

Small firm internationalization using digital platforms: an assessment and future research directions

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how the extant literature approached the issue of small firms' international market entry enabled by digital platforms.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents a systematic literature review of the internationalization of small firms using digital platforms. It includes only empirical papers from Scopus and Web of Science databases, covering 2016 to mid-2023.

Findings – The study provides both (1) a descriptive analysis of the selected papers, encompassing their temporal and spatial distribution, methods, theoretical perspectives and the type of platform examined and (2) a qualitative analysis of the articles' content in a narrative review structure, culminating in an integrated framework of key findings and suggested research questions on the role of digital platforms in small firm internationalization.

Originality/value – There is still a very limited number of studies addressing the phenomenon, with several scholars recently calling for further research. This paper compiles, synthesizes, analyzes and integrates the empirical literature on SME internationalization enabled by digital platforms, offering possible future avenues to advance research.

Keywords Digital platforms, SMEs, Digital internationalization, Systematic literature review

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Digital technology has changed the nature of international business by reducing the costs associated with physical distance, thus making it easier to identify international opportunities and facilitating direct contact with suppliers, business partners, users, and potential customers in any foreign market. Defined as the process of rendering “an organization's

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products, services, and processes [. . .], along with the information associated with them, for marketing, sales, and distribution” internet compatible (Banalieva and Dhanaraj, 2019, p. 1373), digitalization has promoted radical changes in the way firms operate internationally.

The study of how firms internationalize using the internet has been pioneered by several scholars (e.g. Reuber and Fischer, 2011; Samiee, 1998; Sinkovics *et al.*, 2013; Yamin and Sinkovics, 2006). While most of these studies focused on using corporate sites and email to perform international marketing functions and facilitate international customer relationship management, the ability of smaller firms to adopt digital internationalization was limited until the advent of digital platform ecosystems (DPEs). DPEs are meta-organizations (Kretschmer *et al.*, 2022) organized around platforms via shared or open-source technologies (Jacobides *et al.*, 2018), through which different actors interact, directly or indirectly, and co-create value (Senyo *et al.*, 2019). The coordination and regulation characteristics are especially relevant as they shape users’ behavior and correct market failures, with the potential of setting “powerful network effects and complementarities into motion” (Boudreau and Hagiu, 2009, p. 188). Digital platforms are at the center of digital ecosystems, constituting a “set of technologies, components, services, architecture, and relationships” (Nambisan *et al.*, 2019, p. 1465) that facilitate user interactions and transactions. Digital platforms can operate as “intermediaries or matchmakers whose core competency is reducing or eliminating transaction costs” using digital infrastructure governance mechanisms (Song, 2019, p. 579). The adoption of digital platforms by firms of all sizes allowed digital internationalization to become widespread. Digital platforms provide a cost-effective international market entry mode and enable intermediation, specialization, knowledge generation and dissemination, and the development of innovative business models. Furthermore, they have the potential of enhancing the speed and broaden the scope of internationalization while mitigating some of the inherent risks of entering foreign markets.

Despite the relevance of the phenomenon, research addressing digital internationalization in general and the specific role of digital platforms remains scarce, prompting several scholars to call for further investigation into the impact of digital platforms on firm internationalization (e.g. Cha *et al.*, 2023; Stallkamp and Schotter, 2021). Nambisan *et al.* (2019) argue that scholars need to improve theories by examining this phenomenon, while Saari *et al.* (2022) point out that research on the influence of social media on the international growth of small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) is still in its infancy. This paper responds to these calls by conducting a systematic review of the literature on the internationalization of smaller firms using digital platforms, aiming to answer the following research question: *How does the extant literature address the issue of international market entry for SMEs enabled by digital platforms?* Although other literature reviews have addressed the interplay between digitalization and internationalization in general, none have focused on digital platforms and SMEs. This article presents an up-to-date systematic literature review that compiles, synthesizes, analyzes, and integrates the empirical literature on the internationalization of SMEs using digital platforms, offering possible future avenues to advance research.

After this introduction, the paper starts by exploring early studies on the Internet-enabled internationalization of small firms and the potential role and types of digital platforms that facilitate SME internationalization. It then reports how digital internationalization has been examined in previous literature reviews. The method section explains the data collection and analysis protocols applied to 51 empirical articles relevant to the study’s research question. These selected studies are examined to determine the extent to which the literature has explored digital platforms within SME internationalization. The study identifies the main themes, topics, and relationships among them, leading to an integrated framework of the key findings in the literature. The study concludes by suggesting areas and research questions for further investigation, including some of the phenomenon’s unexplored antecedents (internal, external, related to relationships or strategic issues) and outcomes.

This study contributes to the international marketing literature in three ways: (1) by compiling, analyzing and summarizing the theories, methods, contexts, and findings of empirical studies on SME internationalization using digital platforms conducted from 2016 to mid-2023; (2) by presenting a framework designed to guide future research efforts; and (3) by identifying existing gaps in the current research and proposing new research avenues to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon.

