the volume of food exports.
Rialp-Criado, Alarcón-del-Amo, and Rialp 2020	Empirical - Quantitative	Resource-based View (RBV), Knowledge-based View (KBV)	Analysis of the role of SM usage in the internationalization process of firms and elaboration on how the speed of use of SM may accelerate the speed of internationalization
Zhou and Charoensukmongkol 2021	Empirical - Mixed	Categorization theory, Network effect theory, Social linguistics theory	Exploration of the mediating role of customer qualification skills in explaining how social media use in sales contributes to salespeople's adaptive selling behaviors to achieve high sales performance in export selling.
Zhou and Charoensukmongkol 2023	Empirical - Quantitative	Media Synchronicity Theory	Investigation of how SMU in B2B export selling contributes to sales performance.