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The Use of Digital Marketing in B2B Exporting Firms: A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Directions

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Abstract:

Research on the role of social media in marketing has been expanding across various fields, exploring diverse types of companies and industries. However, a notable research gap remains in the literature concerning the B2B context, particularly among export-oriented firms. This systematic literature review aims to consolidate findings from various studies in International Business and International Marketing, to elucidate how digital marketing can assist B2B export-oriented firms to improve their exporting efforts and performance, and provide some useful future research directions.

Keywords: *Digital Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Exporting, Export Performance, B2B firms*

Introduction

It is widely recognized that marketing has undergone a substantial evolution over the past two decades, commonly referred to as the “Digital Transformation”. This phenomenon, extensively studied by both industry practitioners and academic researchers, has been propelled by technologies such as digital marketing, e-commerce, mobile services, and artificial intelligence (AI), leading to a revolution in consumer interaction and product/service delivery (Li *et al.*, 2021). The onset of COVID-19 acted as a catalyst, accelerating the adoption of social media and a wide variety of web applications for activities such as entertainment, socializing, shopping, and information consumption. Within the marketing domain, the pandemic underscored the pivotal role of social media and mobile marketing (Mason *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, intensified competition in international markets prompted companies to rapidly digitalize their organizational structures and adopt new communication approaches with stakeholders (Lee *et al.*, 2020). Through various digitalization processes and digital marketing tools, marketers now have access to real-time data, enabling advanced insights into customer behavior, demographics, and preferences, facilitating predictive analytics and expedited marketing decisions (Román & Iacobucci, 2010).

The increased prevalence of social media has provided international businesses (IB) with opportunities for direct and interactive communication with potential customers (Siamagka *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, social networks have emerged as potent strategic marketing tools for exporting firms, contributing to international sales growth, branding, and business profitability (Fan *et al.*, 2021). A growing number of internationalized business-to-business (B2B) firms are extensively leveraging social media platforms, including LinkedIn, Facebook, and X (formerly known as Twitter), as part of their export strategy. These platforms facilitate information sharing with potential partners/buyers and effective brand awareness establishment in foreign markets (Safari & Saleh, 2020). The significant temporal and spatial barriers between countries pose challenges for export salespeople in gathering adequate information about customers and selling situations. Social media addresses these barriers by providing a channel for export salespeople to access prospects and their relevant profiles, engage with existing customers, and identify their needs and expectations (Constantinides *et al.*, 2009; Okazaki & Taylor, 2013; Alarcón-del-Amo *et al.*, 2016; Lacoste, 2016).

While scholars are increasingly delving into the rapid advancements in digitalization and digital marketing, along with the technological progress stemming from this transformation across enterprises of varying scales (Amiri *et al.*, 2023; Malik *et al.*, 2020), research specifically focused to digital marketing for B2B companies remains relatively limited (Mendonça Silva *et al.*, 2024; Pandey *et al.*, 2020; Saura *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, there has been limited exploration thus far into the relationship between social media usage and export performance of B2B firms (Eid *et al.*, 2019). By synthesizing existing research on the topic, this paper aims to provide a preliminary overview of if and how digital marketing tools can help B2B firms enhance their export performance. In particular, our study answers the following research questions 1) *Does digital marketing helps B2B firms in their exporting efforts?* 2) *In what ways do B2B firms use digital marketing tools to support their exporting efforts?* 3) *Which direction should future research take?*

The findings illustrate that digital marketing, and especially social media, support B2B firms in their exporting operations by improving their ability to understand customers’ views and preferences (Eid *et al.*, 2019; Kilipiri *et al.*, 2022), improving their international brand awareness (Moen *et al.*, 2020; Eid *et al.*, 2019), enhancing their international business contacts (Eid *et al.*, 2019; Kilipiri, *et al.*, 2022; Deszczynski, 2018), and better understanding international competition (Eid *et al.*, 2019; Rialp-Criado *et al.*, 2020).