Digital internationalization and SMEs

Early studies on the Internet-enabled internationalization of small firms delved into the antecedents, benefits, and requirements of the Internet in international activities (Reuber and Fischer, 2011), as well as its impact on the speed and scope of internationalization, particularly for SMEs with limited resources (Arenius *et al.*, 2005). This literature acknowledges the Internet's role as an export enabler by mitigating the liabilities of newness and foreignness (Cavusgil and Knight, 2015) and reducing transaction costs. The widespread use of the Internet made global connectivity more accessible, enabling firms to leverage their information-processing capabilities (Sinkovics *et al.*, 2013) and to perform online international marketing functions (Samiee, 1998). Furthermore, online presence and interaction with customers from other countries could lower managerial perceptions of psychic distance, reducing export barriers (Yamin and Sinkovics, 2006). However, the scope of SME internationalization using the Internet was limited by management expertise, the firm's experience with the Internet, and perceptions of the Internet's effectiveness for international marketing (Moini and Tesar, 2005).

Despite the advantages, some scholars cautioned against viewing the Internet as a panacea for solving internationalization problems. Firms could fall into a "virtuality trap" by assuming they have enough knowledge about a foreign market and reducing efforts to learn more (Yamin and Sinkovics, 2006). Underestimating the importance of a physical presence in the market could harm their future export performance. In addition, independent websites – the focus of early studies on Internet-enabled firms – have proven expensive and difficult to maintain. They also attract only a limited number of visitors, especially if the firm lacks the resources to invest in websites in several languages (Saban and Rau, 2005).

However, the advent and adoption of digital platforms changed the nature and scope of digital internationalization. Digital platforms can help smaller companies overcome limitations associated with previous internet-enabled internationalization efforts. They not only leverage the inherent advantages of digitalization, but they allow companies to expand beyond geographic and industry boundaries. Moreover, they can reduce the liabilities of foreignness, newness and smallness associated with foreign market entry. For small businesses, digital platforms facilitate reaching a global customer base at a low cost and streamline sales, financial transactions, and customer relationship management (Manyika *et al.*, 2016), enabling even the smallest firms to pursue internationalization.

Digital platforms that enable SME internationalization can be categorized into three main types: Sales Platforms, Interaction and Reach Platforms, and Support Platforms (Table 1).

Sales Platforms – Sales platforms facilitate transactions between actors who would otherwise be unable to interact (Jacobides *et al.*, 2018). They include digital distribution platforms, like Apple's App Store and Google Play Store, and global marketplaces like Amazon and eBay (Acs *et al.*, 2021). These platforms benefit SMEs by providing access to a vast global consumer base with efficient search engines, enhancing trust in cross-border transactions (Zhu *et al.*, 2019). Global marketplaces build a reputation in each location, assuring consumers of the credibility of unknown sellers (Petroni, 2021). Operationally, these platforms may offer from basic digital infrastructure to comprehensive fulfillment services (such as Fulfillment by Amazon). Sellers may also invest in additional value-added services and knowledge within those platforms, such as analytical data insights, search engine

Type	Definition	Purpose	Supporting authors	Examples
Sales platforms	Marketplace platforms that facilitate commercial transactions between parties (typically company and consumers) who would otherwise be unable to interact directly	Serve as commercial matchmakers, or sales channel	Acs et al. (2021) , Briedis et al. (2020) , Jacobides et al. (2018) , Petroni (2021) , Zhu et al. (2019)	General marketplaces: Amazon, Alibaba, eBay, Jio Platforms, Jumia, Mercado Libre, Rakuten, TaoBao, TMall, Shopify Specific marketplaces: ASOS, BestBuy, Etsy, Shein, Zalando, Wayfair, Digital Distribution Services: Apple's App Store, Android's Play Store and Google Play Store
Interaction and reach platforms	Originally designed to promote social interactions between users, social media platforms have evolved into crucial channels for fostering promotion and interaction for both B2B and B2C companies	Foster social interactions, content sharing and augment promotional reach	Alaimo et al. (2020) , Da Fonseca et al. (2023) , Evans and Schmalensee (2016) , Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al. (2020) , Stallkamp and Schotter (2021) , Saari et al. (2022) , Song, 2019	Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, Pinterest, YouTube
Support platforms	Platforms that provide lower cost and better tools to facilitate operations such as commerce/ web development, crowdfunding, search engine marketing optimization, and payment processing	Facilitate worldwide digital operations	Ojala et al. (2022)	PayPal, AliPay, Indiegogo, SeedInvest Technology, Shopify, Dynamic Yield, SISTRIX, WhatsApp, Telegram
Source(s): Created by authors				

Table 1.
Digital platforms as enablers of SME's internationalization

optimization, support to enhance product detail pages and images, and promotion and conversion strategies ([Briedis et al., 2020](#)). In addition to B2C marketplaces, platforms like Amazon Business and TaoBao cater to B2B transactions.

Interaction and Reach Platforms – Interaction and reach platforms, unlike two-sided platforms connecting users and service providers, can encompass up to six sides, connecting individuals, businesses, and various providers (app developers, ad service providers, influencers, etc.) in C2C, B2C or B2B combinations ([Evans and Schmalensee, 2016](#); [Song, 2019](#)). They are mostly comprised of social media (e.g. Facebook) or content sharing apps (e.g. Pinterest) that were initially designed for community building and networking, having evolved into “platform organizations facilitating certain kinds of exchanges” ([Alaimo et al., 2020](#), p. 27). They also act as matchmakers, reducing transaction costs and creating value ([Song, 2019](#); [Saari et al., 2022](#)) in a controlled environment. [Alaimo et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that social

media platforms facilitate product and service exchanges and provide access to essential data on prices, location, and reputation. Moreover, social media platforms enable the 'sides' to interact, enhancing brand exposure, engagement, knowledge exchange, trust building, loyalty, and sales intent (Saari *et al.*, 2022) at a very low cost (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020), which is particularly advantageous for smaller companies with limited resources.

