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Decoding internationalization: examining digital ambidexterity and competitive strategy configuration via fsQCA

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Abstract:

This study examines in detail the specific ways employed by Business-to-Business (B2B) firms to navigate the complexities of internationalization. To date, research has primarily focused on fragmented aspects. Drawing on a sample of 341 B2B firms and through an in-depth examination employing the fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) methodology, this research illuminates the nuanced interplay between certain configurations of digital ambidexterity (exploitation or exploration) and competitive strategy (cost, differentiation, and focus), and their effect on firm internationalization business performance, moderated by the digitalization levels (limited, moderate, and high). The findings reveal multiple equifinal configurations that contribute to internationalization performance. Across different levels of digitalization, varying combinations of digital ambidexterity and competitive strategy are found to positively influence business performance, each characterized by a unique configuration of core and peripheral conditions. This study contributes to international business theory and practice, particularly benefiting companies facing resource constraints and seeking clarity on how to prioritize their limited resources. By identifying the specific configurations of digital ambidexterity and competitive strategy that lead to successful internationalization, the research provides a roadmap for B2B firms to navigate the digital landscape and achieve global success.

Keywords: Digital ambidexterity, competitive strategy, internationalization, B2B, fsQCA

1. Introduction

Digitalization (Meyer, Li, Brouthers, & Jean, 2023) and changing institutional norms and standards (Dau, Chacar, Lyles, & Li, 2022) have important influence on international business (IB) theory and practice. In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, businesses are increasingly challenged to balance the exploitation of existing capabilities with the exploration of new opportunities (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). This duality, known as ambidexterity, has garnered significant attention in the literature as a key determinant of organizational success, particularly in the context of internationalization (Ju, M., & Elliott, 2024; Venugopal et al., 2020).

For B2B companies, internationalization serves as a viable business strategy, offering avenues for risk mitigation, new customer acquisition, and expansion beyond local markets (Ciszewska-Mlinarić, Siemieniako & Wójcik, 2024; Zahoor, N., & Lew, 2023). This strategy can lead to the acquisition of significant key accounts and the transfer of valuable know-how back to the home country (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2011).

The variation in digitalization levels among B2B companies makes it challenging to draw conclusive factors for developing certain digital capabilities. B2B companies operate in different industries, markets, and contexts, leading to varying digitalization requirements and priorities (Hofacker et al., 2020). B2B companies may have limited resources, including financial, technological, and human resources, which can affect their ability to invest in and develop certain digital capabilities (Wang, 2020). Digital capabilities encompass a wide range of technologies and tools, each with its own set of complexities and requirements (Benbya et al., 2020). The digital landscape is constantly evolving, with new technologies, trends, and disruptions emerging regularly. B2B companies need to adapt and evolve their digital capabilities continuously to stay competitive and meet changing customer demands (Zahoor et al., 2022). Therefore, for enterprises with different levels of digitalization, how the micro-level aspects of digital capabilities are combined and intersected to help B2B companies face the fast-changing international markets is a pressing issue.

Configurations refer to the interplay between different digital capabilities and various levels of digitalization, providing a holistic perspective in line with Gestalt theory (Dess et al., 1993). Thus, from a configurational perspective, the primary concern is not whether individual digital capabilities of the internationalization process are present or how developed they are (e.g., to what extent social media is applied in a limited digitalized level B2B company), but rather how different digital capabilities of limited digitalized companies, moderated digitalized and highly digitalized companies interact to form a constellation of conditions (Meyer et al., 1993).

Our research starts from these considerations, grounded in configuration theory. We specifically focus on configurations associated with digital capabilities portfolios. Instead of simple causality analysis, which is often a regression-based method and does not cover asymmetric or complex causal phenomena (Greckhamer et al., 2008; Fiss, 2007), we address the research question :

RQ1: What are the roles of digital ambidexterity and competitive strategy to improve and sustain B2B companies' internationalization business performance?

RQ2: Which digital ambidexterity and competitive strategy are necessary and/or sufficient, and which represent core or periphery conditions for configurations characterized by superior internationalization business performance?

Addressing these questions makes several important contributions. First, this study is one of the very few empirical studies examining the success of business performance through a configurational lens. Specifically, the study finds that configurations promote internationalization performance, and that the interplay of digitalization levels is key in this context, rather than single conditions. Secondly, the present study provides a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of micro-level aspects of digital capabilities combined and intersected, aiding B2B companies in facing the fast-changing international markets. The research shows that, irrespective of their digitalization levels, firms can achieve high internationalization performance as long as the relevant digital capabilities are aligned. Thirdly, the study applies fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), which is well-suited for understanding phenomena based on configuration theory (Grechhamer et al., 2008).