Methodology

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 & Christofi, 2019; Paul & Criado, 2020). The databases used for our research are Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, the two most well-known bibliographic databases (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The combination of search terms was (("social media" OR "social networks" OR "digital marketing" OR "online marketing" OR "website*" OR "email marketing" OR "search engine marketing" OR "digital advertising" OR "online advertising" OR "emarketing" OR "digitalization" OR "digitalisation") AND ("Business to business" OR "b2b" OR "B-to-B") AND ("export*" OR "exporting" OR "export-oriented")), to include all results that are relevant to our topic. To avoid never-ending results, the end date chosen was April 2024. Since all the results were written in English, no other exclusion criteria were applied, to encompass the maximum possible breadth of research. The initial research yielded nine results on Scopus and ten results on Web of Science. Since there were papers in common, the final number of results was only 14, further highlighting the scarcity of research on this topic, as other studies have previously stated (Moen *et al.*, 2020). Next, we proceeded by independently and separately analyzing these 14 studies through a coding scheme capturing the research purposes and research questions, the theories and the methodology used. The main findings are presented in Table 1.

Findings

Most studies from our data pool focused mainly on the role and use of social media in exporting activities, among all the digital marketing tools (search engine marketing, email marketing, social media marketing, etc.). *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 *et al.*, 2020).

Use of Social Media

In their research, Rialp-Criado *et al.* (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 *et al.*, 2020).

In general, it is revealed that social media are increasingly important in the context of international marketing, not only towards consumer (B2C) markets but also B2B markets (Moen *et al.*, 2020; Eid *et al.*, 2019; Deszczynski, 2018). Their use can improve key processes of the firm when operating abroad (Kilipiri *et al.*, 2022) and hence improve its overall competitive position (Mendonça Silva *et al.*, 2024). Exporting firms must be provided 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 *et al.*, 2019). In all of these processes, digital marketing tools and social media could have a catalytic role (Moen *et al.*, 2020; Rialp-Criado *et al.*, 2020). While using social media, export managers and 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 & Charoensukmongkol, 2021; Itani *et al.*, 2020).

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the efficacy of social media usage in enhancing export performance is not solely reliant on its mere utilization, but rather on the active engagement and efforts of the firm's personnel (Eid *et al.*, 2019; Kilipiri *et al.*, 2022; Deszczynski, 2018). Social media indirectly impacts export performance by augmenting the firm's overall capacity to understand international competition, discern customers' perspectives and requirements, and fortify international business relationships, as mentioned above. Furthermore, it is not merely about having a presence on social media platforms, but also about selecting platforms that align with the company's positioning and its customers' profiles in B2B settings (Puma Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2023). Additionally, the publishing of relevant content across these platforms is crucial for shaping the brand image abroad, thereby enhancing export performance (Eid *et al.*, 2019; Kilipiri *et al.*, 2022). According to Eid *et al.* (2019), B2B marketing managers who perceive the utility of social media marketing in their international marketing endeavors are more inclined to integrate it into their daily operations. However, despite recognizing its importance, many firms have yet to fully integrate social media into their strategies. Several managers acknowledge the significance of online engagement for internationalization, but they face challenges in managing their social media presence or lack the time to actively engage with it (Deszczynski, 2018). This observation is corroborated by Kilipiri *et al.* (2022), who found that a majority of exporting firms' managers expressed the need for a dedicated social media specialist within their organizations. Moreover, older firms exhibit a lower propensity to adopt digital tools compared to their younger counterparts, primarily due to their inherent resistance to adopting new technologies (Amornkitvikai *et al.*, 2022).

Other Digital Marketing Tools

Apart from social media use, presence and use of other digital marketing tools should not be neglected by exporting B2B firms. For example, online marketplaces should be considered for the international marketing strategy (Puma Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2023). 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 & Rosa-Díaz, 2023). Regarding the overall online presence of an export-oriented B2B firm, the online reputation appears crucial for enhancing the competitiveness of firms in business transactions, both domestically and internationally (Puma Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2023). Therefore, B2B exporting firms need to understand the fundamental factors that shape their online reputation. More specifically, the total online reputation, encompassing its proficiency in the online domain and the equilibrium between the positive and negative impacts of its digital activities, significantly influences the volume of its exports. Factors such as the volume of online publications pertaining to the company and the quality of the corporate website, contribute positively to the export volume (Puma Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2023).