Support Platforms – These digital platforms contribute with resources, know-how, and tools, enabling SMEs to initiate online businesses. Specialized in specific services and technologies, they offer low-cost, faster, and more reliable options than internalizing the activity, allowing SMEs to venture into cross-border e-commerce without significant upfront investments. Some service provider digital platforms enable small businesses to set up proprietary and personalized websites (e.g. Shopify). Others provide information technology tools that assist SMEs in optimizing their global online marketing activity, such as search engines and ads efficiency, sales and customer service performance monitors (e.g. Dynamic Yield, SISTRIX), operationalizing online transactions (e.g. PayPal, AliPay), using instant messaging for closer contact with customers (e.g. WhatsApp, Telegram), and acquiring funding for international expansion (e.g. Indiegogo, SeedInvest Technology).

SMEs' can choose between two basic strategies when adopting digital platforms for internationalization. The first strategy involves using sales platforms with an existing global structure. This strategy works best for manufacturers seeking cost-effectiveness. An example of a digital platform that serves this strategy is AliExpress, which focuses on connecting international buyers with Chinese businesses. Depending on their strategic positioning and objectives, niche sales platforms focusing on a specific product type or category may also be an option for SMEs' international expansion. The second strategy suits businesses interested in building a strong niche brand and requires developing a robust online presence to reach global consumers and solid marketing capabilities. However, SMEs often face resource constraints that hinder the adoption of this alternative. In this situation, interaction and reach platforms, as well as support platforms, can play a role by assisting SMEs in showcasing, selling, and shipping internationally through their own low-cost websites, with payments and shipment operationalized by a third party, along with other optional services.

Digital internationalization in previous literature reviews

Dagnino and Resciniti (2021, p. 969) defined digital internationalization as "the ways with which the design and implementation of a digital transformation path and the application of digitization processes and tools may help firms of all sizes thrive in international and global contexts." Examining prior literature reviews offer a comprehensive overview of past research on digital internationalization (Appendix). Eight recent reviews have explored the interplay between digitalization and internationalization, albeit from different perspectives and scopes. Five reviews were systematic, four employed bibliometric methods, and three were conceptual.

An in-depth look at the content of these reviews shows that the phenomenon of digitalization has been underrepresented in the literature on firm internationalization. Not only is the number of articles in each review limited – barring Feliciano-Cestero *et al.*'s (2023) review – but most articles primarily cover early uses of the Internet in international activities, particularly traditional Internet communication by e-mail and sites or digital advertising. Bergamaschi *et al.* (2021) provide a historical overview of the 1996 to April 2019 literature on the interplay between digitalization and internationalization. Feliciano-Cestero *et al.* (2023) analyze a broad range of journals from several disciplines covering 2002 to 2022, focusing on digital transformation's positive and negative effects on internationalization at the individual, firm, and macro levels. Li *et al.* (2022) examined 121 articles published between

2007 and 2020 to determine how digital internationalization impacts theories of the multinational enterprise. These three reviews suggest that significant scholarly attention only started in 2016.

A limited number of articles in these reviews approach the phenomenon of digital platforms. For example, [Katsikeas et al.'s \(2019\)](#) review mentions a few articles on social media usage, but these articles typically focus on social media brand communities rather than on social media as business platforms for international activities. [Bergamaschi et al. \(2021\)](#) indicate that keywords relating to digital platforms only emerged at the end of their review period, while [Feliciano-Cestero et al. \(2023\)](#) identified the keyword e-commerce in eight articles underscoring the benefits of using digital platforms, almost all of them published after 2019. [Ojala et al. \(2022\)](#) do not specifically examine SMEs or digital platforms.

Concerning SMEs' digital internationalization, [Feliciano-Cestero et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight the risks associated with digital internationalization and their lack of digital capabilities while briefly indicating potential benefits to SMEs' performance. Although rooted in the international entrepreneurship literature, [Vadana et al.'s \(2020\)](#) review concerns metrics for examining the interplay between digitalization and internationalization in digitalized companies. [Watson et al.'s \(2018\)](#) literature review focuses on the extent to which the international marketing literature has examined relational, digital, and hybrid approaches to international market entry over 25 years ending in 2016. This review analyzes legal, logistical, market, and cultural considerations but does not specifically examine their impact on smaller firms or issues related to digital platforms, although it briefly mentions some benefits accrued by firms using them. Only [Dethine et al.'s \(2020\)](#) review focuses on SMEs' digital internationalization. However, this review includes a small number of articles, with only one published in 2020. Among the 21 articles reviewed, four articles referred to social media specifically, and only two to digital platforms in general. All other reviews cover all types of firms, except for [Li et al.'s \(2022\)](#), which focuses on multinational enterprises.

