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Platform-enabled competitiveness: developing B2B professional services exports in emerging markets through digital marketing capabilities

Maryam Asgharinajib
Faculty of Economics, Management and Administrative Sciences, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran, and Department of Business Management, Se.C., Islamic Azad University, Semnan, Iran

Davood Feiz
Faculty of Economics, Management and Administrative Sciences, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran, and

Shahryar Sorooshian
Department of Business Administration, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden, and Faculty of Engineering and Sustainable Development, University of Gävle, Gävle, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explain how business-to-business (B2B) professional service providers in emerging markets develop service exports through digital platforms and how this process supports capability upgrading and location competitiveness under institutional and resource constraints.

Design/methodology/approach – Using classical grounded theory, the authors conducted 37 semi-structured interviews with professional service firm managers, freelancers and platform/industry experts across emerging and developed markets. Data were analysed iteratively through open, selective and theoretical coding using constant comparison to build a process model.

Findings – The study identifies a dynamic export development cycle comprising three reinforcing mechanisms: platform-driven leap (platform-enabled market intelligence and innovation for opportunity discovery), digital credibility enhancement (platform-based legitimacy signalling and improved digital customer experience) and digital adaptation stability (localization and digital risk governance to sustain cross-border delivery). Together, these mechanisms show how platforms function as low-cost export infrastructure, reducing institutional frictions and enabling resource-constrained actors to compete in international B2B service markets.

Originality/value – The study contributes a grounded, capability-based explanation of platform-enabled internationalization in B2B professional services and extends debates on competitiveness of locations by clarifying how digital capabilities and platform ecosystems can support service-export upgrading in emerging

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markets. The findings offer actionable implications for managers and policy actors seeking to strengthen platform readiness, digital skills and enabling payment/regulatory infrastructures.

Keywords B2B services exports, Emerging markets, Digital platforms, Dynamic capabilities, Digital marketing capabilities, Internationalization

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Trade in services has become a major driver of the global economy, with particularly strong growth in business-to-business (B2B) professional services such as consulting, legal and technical services [World Trade Organization (WTO), 2025; UNCTAD, 2024]. Yet international trade research still privileges manufacturing, leaving the internationalization of service firms, especially professional B2B services, comparatively underdeveloped in the international business and marketing literatures (Rammal *et al.*, 2022; Blagoeva *et al.*, 2020; De Jong *et al.*, 2021). This gap matters because professional services are highly intangible, customized and relationship-intensive, limiting the transferability of production-oriented export models (La *et al.*, 2009; Liu and Vrontis, 2017). In B2B contexts, the interdependence of interpersonal and organizational relationships further amplifies complexity and risk in cross-border exchanges (Gansser *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, we still know too little about how professional service providers build export capability and sustained international presence.

Digitalization has begun to reshape this landscape. Historically, many services remained domestically consumed because production and consumption co-occurred; advances in ICT, the digital economy and cross-border digital platforms increasingly decouple these activities and enable remote delivery at scale (Rao and Vinod, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2025). These developments are especially consequential for emerging-market firms and freelancers that face resource constraints, institutional distance and regulatory uncertainty, yet seek international growth (Tang *et al.*, 2024; Liu *et al.*, 2025). From a location competitiveness perspective, platform-enabled exporting can support sustainable development by enabling capability upgrading and more inclusive access to global demand, particularly where local market endowments and export infrastructures are weaker. In this sense, digital platforms can function as competitiveness infrastructure that helps firms located in emerging markets compete internationally, with potential relevance to sustainable development goal-oriented policy agendas.

At the firm level, digital transformation creates opportunities but also new complexities for B2B service exporters (Tronvoll *et al.*, 2020; De Jong *et al.*, 2021). Cross-border platforms such as LinkedIn, Fiverr and Toptal have become key interfaces for market access, matching, reputation signalling and transaction support in B2B services trade (Cassia and Magno, 2025). Prior work suggests that digital global connectivity is reshaping international advantages and lowering some traditional barriers to internationalization (Bhandari *et al.*, 2023). However, empirical research on how B2B professional service providers in emerging markets leverage platforms to build export capability remains limited (Da Rocha *et al.*, 2024) and existing studies often emphasize adaptation through learning rather than the broader capability configurations that sustain international competitiveness over time (e.g. Liu *et al.*, 2025).

Addressing this gap, this study examines how emerging-market professional service firms and freelancers develop B2B service exports through the synergy of digital marketing capabilities and cross-border digital platforms. Drawing on the resource-based view (RBV) and dynamic capabilities, and using classical grounded theory, we develop a process framework that explains how platform participation supports opportunity discovery, credibility building and adaptive stability in international markets. We ask: how can the development of digital marketing capabilities through cross-border platforms help professional service providers in emerging markets overcome barriers to exporting B2B professional services? The findings offer theoretically grounded insights into platform-enabled capability building and provide actionable implications for managers and policy actors concerned with strengthening sustainable competitiveness and service export development in emerging markets.