2. Literature review

2.1. Ambidexterity under digitalization context

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, businesses are increasingly challenged to balance the exploitation of existing capabilities with the exploration of new opportunities (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). This duality, known as ambidexterity, has garnered significant attention in the literature as a key determinant of organizational success, particularly in the context of internationalization (Ju, M., & Elliott, 2024; Venugopal et al., 2020).

Ambidexterity refers to an organization's ability to effectively manage and balance conflicting demands for exploration and exploitation. Exploitation involves leveraging existing resources and capabilities to maximize short-term efficiency and performance, while exploration entails seeking out and developing new opportunities and capabilities to ensure long-term sustainability and competitiveness. Research suggests that organizations capable of ambidextrous behavior tend to outperform their counterparts by simultaneously achieving efficiency and innovation.

Exploitative activities in the digital realm involve optimizing existing technologies, processes, and resources to enhance operational efficiency and productivity. This may include investments in digital tools such as enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, customer relationship management (CRM) software, and data analytics platforms to streamline business operations and improve decision-making. Conversely, exploratory activities focus on experimenting with emerging technologies, identifying new market trends, and fostering innovation. Companies engage in exploration to uncover untapped opportunities, anticipate future market demands, and gain a competitive edge in the global arena.

Achieving ambidexterity in developing digital capabilities is crucial for companies pursuing internationalization strategies. By simultaneously exploiting existing digital assets and exploring new technological frontiers, firms can effectively manage the tensions between efficiency and innovation inherent in global expansion. Research suggests that ambidextrous organizations are better positioned to adapt to the dynamic nature of international markets, capitalize on emerging digital trends, and sustain long-term competitive advantage.

Previous literature confirm the value of developing and balancing the digital ambidexterity in the internationalization context. Ambidexterity allows firms to simultaneously explore new digital technologies and opportunities while exploiting their existing business models and capabilities. This balance is critical for success in rapidly changing digital environments. When internationalizing, ambidextrous firms can adapt their offerings to local markets while maintaining global integration and efficiency. This local responsiveness is enabled by digital technologies. Ambidextrous digital capabilities allow firms to innovate their business models based on market orientation, improving their digital transformation performance. This is especially important for SMEs entering new international markets. Established firms face challenges in implementing ambidextrous solutions due to structural and cultural barriers. Overcoming these barriers is key to successful digital transformation, especially when expanding internationally. Ambidexterity facilitates organizational learning, allowing firms to explore new digital opportunities while exploiting existing knowledge. This learning is critical for adapting to diverse international markets.

While some attempts have been made to systematically present the concept of digital capabilities from a holistic view, there is still a need for further development and enrichment in the academic discourse surrounding this topic.

2.2. Competitive strategies of B2B companies with different digitalized levels

When internationalizing, B2B companies can pursue one of three main competitive strategies: cost leadership, differentiation, or focus (Chung & Ho, 2021). The choice of strategy depends on factors such as the company's resources, capabilities, and target market.

Companies following a cost leadership strategy aim to be the low-cost producer in their industry (Tanwar, 2013). This allows them to offer competitive prices and undercut rivals. To achieve this, firms may seek economies of scale, access to low-cost raw materials, or efficient production methods (Luo & Zhao, 2004). However, cost leadership requires significant upfront investment and can be difficult to sustain long-term (Ross, Beath & Goodhue, 1996).

Differentiation involves offering unique products or services that are perceived as superior by customers (Gebauer, Gustafsson & Witell, 2011). This allows firms to charge premium prices and build brand loyalty. Differentiators may invest heavily in R&D, marketing, or customer service (Fisher, 1991). Successful differentiation requires deep understanding of customer needs and the ability to deliver exceptional value (Day & Wensley, 1988).

Companies pursuing a focus strategy target a narrow market segment, such as a specific customer group or geographic region (Cortez, Clarke & Freytag, 2021). The aim is to serve the target market better than competitors who are more

broadly focused. Focus strategies can be based on cost leadership or differentiation within the target segment (Keskin et al., 2021). However, focusing too narrowly can limit growth opportunities.

When internationalizing, B2B firms must adapt their competitive strategy to the new market context (Sraha et al., 2020). This may involve modifying products, pricing, or marketing to suit local preferences and regulations. Successful internationalization requires aligning the firm's strategy with the competitive dynamics and customer demands of each foreign market.