Method

This study conducted a systematic literature review on SME internationalization using digital platforms. A systematic literature review summarizes existing publications in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible way ([Tranfield et al., 2003](#)) to address a research question. [Palmatier et al. \(2018, p. 1\)](#) state that research integration and synthesis are "an important, and possibly even a required, step in the scientific process". The method has gained prominence due to the exponential increase in information and publications in recent years ([Snyder, 2019](#)). It (1) synthesizes the literature, (2) supports better decision-making for policymakers, managers, and entrepreneurs, (3) provides new conceptual frameworks, and (4) pinpoints research gaps, and inconsistencies ([Palmatier et al., 2018](#); [Tranfield et al., 2003](#)). Compiling and contrasting individual studies, a systematic literature review often delivers evidence on the state-of-the-art domain literature, paving the way for novel research questions and paths and building a solid foundation for advancing knowledge ([Palmatier et al., 2018](#); [Snyder, 2019](#)).

Article selection

A search protocol with predetermined inclusion criteria was established to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The selected papers were all empirical studies covering SME internationalization using digital platforms, excluding theoretical, conceptual, and viewpoint articles. The study included only peer-reviewed articles published in English from 2016 through June 2023. The year 2016 was chosen as the starting point due to three prior literature reviews ([Bergamaschi et al., 2021](#); [Feliciano-Cestero et al., 2023](#); [Li et al., 2022](#))

indicating a substantial surge in the number of articles linking internationalization and digitalization starting that year. Moreover, previous reviews already covered earlier research, and the rapid evolution of the topic warranted a more focused examination. Both Scopus and Web of Science databases were searched.

Because digital internationalization is a recent topic, adjacent and complementary terms were also included in the search. The terms used were “digitalization” OR “digital ecosystem” OR “social media” OR “digital platform” OR “e-commerce” OR “e-tailing” OR “cross-border commerce” OR “digital servic*” OR “information technolog*” OR “e-business*” OR “global marketplace” OR AND “INV” OR “international entrepreneurship” OR “international new venture” OR “born global*” OR “micromultinational*” AND “small firm” OR “SME*” OR “small and medium enterprise*” OR “small company” OR “small and medium compan*” OR “SMC*” AND “export*” OR “international*” OR “global” OR “cross-border” OR “global value chain”, either at title, abstract or keywords. The initial selection was carried out by one of the authors.

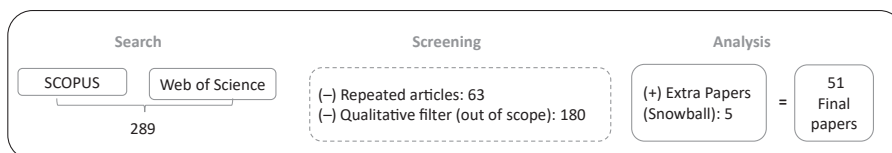
The searches from Scopus and Web of Science resulted in 289 articles. Next, two authors screened the material independently, based on the title, abstract, and keywords. The third author decided on inclusion or exclusion when there were divergences in the screening. After exclusions related to repetition and non-adherence to the research question, 46 articles remained. Subsequently, five articles listed as references in the articles previously selected that met the inclusion criteria were added. At the end of this process, there was a final dataset of 51 articles. All selected articles were then read in full. [Figure 1](#) summarizes the article selection process, displaying the number of papers in each step.

Analysis

Each paper underwent individual and independent review by two authors, focusing on theoretical perspectives, research questions and/or hypotheses, constructs, and results. Individual summaries were prepared for each paper to facilitate the analysis, followed by summarizing key points in tables to allow for cross-referencing and comparison. A descriptive analysis of the selected papers examined their temporal and spatial distribution, research methods, theoretical perspectives, and types of platforms investigated. Subsequently, a qualitative analysis of the content was conducted. Analysis and conclusions were reached through iterative discussions involving all three authors, culminating in consensus. The analysis adopted a narrative structure, encompassing systematic extraction, verification, and narrative synthesis of findings ([Petticrew and Roberts, 2006](#)).

Descriptive analysis

The temporal distribution of the papers reveals limited scholarly attention to the topic between 2016 and 2019, with only eight papers published. However, from 2020 to June 2023, there was a significant surge, with 43 papers published, and an additional 11 papers were released in the first seven months of 2023. Regarding research methods, out of the 51 papers,



Source(s): Created by authors

Figure 1.
Articles' selection
process

30 were quantitative, 18 were qualitative, and three used mixed methods. Nearly two-thirds of the quantitative studies employed surveys, while the remainder relied on secondary data. Almost all qualitative papers used case studies. The dominant theoretical perspectives were the resource-based view (RBV), dynamic capabilities, transaction cost economics (TCE), and network theory. Various other theoretical approaches were adopted in the remaining papers, with 11 being empirically driven.

The spatial distribution of the studies is also noteworthy. Of the total, 11 are multiple-country studies, while the others are single-country studies, with authorship origin mostly following the locus of research. European countries predominantly contributed to the authorship and research locus, possibly due to their substantial number of internationalized SMEs. These studies comprise about half of the sample and cover numerous countries, with Italy, Sweden, and Finland being the most frequently studied. Other world regions are underrepresented: 13 papers explicitly examine Asian countries (nine on China), five look at the Americas, and four cover Australia or New Zealand. Notably, Africa is absent from the sample, except perhaps for studies involving multiple unspecified countries.