2. Literature review

2.1 Digital marketing capabilities and internationalization

This study integrates the RBV and dynamic capabilities theory to explain how B2B professional service providers build export capability in digitally mediated markets. RBV argues that sustained competitive advantage derives from valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991; Barney and Arikan, 2005). In digital settings, such resources often include intangible assets and knowledge embodied in technology, processes and market information (Bharadwaj *et al.*, 2013). However, RBV is limited in fast-changing and institutionally complex environments, where resources must be continually reconfigured – conditions that are particularly salient in emerging markets (Teece, 2007; Bıçakcıoğlu-Peynirci, 2023). Dynamic capabilities address this limitation by focusing on firms' abilities to sense opportunities, seize them and reconfigure resources in response to shifting markets (Teece, 2007; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2017). In international marketing contexts, such capabilities shape service firms' capacity to compete and adapt across borders (Stefia *et al.*, 2024; Heikinheimo *et al.*, 2024).

Digital technologies have reshaped international exchange, especially in services, by enabling remote delivery, data-driven market engagement and new governance mechanisms for transactions (Wang, 2020; Gregory *et al.*, 2019). In B2B service contexts, digital channels can mitigate core service challenges related to intangibility and evaluation difficulty by enabling visibility, interaction and documentation (Opazo-Basáez *et al.*, 2022; Gansser *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, digital marketing capabilities can be understood as the firm's capacity to leverage digital resources to generate market intelligence, create value propositions, build relationships and orchestrate customer engagement in digital environments (Herhausen *et al.*, 2020; Maycotte *et al.*, 2025). Prior work traces the evolution of these capabilities from early online channels and marketplaces to social media, digital relationships and advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) (Herhausen *et al.*, 2020; Mikalef *et al.*, 2021). Yet the international trade and international business literature remains comparatively fragmented in its treatment of digital marketing capabilities, despite their growing relevance for cross-border value creation (Wang, 2020; De Jong *et al.*, 2021).

Cross-border digital platforms and marketplaces (e.g. Upwork, Toptal, Alibaba) increasingly serve as intermediaries for international market access, matching, reputation signalling and transaction support [OECD, International Monetary Fund (IMF), UNCTAD and World Trade Organization (WTO), 2023; Tolstoy *et al.*, 2023]. In B2B markets, platforms can lower the cost of reaching international buyers while providing governance features that support trust and exchange (Jean and Kim, 2021; Shree *et al.*, 2021). Platform ecosystems also facilitate information flows and coordination among market actors, potentially accelerating cross-border exchanges and capability upgrading over time (Wang, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2022). However, realizing these benefits requires sustained capability development rather than one-off platform adoption (Bhandari *et al.*, 2023). Taken together, the literature suggests two unresolved gaps:

(1) professional services exporters remain underexamined relative to manufacturing; and

(2) we still lack process explanations for how platforms contribute to the development of digital marketing capabilities that sustain B2B professional services exporting.

2.2 Challenges and opportunities for B2B professional services exports in emerging markets

International services involve cross-border movements of people, information and associated assets, often requiring interaction across cultural and institutional contexts (Clark and Rajaratnam, 1999; Ojasalo and Ojasalo, 2011). Although services trade has become central to the global economy, B2B services exporting, particularly in emerging markets, remains comparatively understudied, in part due to data and measurement challenges (Blagoeva *et al.*, 2020; Rašković *et al.*, 2025). Recent work has expanded understanding of B2B service delivery, innovation and sales–service interaction, yet gaps persist regarding exporting processes and the role of digitalization in mitigating emerging-market constraints (Raddats *et al.*, 2019; De Jong *et al.*, 2021; Da Rocha *et al.*, 2024).

To synthesize relevant insights, we organize prior research on B2B professional services exporting into four themes that align with RBV and dynamic capabilities. Firstly, networking and relationships function as critical intangible resources in services exporting; formal and informal ties shape market selection, entry and trust formation (Coviello and Martin, 1999; Alon and McKee, 1999). More recent work suggests that exporters increasingly combine physical and virtual networking in dynamic ways, particularly in born-global trajectories (Tobiassen and Pettersen, 2023). Secondly, adaptation and localization are central to professional services exporting because customer expectations and institutional requirements vary across markets; successful exporters develop capabilities to tailor delivery and manage quality while controlling cost (Winch, 2008; La *et al.*, 2009). Thirdly, resource and capability management remains a persistent challenge in emerging markets; exporters must address uncertainty linked to cultural and regulatory differences and often rely on skilled personnel, innovation and networks to compensate for resource constraints (Pomirleanu *et al.*, 2016; Pacheco and Akhter, 2022). Fourthly, digital platform integration has emerged as a distinct stream, highlighting exporter readiness and the strategic role of platforms in enabling cross-border exchange, yet empirical evidence remains limited for B2B professional services and emerging-market contexts (Da Rocha *et al.*, 2024; Cassia and Magno, 2025).

Furthermore, studies on the success of selecting profitable foreign markets show that success depends on four critical factors: the management team's international business experience, market knowledge, internal and external consultations and identifying a trusted manager with international experience (Al Qur'an, 2020). Recent cross-country research also presents a four-step systematic decision-making process for achieving profitable foreign market choices and emphasizes that the decision-making process is influenced by cognitive boundaries (Al Qur'an, 2024). This research transforms the traditional processes of selecting and entering international markets by considering digital platforms as a platform and infrastructure for building capabilities for companies. It also helps resource-constrained players in emerging markets achieve Platform-Driven Leap. Instead of relying solely on fixed location choices.