Finally, with the emergence of AI technologies, the integration of AI into marketing analytics will accelerate firm performance in sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring the international market landscape. Marketing analytics capability and AI's appropriate implications further equip managers to capture market opportunities, find a buyer-centric solutions, adopt best practices, address market imperfections, and capitalize on every single opportunity from the international market (Hossain *et al.*, 2022).

Future Research Directions

As our review highlights, research on the role of digitalization and digital marketing tools used by B2B export-oriented firms is still limited. Since exporting is widely regarded as a strategic avenue for firms to expand internationally and grow, remaining the preferred mode of foreign market entry (Ngo-Thi-Ngoc & Nguyen-Viet 2021), future research should be directed to enhance this gap in the IB literature. Moreover, since digital marketing literature is still emerging, many interesting future research paths arise for scholars to follow.

Regarding the most analyzed digital marketing tool yet, namely social media marketing, future research should explore the barriers to the adoption of social media by B2B exporting firms, such as lack of specialized knowledge and time constraints, and identify effective strategies for overcoming these barriers to enhance international marketing efforts. Moreover, the role of employees' efforts in managing social media platforms and its indirect effects on B2B export performance should be further investigated, considering factors such as understanding of international competition, customer needs, and appropriate content creation. In addition, a comparative analysis could be made on the effectiveness of different social media platforms on export performance, e.g. Facebook and LinkedIn, that are the most popular ones at the business level.

Regarding other digital marketing tools, the above research paths could be also applied to examine individually the impact of Email Marketing, Content Marketing, Search Engine Marketing, Search Engine Optimization, and other relevant strategies on the export performance of B2B firms. Moreover, the effectiveness of these different digital marketing tools could be compared in facilitating B2B export activities, considering factors such as cost-effectiveness, reach, and engagement metrics. Furthermore, future research could analyze the usefulness of digital marketing in different types of industries or firms. For example, scholars could explore how the challenges and opportunities of the pandemic were confronted by exporting firms in different sectors and which were the most useful digital marketing tools for their export performance. Finally, future research could explore the impact of AI and machine learning technologies on B2B firms' digital marketing efforts, particularly in terms of customer segmentation, personalized marketing, and predictive analytics for export market selection.

These research directions aim to further our understanding of the role of digital marketing in B2B export activities and provide valuable insights for practitioners, academics and policymakers in leveraging digital tools for successful exporting.

Conclusions and Limitations

In contemporary times, social media wield significant influence over opinions, attitudes, and purchasing behaviors, fostering extensive connections and vast information networks shared among participants (Puma Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2023). Our study underscores the increasingly pivotal role of social media in international marketing for B2B exporting firms (Moen *et al.*, 2020; Eid *et al.*, 2019; Deszczynski, 2018). Together with the firm's website, social media forms a critical component of the online strategy for shaping the online reputation of exporting companies, thus bolstering their export endeavors (Puma Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2023). Existing research aligns on four key ways in which social media positively impact the export performance of B2B firms: i) by enhancing the firm's understanding of customers' views and preferences (Eid *et al.*, 2019; Kilipiri *et al.*, 2022), ii) by elevating their international brand awareness and reputation

(Moen *et al.*, 2020; Eid *et al.*, 2019; Puma Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2023), iii) by enriching their international business contacts, both prospective and existing (Eid *et al.*, 2019; Kilipiri *et al.*, 2022; Deszczynski, 2018), and iv) by fostering a better comprehension of competition in international markets (Eid *et al.*, 2019; Rialp-Criado *et al.*, 2020).

In the context of B2B export selling, salespeople should leverage social media to enhance the effectiveness and appropriateness of cross-cultural communication, thus achieving success in export sales (Zhou & Charoensukmongkol, 2023). Furthermore, the role of the COVID-19 pandemic should not be neglected in accentuating the significance of digital and social media marketing in exporting activities. COVID-19 has precipitated a shift in global consumer behavior towards online channels, fundamentally altering the market landscape (Amornkitvikai *et al.*, 2022) and necessitating online trade in numerous sectors.