Regarding the types of digital platforms studied, eight papers did not specify a particular type, while four examined multiple types. E-commerce platforms were most frequently mentioned, followed by social media platforms. Other platforms investigated include crowdfunding, proprietary platforms, labor platforms, and gaming platforms. The samples varied in terms of industry, with a high concentration in manufacturing. [Table 2](#) provides an overview of the selected papers' characteristics, encompassing method, theoretical perspectives, sample details, analyzed countries, industries, and types of digital platforms. Additionally, [Table 3](#) presents the focus of the analysis, issues examined, and main findings.

Digital platforms and SME internationalization

The literature on the internationalization of SMEs using digital platforms focuses on four main themes: resources and capabilities, the adoption process, benefits and risks, and environmental factors ([Table 4](#)).

Resources and capabilities for digital internationalization

Papers on the resources and capabilities associated with digital internationalization draw mainly from the RBV and the dynamic capabilities perspective but also from network theory, effectuation theory, signaling theory, exploitation-exploration theory, opportunity recognition framework, organizational learning, and TCE as theoretical perspectives.

Research from the RBV and dynamic capabilities perspective examines the availability (or lack thereof) of firm resources and capabilities and their influence on internationalization enabled by digital platforms. The RBV posits that sustained competitive advantage derives from a firm's valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable tangible or intangible resources ([Barney, 1991](#)). Capabilities refer to a firm's capacity to utilize its resources through organizational processes to achieve specific outcomes ([Amit and Schoemaker, 1993](#)). Dynamic capabilities represent a firm's ability to effectively integrate, build, and reconfigure its internal competencies in response to a changing business environment, supported by organizational routines and managerial expertise ([Teece et al., 1997](#); [Teece, 2007](#)). These capabilities are difficult to replicate due to their foundation in unique managerial characteristics, organizational routines, and culture that evolve over time ([Teece, 2014](#)). [Eisenhardt and Martin \(2000\)](#) argue that the value of dynamic capabilities for competitive advantage lies not just in the capabilities themselves but in how firms configure their resources.

Authors (year)	Type	Method	Theoretical perspectives	Country/ Region studied	Country of authorship	Sample	Industry	Type of digital platform
Ahsan and Musteen (2021)	qualitative	single case study	Cognitive Perspective of International Entrepreneurship Theory of Reasoned Action; Expectancy- Value Theory	Denmark	U.S.	1 start-up	Manufacturing	Crowdfunding platform
Alarcón-del- Amo <i>et al.</i> (2018)	quantitative	survey, online	Dynamic Capabilities	Spain	Spain	152 firms ¹	All	Social media
Anwar <i>et al.</i> (2022)	quantitative	survey, self- administered secondary data	Technology- Organization- Environment Framework	Pakistan	Germany	213 SMEs	Manufacturing	Unspecified
Aronica <i>et al.</i> (2021)	quantitative	secondary data	Exploration- Exploitation Perspective	Italy	Italy	19,248 SMEs	All	Social media
Caputo <i>et al.</i> (2022)	quantitative	secondary data	Resource-Based View	Italy	Italy, France	746 SMEs with foreign activities	All	Social media
Cassetta <i>et al.</i> (2020)	quantitative	secondary data (previous survey)	Resource-Based View	Italy	Italy	2,516 SMEs	All	Several
Cassia and Magno (2022a)	quantitative	survey, online	Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities	Italy	Italy	101 exporting SMEs	Food and Beverage	E-commerce platform
Cassia and Magno (2022b)	quantitative	survey, online	Exploration- Exploitation Perspective	Italy	Italy	110 exporting SMEs	Food and Beverage	E-commerce platform
Crespo <i>et al.</i> (2023)	quantitative	survey, online	Resource-Based View	Portugal	Portugal	213 INVs	Several	Unspecified
Da Fonseca <i>et al.</i> (2023)	qualitative	multiple case study	Ecosystems Perspective	Brazil	Brazil	8 SMEs	Manufacturing	Social media
Deng and Wang (2016)	quantitative	secondary data	Early Mover Advantages	Several	China	297,846 export transactions	B2B	E-commerce platform

(continued)

Table 2.
Papers' research
design

Table 2.

Authors (year)	Type	Method	Theoretical perspectives	Country/ Region studied	Country of authorship	Sample	Industry	Type of digital platform
Dillon <i>et al.</i> (2020)	qualitative	multiple case study	Opportunity Recognition Framework	Australia	Australia	16 small virtual firms	Service	Several
Eid <i>et al.</i> (2020)	quantitative	survey, online	Diffusion of Innovations Theory, Technology Acceptance Model	UK	UAE, Egypt, UK	277 SMEs	B2B	Social media
Elia <i>et al.</i> (2021)	quantitative	secondary data	Resource-Based View	Italy	Italy, UK	102 firms	Design and Furniture, Fashion, Food and Beverage Several	E-commerce platform
Fan <i>et al.</i> (2023)	quantitative	survey, field, and online	Empowerment Theory, Value Chain Theory	China	China	425 MSMEs		E-commerce platform
Fraccastoro <i>et al.</i> (2021a)	qualitative	multiple case study	Internalization Theory, Network Theory	Finland, Sweden, New Zealand	Finland, Sweden	3 SMEs	Beverage	Social media
Fraccastoro <i>et al.</i> (2021b)	qualitative	multiple case study	Grounded Theory	Brazil, Finland, Italy, Poland, US	Finland, U.S, Finland, Italy, Poland, US	10 SMEs	B2B Service	Social media
Gabrielsson <i>et al.</i> (2022)	qualitative	single case study	Effectuation, Network Theory	n.a	Finland	1 firm from inception to accelerated growth	Mobile gaming	Gaming Platform
Glavas <i>et al.</i> (2019)	qualitative	multiple case study	Organizational Learning	Australia	Australia	13 SME	Manufact-uring and services	Unspecified
Guo <i>et al.</i> (2023)	quantitative	survey, online	Knowledge Management	China	China, Italy	203 multinational SMEs ²	Manufacturing	Unspecified