Overall, the literature remains fragmented regarding how emerging-market professional service providers convert platform participation into sustained exporting capability, particularly under institutional uncertainty and rapid digital change (Blagoeva *et al.*, 2020; De Jong *et al.*, 2021). This limitation is especially relevant to competitiveness-oriented debates: if platforms operate as export infrastructure for firms located in emerging markets, then understanding the capability-building mechanisms behind platform-enabled exporting is essential for both managerial action and policy design aimed at strengthening location competitiveness and sustainable development outcomes. This study responds by developing a grounded, process-based framework of platform-enabled capability building in B2B professional services exports.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

In line with the guidelines for designing qualitative research in international entrepreneurship (Al Qur'an, 2024), this study combines classical grounded theory with a multi-expert field setting to develop a process explanation of how B2B professional service providers in emerging markets build export capabilities through cross-border digital platforms. Classical grounded theory is appropriate where prior theories are limited and aims to establish concepts and relationships based on field data Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Birks and Mills, 2015). Given the under-theorized nature of platform-based B2B professional service exports and the contextual complexity of emerging markets, this approach supports the collection and analysis of replicated data, allowing theory to emerge through ongoing comparison and theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2014; Urquhart, 2022). Although our unit of analysis is not a single company or country, we used prominent principles to design the research process:

(1) data were generated and analysed using purposive and theoretical sampling;

(2) semi-structured interviews; and

(3) classical grounded theory coding (open, selective and theoretical), supported by memoing throughout the study (Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019; Qureshi and Ünlü, 2020).

This qualitative process provides intensity and richness in the collected data that can prevent and overcome common barriers to validity and reliability in a social and organizational study (Al Qur'an, 2024).

3.2 Sampling and participants

Sampling began with purposive selection of information-rich participants with direct experience exporting B2B professional services via digital platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, Fiverr, Toptal) (Streubert and Carpenter, 2011). To capture variation in service contexts and exporting experiences, we included both professional service firms and freelancers across consulting, legal and technical/engineering domains. Theoretical sampling was then used to refine categories as analysis progressed until saturation was reached.

After the initial purposive sampling, theoretical sampling was used to refine and further develop the categories and fill in the gaps and the researchers refined where and how to find the data needed to further develop the categories (Charmaz, 2014). For example, after categories such as dynamic localization emerged, subsequent interviews with platform experts and experienced consultants were directed to develop these categories. Data collection and analysis were also conducted simultaneously to allow for ongoing comparison of new data with the emerging categories. This process continued until additional explorations yielded no further theoretical explanations (Urquhart, 2022) and theoretical saturation was achieved.

In total, 37 participants were interviewed over a three-month:

(1) B2B professional services company executives, including export managers and senior digital marketing managers with over five years of experience;

(2) experienced freelancers with over five years of experience providing B2B professional services (such as marketing consulting, international legal services, management consulting and software engineering) using international digital platforms; and

(3) platform/industry experts with in-depth knowledge of how these types of platforms work.

We define emerging markets as countries that are in transition from a closed to an open market economy, experiencing rapid economic growth and industrialization (Bruton *et al.*, 2021) and, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have some degree of market openness but do not yet meet the criteria for classification as advanced economies (IMF, 2018). In contrast, we define developed markets as economies known to have advanced institutional maturity, high market transparency and sophisticated regulatory frameworks that support efficient market functioning (IMF, 2018).

Consistent with the study focus, 70% of participants were based in emerging markets (India, Pakistan, Brazil and China) and 30% in developed markets, enabling comparison of constraints and practices across contexts. They ranged in age from 22 to 50 years, and 8 were female (21.6%) and 29 were male (78.4%). Saturation was reached after 31 interviews, and six additional interviews were conducted to confirm category stability (Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019). Participant inclusion criteria and participant overview are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews conducted via Google Meet. Interviews lasted 45–90 min (average 67 min), were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed *verbatim*. The interview protocol covered platform use in exporting, market intelligence and analytics, customer engagement, localization and institutional constraints and the use of digital tools (including automation/AI). To strengthen interpretive credibility, 12 participants took part in follow-up member review discussions focused on clarifying and validating emergent concepts. A semi-structured interview was developed to provide the starting point of questions. Questions

Table 1. Participant inclusion criteria

Entry criteria	Criteria details	Logic
Service export history	At least three years of experience using digital platforms to export B2B services	Ensuring experience with the practical challenges of being present in international markets
Industrial diversity	Working in one of the fields of consulting, engineering, law	Covering a wide range of B2B professional services
Geographic diversity	70% of the sample is from emerging markets (India, Pakistan, Brazil, China) and 30% from developed markets	Comparative comparison of emerging market specific challenges with international standards

Table 2. Overview of participants

Interviewees	Geographical breakdown	Target industries
Service company managers (SME, large): 15	Emerging markets: 9 Developed markets: 6	Marketing consulting: 5 people International legal services: 4 people Management consulting: 3 people Software engineering: 3 people
Professional freelancers: 15	Emerging markets: 10 Developed markets: 5	Marketing consulting: 8 International legal services: 2 Management consulting: 2 Software engineering: 3
Industry/platform experts: 7	Emerging markets: 4 Developed markets: 3	Marketing consulting: 2 International legal services: 2 Management consulting: 2 Software engineering: 1

were developed in three stages based on the participants' responses. The questions in the first stage were used to initiate interviews and in the direction of experimental basic orientation and key concepts. The questions of the interviews were more specialized gradually, with the appearance of primary themes in the second stage. The third stage questions were created to examine the discovered mechanisms. The questions of the interview are summarized in Table 3.