Companies' digitalized level can determine their digital capabilities development choice and competitive strategies planning. Companies at different levels of digitalization, such as beginner, intermediate, advanced, or expert, will make distinct choices in their digital transformation journey (Mugge et al., 2020). Beginner companies may focus on basic digital initiatives, while advanced companies are likely to implement more sophisticated strategies. Also, understanding the current digital readiness level is crucial for companies to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for digital transformation (Machado et al., 2021). This assessment guides companies in making informed decisions about their digital maturity choices.

The level of digitalization influences a company's digital strategy, including decisions on technology adoption, organizational culture, and business models (Favoretto et al., 2022; Proksch et al., 2024). Companies with higher digital maturity are more likely to adopt advanced digital strategies to gain a competitive edge (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). Companies with varying levels of digital maturity will make different competitive choices based on their digital capabilities and readiness. More digitally mature companies may focus on innovation, customer-centric approaches, and agile operations to stay competitive in the digital landscape (Khanom, 2023).

3. Research method and design

To evaluate the configurational pathways, the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) configurational approach is applied (Ragin, Shulman, Weinberg, & Gran, 2003). QCA represents a suitable methodology for analyzing configurational statements (Woodside, 2013). QCA is based on set-theoretic assumptions and provides an understanding of the interplay between different variables (called conditions) in affecting the presence (or absence) of a specific outcome.

3.1. Sample

We used data from 341 firms located in the whole Italy. The data was collected using a programming service sent to senior export managers, international key account managers and international product managers that are responsible for international sales. Senior marketing managers were asked to answer the questions for the company function they are working on, and if they deal with foreign markets sales and relationship.

3.2. Measurement

In line with previous research on strategy types, the relationship strategy was operationalized through a self-reported measure (James & Hatten, 1995). Respondents were asked to read three different paragraphs characterizing the digitalization levels of their companies (Brodny & Tutak, 2021; Buer et al., 2021). Table 1 shows all the descriptors. Respondents were then required to indicate which paragraph best fits the condition of their organization. This classification built the basis for dividing the sample into three sub-groups. The respondents identified the digitalization level of their companies: limited digitalized (91 firms), moderate digitalized (172 firms) and highly digitalized (83 firms).

For the outcome variable (i.e. business performance) as well as the DCs, seven-point Likert-type scales (anchored in 1=完全ly disagree, to 7=完全ly agree) were used with established multi-item reflective measurement models for all constructs. Table 2 shows all the Digital Capabilities and the multi-items.

4. Preliminary discussion

In recent years, empirical and anecdotal evidence have advanced an understanding of factors impacting on the internationalization performance (Beugelsdijk et al., 2018; D'Angelo et al., 2013). Prior studies for the most part focus their analyses on the individual net effects of success drivers. These studies typically suggest that firms that perform very well on a holistic dimensions considering their capabilities of exploitation or exploration and the competitive strategies in use based on different digitalized levels will show significant and positive effects on performance constructs. Generally speaking, this points to a lack of research integrating the multitude of digital capabilities and competitive strategies characteristics (i.e., conditions) into an overarching analytical framework to account for the interdependencies between these conditions. Employing a configurational approach based on fsQCA enabled us to simultaneously analyze distinct conditions promoting business performance and to show how the relevant digital capabilities and competitive strategies jointly impact the success of business, thus widening the scope of research on success drivers of internationalization.

4.1. Managerial implications

Our study offers several implications for managerial practice. Because companies have scarce resources, they have to choose where to focus their efforts. Such focus is also likely when firms are required to decide how to manage their internationalization strategies effectively, with emphasis on some but not all identified levers to achieve superior business performance. Managers need to know from which configurations they can choose to foster business

performance, an insight which is not provided by ‘traditional’ variable-based analyses (Fiss, 2007). Thus, by drawing on configuration theory, this study provides specific guidelines to help managers of B2B companies to design internationalization plan in ways that are aligned with the companies’ strategic intent.

4.2. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that indicate opportunities for future research. In particular, three areas can be mentioned. First, the sample in our study was restricted to service firms in the Italy. As in the case of any single country study, the findings should be generalized with caution. Secondly, data were obtained from a single key-informant in each company. Thus, the evaluation of the measurement is inclined towards subjective biases. A final limitation is that the model encompasses five conditions that jointly impact the relationship performance in B2B firms. The identified conditions might not cover the full range of factors promoting business performance, and also may differ by country.

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