Certainly, this study is not exempt from limitations, which present avenues for further research and opportunities for enhancing the understanding of the topic. The primary limitation stems from the constraint of reviewing only 14 studies. However, such limitations are not uncommon in literature review articles, particularly given the emerging nature of the topic (Yaghmaie & Vanhaverbeke, 2019). Future research should aim to expand the scope of analysis by incorporating a larger number of studies to ensure robust and applicable findings. Additionally, the studies included in this systematic literature review were sourced exclusively from two databases, Web of Science and Scopus. Future studies could adopt explore different databases to identify additional relevant studies or use alternative or broader research criteria, thereby offering more comprehensive insights into the subject.

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 digital marketing in the context of B2B exporting activities, leading to robust conclusions and managerial implications.

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Table 1. Authors, Title, Research Purpose, Methodology and Theories/Frameworks used by the analyzed papers

Authors & Year	Title	Research Purpose	Methodology	Theories/Frameworks
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	A bibliometric analysis of digital marketing research in small and medium enterprises (SMEs).	Literature Review	-
Amornkitvikai et al., 2022	Barriers and Factors Affecting the E-Commerce Sustainability of Thai Micro-, Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs)	Examination of the factors and barriers affecting the e-commerce sustainability of Thai MSMEs.	Empirical – Quantitative	Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework
Deszczyński, 2018	Business networking in social media: A case study of Polish export professionals	Exploration of how/what extent Polish export professionals use social media for professional purposes?	Empirical – Qualitative	-
Eid et al., 2019	Antecedents and consequences of social media marketing use:	Comprehensive description of the antecedents and consequences of social media use in international	Empirical – Quantitative	Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the

	an empirical study of the UK exporting B2B SMEs	B2B SMEs and how this use affects their export performance.		Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT)
Hossain et al., 2022	Marketing analytics capability, artificial intelligence adoption, and firms' competitive advantage: Evidence from the manufacturing industry	Investigation of how the marketing analytics capability of an export-oriented manufacturing firm assures sustained competitive advantage	Empirical – Mixed	Resource-based view (RBV), Dynamic Capability (DC) theory.
Itani et al., 2020	Social media and customer relationship management technologies: Influencing buyer-seller information exchanges	Examination of how B2B salespeople use different forms of sales technology to meet their boundary-spanning roles.	Empirical – Mixed	Social Exchange theory, Task-Technology Fit theory
Kidiyoor and Yatgiri, 2021	Sushruth Ayurved Industry: strategies for growth	Social media marketing effectiveness on Greek B2B exporting firms' performance and stakeholder's value.	Empirical – Mixed	Strategic social media marketing framework (Felix et al, 2017)
Kilipiri et al., 2022	The use and effectiveness of social media marketing on firm's performance and value creation on stakeholders: evidence from Greek B2B exporting firms	Research of the private label from a supplier's perspective, including the challenges of digital communication, that helped promote the offer of manufacturing customized products for third parties (wholesalers or retailers) to sell under their private label.	Empirical – Mixed	-
Mendonça Silva, Veiga and Sousa Pinto, 2024	Should private-label supply manufacturers invest in digital strategies? A study on Portuguese manufacturers	Examination of the use of social media by a Norwegian exporting firm, targeting the Chinese market.	Empirical - Qualitative	-
Moen et al., 2020	Examining the Importance of Social Media and Other Emerging ICTs in Far Distance Internationalization: The Case of a Western Exporter Entering China	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.	Empirical - Mixed	Resource-based View (RBV), Stakeholder theory
Puma Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2023	Online Reputation for Food Sector Exporters in the B2B Context: The Importance of Sustainability	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	Empirical - Quantitative	Resource-based View (RBV), Knowledge-based View (KBV)
Rialp-Criado et al., 2020	Speed of use of social media as an antecedent of speed of business internationalization	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.	Empirical - Mixed	Categorization theory. Network effect theory, Social linguistics theory
Zhou and Charoensukmongkol, 2021	The effect of social media use on customer qualification skills and adaptive selling behaviors of export salespeople in China	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.	Empirical - Mixed	Categorization Theory Network Effect Theory Social Linguistics Theory
Zhou and Charoensukmongkol, 2023	How Social Media Use in B2B Export Selling Contributes to Sales Performance: The Media Synchronicity Theory Perspective	Investigation of how SMU in B2B export selling contributes to sales performance.	Empirical - Quantitative	Media Synchronicity Theory