3.4 Data analysis

Analysis began alongside data collection, consistent with grounded theory logic. Transcripts were coded using open, selective and theoretical coding to develop categories and relationships grounded in the data (Glaser, 1998; Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019). We applied constant comparative analysis across interviews and categories, using memoing to document analytical decisions, category development and emerging theoretical links (Qureshi and Ünlü, 2020). Atlas.ti supported data organization and retrieval. Research quality was strengthened through (1) a transparent audit trail via memos and coding documentation, (2) member review with 12 participants and (3) ongoing peer debriefing with senior academics during design and analysis (Holloway and Galvin, 2017). The overall research process is summarized in Figure 1 (adapted from Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019).

Table 3. Interview questions

No.	Question	Evolution of questions
1	Describe how you use digital platforms (e.g. Fiverr, Toptal, LinkedIn …) to export your services	First stage questions in the direction of experimental basic orientation and key concepts
2	What factors led you to digitalize your export process?	
3	What is your strategy for managing international customer engagement on platforms? (e.g. Chatbot, Quick Response)	
4	How do you use platform data (e.g. customer statistics, purchasing behaviour) to make decisions?	Second stage questions to deepen emerging themes
5	What analytical tools (Google Analytics, CRM) have helped you identify new markets?	
6	How do you collect customer feedback and use it to improve your services?	
7	How do you adapt your services to cultural/legal differences in emerging markets? (e.g. changes in contracts)	
8	Do you have an example of adjusting your digital strategy due to changing international regulations?	
9	How do you use AI/automation (e.g. demand forecasting)?	Third stage questions to examine discovered mechanisms
10	Have you used new technologies (such as virtual reality) to showcase your services to international clients?	

Note(s): CRM = customer relationship management

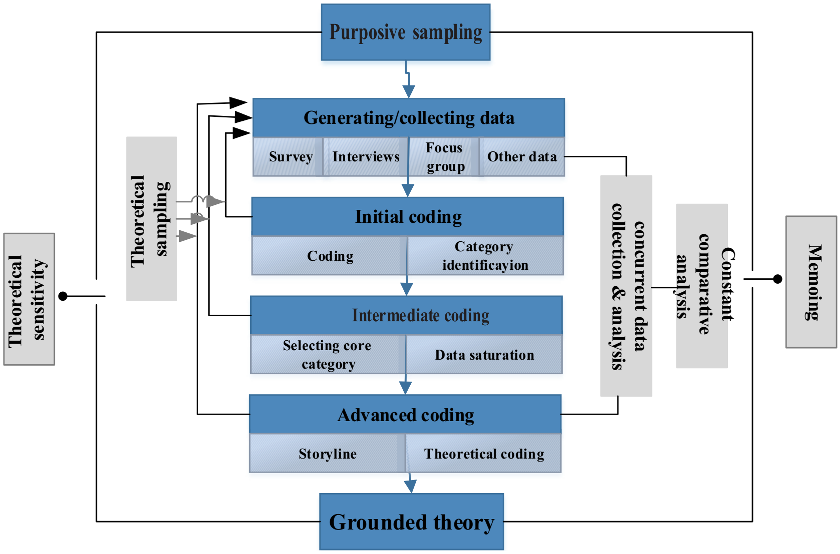

Figure 1. Research process
Source: Adapted from Chun Tie *et al.* (2019)

4. Findings

4.1 Open coding results

The researchers began transcribing interviews and conducting open coding immediately after completing the first interview. Open coding is a dynamic, reflective process in which significant words or groups of words are identified and labelled (Coyne and Cowley, 2006; Glaser, 1998). Constant comparative analysis and memoing also began simultaneously with data collection and were conducted continuously throughout the research process (Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019). Three hundred 65 open codes were identified in this process. Examples of line-by-line coding and interview quotes are provided in Table 4.

4.2 Results of selective coding

In this stage, unlike open coding, where everything is important, selective coding was limited to categories that were relevant to the research problem (Glaser, 1978). Selective coding transformed basic data into more abstract concepts (Glaser, 1998) and continued until the main and subcategories reached a state of saturation. At this stage, 17 subcategories and six main categories were identified. Tables 5 and 6 provide examples of open codes and their corresponding classifications.

4.3 Theoretical coding results

In this stage, which is the last coding stage in the classical grounded theory method (Evans, 2013), a unified framework and new perspective are presented through establishing relationships between the main categories (Glaser, 1978). The theoretical codes obtained in this stage include platform-driven leap, digital credibility enhancement and digital adaptation stability, which are reported in Table 7:

Table 4. Sample of interviews and open codes

Quotation	Open codes
This platform acts as an assistant for me and gives me a lot of chances to get in front of potential buyers in B2B markets This platform provides me with various tools with attractive features so that I can easily attract the trust of customers One of these useful features is the pro badge platform and its selected market This feature has been useful for me in this regard and has made every customer come to me with confidence in my skills before starting their conversation with me	Trust in skills
As you know, there are certain complexities in international transactions, especially in the field of payment, but platforms have made these previously complicated transactions simpler and more convenient for our company by creating a platform for secure payments	Secure payments
Another important issue in international trade is time differences We must always be careful that each region or country needs its own time planning; to keep strong communications and feedbacks On the other hand, we in the company pay special attention to the subtle cultural differences and communication styles or preferred reporting formats of our customers	Pay attention to time zone differences; subtle cultural differences – such as communication styles or preferred reporting formats
Unfortunately, I think the issue of digital awareness and education in emerging markets has not been given the attention it deserves Many companies and individuals in emerging markets struggle with platform awareness, and the main reason why companies in emerging markets are wary of online transactions is precisely the issue of their digital literacy gap	Digital literacy gap; lack of awareness of B2B professional services platforms; Caution towards online transactions
Another issue that makes things a little difficult for us when it comes to international trade is local regulations or strict FX controls, as these complicate payment flows anyway, so we try to provide guidance on platform deposit protections and milestone settings as much as possible to gain trust	Complexity of payment flows due to local regulations or strict FX controls

4.4 Substantive theory: a dynamic cycle of platform-enabled export development

Finally, after data classification, constant comparative analysis and theoretical coding, the grounded theory was formulated. Glaser and Strauss (1967) believed that the theory should be data-based, directly emerge from the field of study and be easily understood and applied in terms of communication. This study reports the following model derived from the data (Figure 2) by presenting the grounded theory:

> For B2B professional services exports in emerging markets, companies focus on Platform-driven Leap to build a platform to enhance digital credibility, overcome cultural and institutional challenges with sustainable digital adaptation and ensure the success of service exports through a dynamic cycle.

The grounded theory emerging from the data, designed as a dynamic and cyclical model, explains the process of internationalization of B2B professional services in emerging markets through the synergy of digital marketing capabilities and digital platforms. The model emphasizes nonlinear and feedback interactions, proposing a dynamic structure that is consistent with the complexities and uncertainties inherent in emerging markets. At the centre of this model, emerging markets are visualized as a gear, a symbol of B2B companies.

Table 5. Sample of initial open codes and subcategories

Subcategory	Open coding
Market analysis	Monitoring competitor activities using online databases, understanding market algorithms, using keyword analysis tools such as Google Trends, focusing on cost efficiency in Asia and Africa, focusing on mobile-centric strategies in Asia and Africa, segmenting customers by industry using CRM
Strategic decision-making	Data-driven decision-making, using real-time data in planning and forecasting, tracking the buyer journey, analysing data to monitor listing performance and buyer behaviour, measuring conversion rates across platforms, generating leads on platforms, researching and selecting platforms aligned with services, using data visualization to improve strategic decision-making in B2B services
Platform-based competitive strategies	Competitive pricing, simultaneous competition with domestic and international players, differentiation through digital value proposition, ranking optimization on platforms, dynamic competitor analysis on platforms
Profile validation	Building a strong profile with in-demand keywords, uploading certifications, providing buyer-friendly assurance signals, telling your brand story digitally, showcasing international certifications like PMP and Google Cloud Partner, showing a case study on your profile, creating content on LinkedIn and professional networking on LinkedIn
Engagement and networking	Engage with customers through live chat and video calls, LinkedIn Ads, pre-contract assessment sessions, use Async tools like Loom to record explainer videos, connect with Middle Eastern customers via WhatsApp, connect with European customers via ZOOM,
Country-of-origin brand effect	The impact of country-of-origin perceptions, customers' reliance on external cues such as reputation to evaluate services, managing country brand perceptions through digital storytelling, strengthening credibility with international partnerships, reducing market biases with digital quality signals
Personalization of interactions	Maintaining a customer-centric attitude, providing reports and documentation and customer experiences, the role of the customer shopping experience, designing the digital customer journey, providing dynamic content based on customer needs, interactions based on customer feedback
Customer support	Facilitate efficient matching between supply and demand by B2B platforms, multi-channel support for customers, manage customer expectations with digital transparency, digital after-sales follow-up, measure customer satisfaction with digital tools
Emerging technologies	Efficient logistics technology, providing services with the seller's AI model, using the logo maker tool on the platform, the buyer's responsibility to review deliveries generated by AI, security of service performance through digital technologies, the role of information technology in separating production and consumption of services for export
Innovative business models	Integrate offline strengths with online reach, create cross-channel engagement, have a multi-platform presence without duplication, offer special memberships on B2B platforms, offer tiered pricing packages, offer additional services through Gig® Extras, legitimize innovation, be digitally open
Dynamic localization	Support for multiple languages, adaptive reporting system for each country, setting up bilingual contracts (English + local language), creating automatic translation tools in chats on platforms, creating regional training tools on platforms
Cultural alignment	Familiarity with the business culture of the countries, Asian clients' greater emphasis on personal relationships and virtual face-to-face meetings, European clients' emphasis on structured weekly reports with quantitative KPIs, identification of cultural taboos, subtle cultural differences – such as communication styles or preferred reporting formats, the impact of psychological distance on exporters' use of B2B platforms
Managing institutional challenges	Familiarity with the business laws of the target markets, digital literacy, Complexity of payment flows due to local regulations or strict FX controls, age restriction of 18 years for platform users, platform unavailability for sanctioned users, weak intellectual property protection
Quality screening	Screening process of experts, measuring subject matter expertise of experts, measuring communication skills of experts, comprehensive assessment of English language of experts, assigning a pilot project to experts, importance of knowledge and technical expertise in evaluating the performance of B2B professional services
Cybersecurity	Maintaining compliance with international data protection standards, securing buyer data using efficient cybersecurity processes, maintaining user confidentiality and password security, having a valid license for archival media
Platform risk management	Maintaining ranking on the platform, creating effective gigs, studying and being aware of platform policies, collaborating and coordinating all business teams in platform activities, suspending seller accounts with low ratings, the impact of high ratings on achieving advanced seller levels
Building digital trust	Secure payment solutions, customization of messaging approach, electronic signature systems, maintaining customer trust with timely responses, maintaining customer trust with complete documentation, using Escrow payment mechanism, starting with small projects, multi-factor authentication system, providing proof of identity by commercial sellers, self-declaration by commercial sellers for compliance with EU regulations