(continued)

Authors (year)	Type	Method	Theoretical perspectives	Country/ Region studied	Country of authorship	Sample	Industry	Type of digital platform
Hervé <i>et al.</i> (2020)	quantitative	secondary data	n.a	Switzerland	Switzerland	190 MSMEs	Manufacturing	Unspecified
Hossain <i>et al.</i> (2021)	qualitative	personal interviews	Diffusion of Innovations Theory, Technology- Organization- Environment Framework	Bangladesh	Bangladesh, Australia	23 small firms	Several	E-commerce platform
Hui (2020)	quantitative	secondary (panel) data	n.a	US	US	e-Bay sellers	n.a	E-commerce platform
Hultman <i>et al.</i> (2023)	quantitative	survey	Network Theory	Kazakhstan	Canada, UK, Sweden, Finland	169 exporting SMEs	Several	Social media
Jean and Kim (2020)	quantitative	survey (personal and telephone)	Resource-Based View	China	Taiwan, US	250 SMEs	All	Unspecified
Jean <i>et al.</i> (2020)	quantitative	survey (personal and telephone)	Transaction Cost Economics	China	Taiwan, S. Korea, US	273 INVs	Hardware, electronics, other	E-commerce platform
Jin and Hurd (2018)	qualitative	multiple case study	n.a	New Zealand, China	New Zealand	4 SMEs	Natural and Health products	E-commerce platform
Kim and Lee (2016)	quantitative	survey, online	Resource-Based View, Transaction Cost Economics	S. Korea	S. Korea	295 firms, mostly SMEs	All	E-commerce platform
Kromidha and Robson (2021)	quantitative	Secondary (panel) data	Signaling Theory	54 countries	UK	4,446 SMEs	All	Social media, Crowdfunding platform
Lee and Falahat (2019)	quantitative	survey, online	Resource-Based View	Malaysia	Malaysia	143 SMEs	Manufacturing	Unspecified

(continued)

Table 2.

Table 2.

Authors (year)	Type	Method	Theoretical perspectives	Country/ Region studied	Country of authorship	Sample	Industry	Type of digital platform
Lee <i>et al.</i> (2022)	mixed methods	personal interviews, surveys (e-mail and face-to- face)	Network Theory	China	China, S. Korea, UK	26 SMEs, 250 SMEs	All	Social media, E-commerce platforms
Lee <i>et al.</i> (2023)	mixed methods	personal interviews, surveys (e-mail and face-to- face)	Institutional Theory	China	China, S. Korea, UK	17 INVs, 260 INVs	All	E-commerce platform
Lehdonvirta <i>et al.</i> (2019)	mixed methods	big data analytics, interviews	Transaction Cost Economics, Signaling Theory	Several	UK, South Africa	6 months of transaction records 107 micro providers 10 SMEs	n.a	Online labor platform
Mäki and Toivola (2021)	qualitative	Action research, multiple case study	n.a	Finland	Finland		Several	E-commerce platform
Neubert (2018)	qualitative	multiple case study	n.a	n.a	Canada	73 startups	Technology	Several
Pereira <i>et al.</i> (2022)	quantitative	survey, online	n.a	Portugal	Portugal	310 firms (93% SMEs)	All	E-commerce platform
Qi <i>et al.</i> (2020)	qualitative	single case study	Transaction Cost Economics	Japan, China	China, UK	1 SME	Beauty	E-commerce platform
Reim <i>et al.</i> (2022)	qualitative	multiple case study	n.a	Sweden, Finland Spain	Sweden, Finland Spain, Norway	29 SMEs	Several	Unspecified
Rialp-Criado <i>et al.</i> (2020)	quantitative	survey, online	n.a	Spain		337 exporters (67% SMEs)	Several	Social media

(continued)