Table 6. Selective coding

Category	Subcategory
Platform-driven intelligence	Market analysis Strategic decision-making Platform-based competitive strategies
Digital legitimacy	Profile validation Engagement and networking Country-of-origin brand effect
Digital customer experience	Personalization of interactions Customer support
Platform-driven innovation	Emerging technologies Innovative business models
Dynamic adaptation	Dynamic localization Cultural alignment Managing institutional challenges Quality screening
Digital risk management	Cybersecurity Platform risk management Building digital trust

Table 7. Theoretical coding

Theoretical codes for the development of B2B professional services exports	
Platform-driven leap	Platform-driven leap is the agile exploitation of B2B digital platforms by companies in emerging environments to identify new markets and capture hidden opportunities in these markets through advanced data analytics and integration of new technologies such as artificial intelligence. The concept of platform-driven leap refers to the development of those analytical and innovative digital capabilities that provide companies with a sustainable competitive advantage in dynamic and complex B2B markets, through real-time digital tools, especially by overcoming the challenges of uncertainty and resource constraints
Digital credibility enhancement	Digital credibility enhancement is the creation and strengthening of lasting trust between the provider and recipient of professional services through digital platforms in complex B2B markets. This concept helps improve the quality of B2B relationships in emerging markets by enhancing customer perceptions and mindsets towards service quality through digital signals such as digital storytelling and personalized interactions
Digital adaptation stability	Digital adaptation stability is the process of adapting professional services to the cultural, institutional and technical needs of complex B2B markets through digital platforms and localization tools such as automated translation. This concept seeks to mitigate cultural and security challenges by developing digital localization capabilities and digital risk management to ensure successful service exports with flexible coordination

This gear connects to international markets through three core concepts: platform-driven leap, digital credibility enhancement and digital adaptation stability, which interact synergistically with each other.

Platform-driven leap, as the driving force behind B2B service exports, strengthens companies' analytical and innovative capabilities in leveraging B2B digital platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, Fiverr,

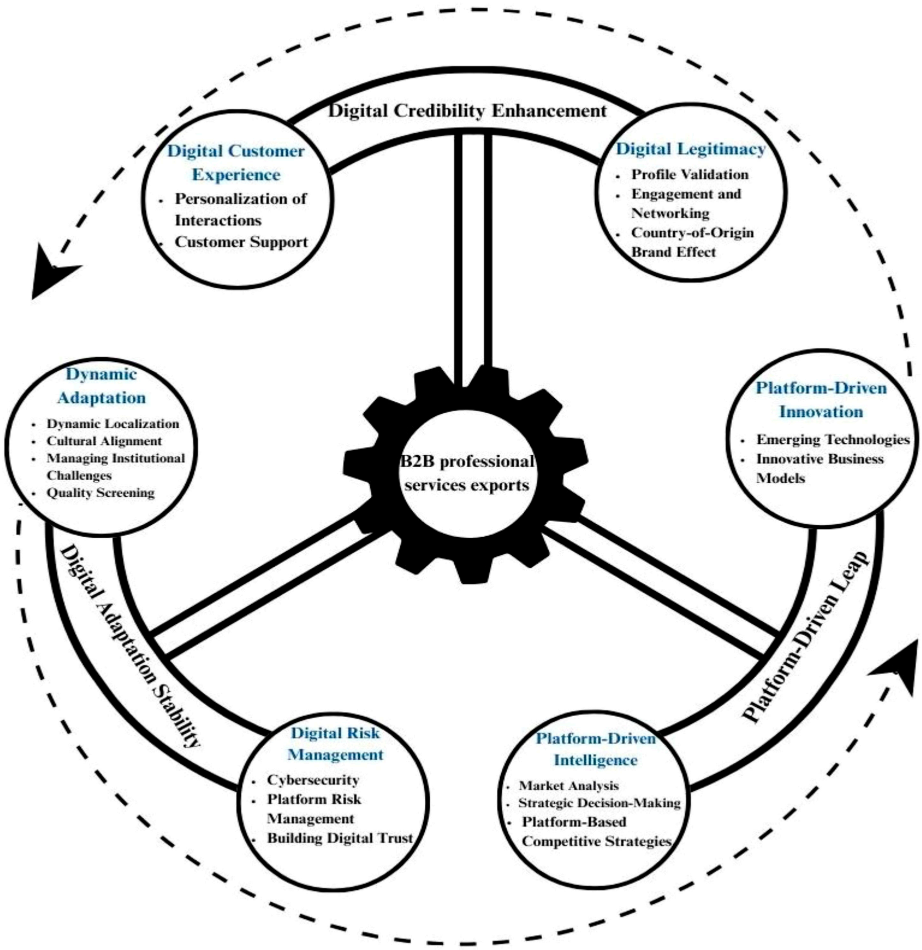

Figure 2. B2B professional services export development framework

Toptal) to analyse real-time data, identify market opportunities and develop innovative business models. As one of the managers of the companies studied said:

> Before using digital platforms, we depended on intermediaries to reach international customers. These intermediaries were very expensive for us. But today, with the help of platforms like Toptal and Fiverr, we identify customers directly and approach them with personalized offers.