Authors (year)	Type	Method	Theoretical perspectives	Country/ Region studied	Country of authorship	Sample	Industry	Type of digital platform
Rienda <i>et al.</i> (2021)	quantitative	secondary data	Resource-Based View	UK, Ireland	UK, Ireland	102 SMEs	Fashion	Social media
Singh <i>et al.</i> (2023)	qualitative	multiple case study	Institutional Theory	India	US, UK, India	5 SMEs	n.a	E-commerce platform
Tobiasen and Pettersen (2023)	qualitative	multiple case study	Network Theory	Norway	Norway	4 Born Globals	Software	Social media
Tolstoy <i>et al.</i> (2021)	quantitative	survey, online	Effectuation Theory	Sweden	Sweden	99 SMEs	Retailing	E-commerce platform
Tolstoy <i>et al.</i> (2022)	quantitative	survey, online	Capabilities Perspective	Sweden	Sweden	99 SMEs	Retailing	E-commerce platform
Tolstoy <i>et al.</i> (2023)	quantitative	survey, online	Effectuation Theory	Sweden	Sweden	99 SMEs	Retailing	E-commerce platform
Troise <i>et al.</i> (2023)	qualitative	multiple case study	Resource-Based View, Knowledge- Based View	Italy	Italy, UK, Cyprus, Finland	48 SMEs	Several	Crowdfunding
Vadana <i>et al.</i> (2020)	qualitative	multiple case study	Bricolage Theory	Finland	Finland	3 SMEs	Service	Proprietary platform
Virglerová <i>et al.</i> (2022)	quantitative	survey, online	n.a	Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia	Italy, Czech Republic	1,585 SMEs	Several	Social media
Westerlund (2020)	quantitative	secondary data	n.a	Canada	Canada	535 SMEs	All	Several
Williams <i>et al.</i> (2020)	quantitative	survey, online	Knowledge-Based View	China	UK, Canada, China	117 SMEs	High-tech	Social media
Wirek-Hadjuk <i>et al.</i> (2022)	qualitative	multiple case study	n.a	Poland	Poland	4 SMEs	Fashion	E-commerce platform

Note(s): ¹ Firm size not specified: average 151.84 employees for the whole sample
² Includes firms with up to 1,000 employees, following China's official definition of an SME

n.a. = not available

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 2.

Table 3.
Main themes and
related studies

Theme	Studies
Resources and capabilities	Anwar et al. (2022) , Caputo et al. (2022) , Cassetta et al. (2020) , Cassia and Magno (2022a) , Crespo et al. (2023) , Dillon et al. (2020) , Elia et al. (2021) , Fraccastaro et al. (2021a) , Gabrielsson et al. (2022) , Hervé et al. (2020) , Hultman et al. (2023) , Jean and Kim (2020) , Kim and Lee (2016) , Kromidha and Robson (2021) , Lee and Falahat (2019) , Mäki and Toivola (2021) , Reim et al. (2022) , Rienda et al. (2021) , Tolstoy et al. (2021, 2022) , Westerlund (2020) , Witek-Hajduk et al. (2022)
Environmental factors	Hossain et al. (2021) , Jean et al. (2020) , Lee et al. (2023) , Lehdonvirta et al. (2019) , Pereira et al. (2022) , Singh et al. (2023)
Adoption	Alarcón-del-Amo et al. (2018) , Aronica et al. (2021) , Da Fonseca et al. (2023) , Deng and Wang (2016) , Eid et al. (2020) , Hossain et al. (2021) , Qi et al. (2020) , Rialp-Criado et al. (2020) , Virglerová et al. (2022) , Witek-Hajduk et al. (2022)
Benefits and risks	Ahsan and Musteen (2021) , Cassia and Magno (2022b) , Fan et al. (2023) , Fraccastaro et al. (2021b) , Glavas et al. (2019) , Guo et al. (2023) , Hui (2020) , Jean et al. (2020) , Jin and Hurd (2018) , Lee et al. (2022) , Mäki and Toivola (2021) , Neubert (2018) , Qi et al. (2020) , Tobiassen and Pettersen (2023) , Tolstoy et al. (2023) , Troise et al. (2023) , Vadana et al. (2020) , Williams et al. (2020)
Source(s): Created by authors	

The literature on SME internationalization using digital platforms extensively relies on these concepts to explain the utilization of resources and capabilities to initiate or foster international activities. Despite the general assumption that digital platforms may help small firms overcome their resource constraints to internationalize, [Elia et al. \(2021\)](#) do not confirm that smaller firms are less likely to adopt digital exports than larger firms. These authors also emphasize that the quality, rather than the quantity, of resources and capabilities is relevant for digital internationalization. [Hultman et al. \(2023\)](#) view social media platforms as a resource for emerging market SMEs to listen to and communicate with foreign customers. Other studies analyze to what extent investments in IT influence digital internationalization ([Caputo et al., 2022](#); [Cassetta et al., 2020](#)). Digital capabilities examined include digital business capability ([Anwar et al., 2022](#)), digital platform capability ([Elia et al., 2021](#); [Jean and Kim, 2020](#)), digital orientation ([Crespo et al., 2023](#)), IT capabilities ([Cassetta et al., 2020](#); [Cassia and Magno, 2022a](#); [Kim and Lee, 2016](#); [Mäki and Toivola, 2021](#)), online marketing capabilities ([Tolstoy et al., 2022](#)) and digital knowledge sharing capability ([Anwar et al., 2022](#)), among others.

In general, digital capabilities seem to boost internationalization (e.g. [Caputo et al., 2022](#); [Cassia and Magno, 2022a](#); [Mäki and Toivola, 2021](#)), but this effect depends on whether firms approach digitalization with organizational innovativeness and invest in digital skills ([Anwar et al., 2022](#); [Cassetta et al., 2020](#)). Depending on the constructs examined, other authors have reached somewhat different conclusions. For example, [Anwar et al. \(2022\)](#) find an indirect relationship between digital capabilities and SME internationalization; [Elia et al. \(2021\)](#) report that having an e-commerce manager enhances digital exports, and [Hervé et al. \(2020\)](#) conclude that digitalization impacts internationalization intensity via entrepreneurial orientation. Additionally, using digital platforms in internationalization positively impacts performance ([Caputo et al., 2022](#); [Eid et al., 2020](#); [Jean and Kim, 2020](#)). [Rienda et al. \(2021\)](#) also find a positive relationship between using social media platforms and international performance, but only for firms with a corporate website.