Digital credibility enhancement, a digital legitimacy builder, helps improve the quality of the digital customer experience. Digital credibility enhancement focuses on building and reinforcing digital legitimacy through the use of digital tools, such as testimonials, digital portfolios and digital storytelling. This concept enhances the digital customer experience by improving customers' perceptions of service quality and increasing trust through personalized interactions (such as chatbots and explainer videos). This process plays a crucial role, especially in emerging markets, where digital literacy gaps and country-of-origin brand biases pose significant challenges. In this regard, one of the participants stated:

> In international markets, customer awareness of you is low and what becomes your brand reputation is your digital footprint. Providing testimonials and portfolios and even customer reviews helps to build trust in this space. It is especially useful to compensate for the origin bias that is more evident in emerging markets.

Digital adaptation stability serves as a mechanism for adapting to cultural, linguistic and institutional challenges. Through digital localization tools (such as bilingual contracts and machine translations like DeepL) and cybersecurity protocols, this concept enables companies to adapt their services to the needs of target markets and effectively manage digital risks. This adaptation, supported by local and inimitable knowledge, strengthens digital trust and ensures the sustainability of companies' international presence. One of the participants stated in this regard:

> Entering international markets required us to adapt to international standards. Even in small processes such as providing bilingual versions of contracts (English + local language) or adapting the tone of communication.

The bidirectional arrows in the model represent the dynamic interactions and mutual reinforcement between these three concepts. For example, platform-driven leap by providing analytics facilitates digital credibility enhancement through profile optimization, which in turn leads to digital adaptation stability through service localization. This feedback loop, consistent with the grounded theory approach, enables companies to review and optimize their strategies continually. This dynamism, unlike linear models that follow fixed stages, provides the flexibility needed to respond to rapid environmental changes in emerging markets.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study advances understanding of B2B professional services exports by theorizing how emerging-market service providers convert cross-border platform participation into export capability. Although services and B2B service relationships are increasingly complex due to intangibility and relationship intensity (Gansser *et al.*, 2021), the internationalization of service firms – particularly in emerging markets – remains underdeveloped relative to manufacturing-focused research (Blagoeva *et al.*, 2020; Rammal *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, scholarship has called for stronger integration of digital marketing capabilities and platform dynamics in industrial and international contexts (De Jong *et al.*, 2021; Luo, 2022). Responding to these gaps, our grounded framework explains how digital platforms shape capability building through a dynamic, feedback-driven cycle.

Firstly, the model extends the platform and ecosystem view by specifying capability mechanisms through which platforms support exporting. While prior research shows that platforms can integrate actors and resources in service ecosystems and stimulate service innovation (Kowalkowski *et al.*, 2024), our contribution is to theorize how exporting capability is built and stabilized in emerging-market contexts through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: platform-driven leap, digital credibility enhancement and digital adaptation stability. This complements work on digitalization and international performance that emphasizes new international advantages and linkages enabled by digital connectivity (Bhandari *et al.*, 2023; Luo, 2021) by detailing the underlying micro-processes that enable emerging-market actors to compete under resource constraints and institutional uncertainty.

Secondly, the framework integrates RBV and dynamic capabilities into a process model tailored to the realities of B2B professional services. Platform-driven leap reflects sensing and seizing through analytics-enabled market intelligence, platform positioning and innovation-oriented service design (Teece, 2007; Stefia *et al.*, 2024). This mechanism is particularly salient for late internationalizers that use platforms to accelerate opportunity discovery and reduce market-entry frictions (Shree *et al.*, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2025). As one participant noted, platform features and networking lowered lead-generation barriers and improved access to target clients. The implication is that platforms operate not merely as channels but as capability-building infrastructures that can compress internationalization timelines.

Thirdly, digital credibility enhancement contributes to legitimacy and trust-building explanations in digitally mediated B2B services trade. In RBV terms, credibility operates as an intangible resource that supports differentiation and value appropriation (Barney, 1991). Platforms enable credibility building via verification, portfolios, testimonials and structured communication, improving perceived service quality and customer experience, especially where country-of-origin bias and information asymmetry elevate buyer risk (Gansser *et al.*, 2021; De Jong *et al.*, 2021). This is consistent with service internationalization research emphasizing legitimacy as a prerequisite for cross-border growth (Blagoeva *et al.*, 2020), while specifying the digital signals through which legitimacy is assembled on platforms.

Fourthly, digital adaptation stability explains how exporters sustain cross-border delivery by aligning with local cultural, institutional and technical expectations while managing digital risk. This mechanism extends adaptation research in professional services by linking localization routines and risk governance to sustained export performance (La *et al.*, 2009; Rammal *et al.*, 2022). One participant highlighted testing market-specific communication styles and aligning service routines with client time zones, illustrating how adaptive coordination is embedded in platform-enabled delivery. Importantly, adaptation stability reinforces credibility by reducing delivery failure and strengthening trust, completing a cycle in which platform-driven leap, credibility and adaptation co-evolve over time.

Finally, the framework carries implications for debates on competitiveness and location-based upgrading. If platform participation enables emerging-market firms and freelancers to access global demand while building export capabilities, then digital platforms can be interpreted as part of a location's competitiveness infrastructure, supporting upgrading and potentially more inclusive participation in global services trade. This aligns with policy-oriented discussions on how capabilities, institutions and digital infrastructures shape competitiveness outcomes in emerging markets.

5.2 Practical and policy implications

The framework provides a concise roadmap for managers seeking to internationalize B2B professional services through platforms under resource and institutional constraints. We summarize implications as three interlinked capability priorities:

(1) Build platform-driven leap (market intelligence and innovation): Managers should treat platforms as learning infrastructures – using platform analytics and iterative experimentation to identify target segments, refine value propositions and develop scalable service offers. Early wins can be generated through focused positioning, clear service packaging and systematic monitoring of platform performance indicators (Bhandari *et al.*, 2023).

(2) Strengthen digital credibility enhancement (signals and experience): Exporters should invest in credibility signals that reduce perceived risk and enhance customer experience: verified profiles, evidence-based portfolios, testimonials and consistent communication routines. Because trust is central in professional services, responsiveness

and documentation should be designed as service quality signals rather than administrative add-ons (Gansser *et al.*, 2021; Blagoeva *et al.*, 2020).

(3) Institutionalize digital adaptation stability (local fit and risk governance): To sustain international delivery, firms should formalize localization routines (e.g. language and reporting adaptations, contractual clarity) and risk governance (e.g. secure payment arrangements, data protection and cybersecurity). These practices reduce institutional uncertainty and strengthen trust, particularly in cross-border engagements (Rammal *et al.*, 2022; Cassia and Magno, 2025).

Competitiveness-oriented policy and ecosystem implications: For emerging-market locations, the model suggests that export performance can be strengthened by policies that expand digital literacy and platform-readiness, improve cross-border payment and contracting infrastructures and provide small and medium-sized enterprises/freelancers with export support that is tailored to platform-based business models. Such interventions can help firms convert platform participation into sustained capability upgrading rather than short-term transactional exporting.

5.3 Social implications

The findings of this study also have broader implications for society. The findings suggest that digital platforms can increase the participation of B2B professional services firms and freelancers operating in emerging markets in the digital economy by reducing their dependence on physical migration. By removing some of the barriers existing in emerging markets, such as resource constraints, geographical distance and institutional uncertainty, these platforms provide the necessary platform for entering cross-border economies. From a societal perspective, these developments lead to the emergence of new forms of digital entrepreneurship and skill-based employment. However, this requires increasing digital literacy, platform training, improving infrastructure and facilitating regulations.

6. Conclusions

This study develops a grounded process framework explaining how emerging-market B2B professional service providers build export capability through the synergy of digital marketing capabilities and cross-border digital platforms. The framework comprises three reinforcing mechanisms, platform-driven leap, digital credibility enhancement and digital adaptation stability, that together describe a dynamic cycle through which firms and freelancers identify opportunities, build legitimacy and sustain cross-border delivery. Based on classical grounded theory and 37 interviews, the findings show how platform infrastructures (e.g. LinkedIn, Toptal, Fiverr) can help exporters mitigate resource constraints and institutional uncertainty while upgrading their international competitiveness.

Theoretically, the study extends research on service internationalization and digitalization by specifying the capability-building mechanisms linking platform participation to sustained exporting outcomes, complementing work on platform-enabled exporting and digital resources in internationalization (Bhandari *et al.*, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2025). The framework also suggests that in contexts of uneven digital infrastructure, exporters benefit from a hybrid approach that combines platform-based engagement with offline relationship building to stabilize delivery and credibility over time. Practically, the model provides a capability-oriented roadmap for managers: develop platform-based market intelligence and experimentation (platform-driven leap), invest in credibility signals and consistent digital service routines (digital credibility enhancement) and institutionalize localization and risk governance to sustain delivery across markets (digital adaptation stability). At a policy level, the findings imply that platform-enabled service exports can contribute to location competitiveness when supported by interventions that improve digital literacy, cross-border payment and contracting infrastructures and SME/freelancer export readiness.

This study has limitations that also indicate directions for future research. Firstly, although theoretical saturation was achieved, broader samples and mixed-method designs could test the framework and assess boundary conditions across industries and regions. Secondly, emerging markets vary substantially in institutional and infrastructure conditions; comparative studies across regions and regulatory environments can refine the model and clarify contingencies, including the role of organizational readiness and complementary explanations such as network theory.

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Ethics statement

This research was conducted under the academic supervision of Semnan University and followed the university's ethical guidelines. Formal ethics approval was waived as the study involved voluntary, non-invasive interviews with professionals, posed minimal risk to participants, and collected no sensitive personal data.

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Corresponding authors
Davood Feiz can be contacted at: feiz1353@semnan.ac.ir and Shahryar Sorooshian can be contacted at: shahryar.sorooshian@gu.se