Other capabilities, such as international marketing capabilities, export operations capabilities, or marketing ambidexterity, are also explored in this literature. Export operations capabilities have been found to be negatively correlated with international e-commerce performance, whereas international marketing capabilities have shown both

Study	Focus of analysis	Issues examined	Main findings
Ahsan and Musteen (2021)	Outcome	Dimensions of digital crowdfunding platforms; International opportunity development	Crowdfunding platforms have a positive impact on international opportunity development
Alarcón-del-Amo <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Phenomenon	Attitudes, intention to use, and use of social media platforms	Three clusters of exporting firms were identified according to their use of social media: potential users, initial users, and expert users
Anwar <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Digital knowledge sharing capability; Digital business capability; Use of a digital platform for the internationalization process	Digital capabilities indirectly promote SME internationalization via business model innovativeness
Aronica <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Phenomenon	Adoption of social media to enter foreign markets	Small firms from lagging regions are less likely to use social media to enter foreign markets, even when they have adopted social media
Caputo <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Investment in information and communication technologies; No. of languages available for the website; No. of languages available for social pages	The three variables show a positive relationship with return on sales in foreign markets
Cassetta <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Website usage and online selling activities; Use of the Internet to share information with suppliers; Use of social media; Use of cloud computing; Employees with ICT competencies; Digital training	Adopting digital technologies positively impacts internationalization only when accompanied by investments in digital skills and process and organizational innovations
Cassia and Magno (2022a)	Antecedents and Outcomes	IT, international marketing, and export operations capabilities on cross-border e-commerce performance	IT capabilities have a positive impact on cross-border e-commerce performance
Cassia and Magno (2022b)	Outcomes	Use of e-commerce platforms to acquire foreign market knowledge and export performance	E-commerce platforms allow firms to gain foreign market knowledge, positively impacting export performance
Crespo <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Antecedents	Digital orientation	International orientation is a determinant of digitalization and early internationalization strategies; digital orientation fosters a digitalization strategy
Da Fonseca <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Phenomenon	Early phases of digital internationalization using social media platforms. Role of the diaspora	Even firms that adopt social media platforms are constrained by their local networks. They need to enhance their digital capabilities to expand beyond the national diaspora

(continued)

Table 4.
Main findings

Study	Focus of analysis	Issues examined	Main findings
Deng and Wang (2016)	Phenomenon and Outcomes	Early-mover advantages at cross-border B2B portals	Firms enjoy earlier mover advantages at B2B portals but are higher at the initial post-entry stages and diminish later. These effects are amplified for low-price and multi-product firms
Dillon <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Outcomes	Digital internationalization experience	Entrepreneurs who use digital technologies in internationalization may achieve a digital internationalization experience. Digital internationalization experience, in turn, may support international entrepreneurial exploitation
Eid <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Phenomenon and Outcomes	Use of social media	The use of social media impacts export performance via the quality of international business contacts, including understanding customer preferences, competitive intelligence, and brand awareness
Elia <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Antecedents	Digital capabilities	Companies that utilize digital technologies have a higher propensity to enhance digital exports, regardless of size. The propensity to adopt digital internationalization is increased by having an e-commerce manager
Fan <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Outcomes	E-commerce platform empowerment and strategic flexibility	E-commerce platforms empower companies by supporting their export operations and positively impacting strategic flexibility, impacting export performance
Fraccastoro <i>et al.</i> (2021a)	Antecedents	Non-location-bound social media firm-specific advantages; Location-social media firm-specific advantages	Entrepreneurial firms may combine their social-media capabilities with their foreign partners' capabilities to develop new social-media capabilities, promoting international growth
Fraccastoro <i>et al.</i> (2021b)	Phenomenon	Use of social media, digital and traditional communication tools	Social media tends to be used during the prospecting phase in B2B, other digital communication tools in the persuasion phase, and traditional tools later in the relationship management phase

Table 4. (continued)

Study	Focus of analysis	Issues examined	Main findings
Gabrielsson et al. (2022)	Antecedents	Global mind-set; Commitment	Inexperienced digital entrepreneurs may use three mechanisms to commit in an accelerated internationalization process: affective commitment to their digital community, effectual commitment, or continuance commitment
Glavas et al. (2019)	Phenomenon and outcome	Internet-enabled experiences: technical, operational, functional, and immersive	Digital platforms allow firms to acquire explicit and tacit knowledge. Digital experiences support/facilitate internationalization. Technological integration within the firm reinforces digital internationalization
Guo et al. (2023)	Antecedents	Effects of knowledge integration on organizational resilience	Knowledge integration processes based on digital platforms are associated with the organizational resilience of SMEs' global businesses
Hervé et al. (2020)	Antecedents and Outcomes	The degree of digitalization, entrepreneurial orientation (innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking), and internationalization intensity (scale, scope, speed, and mode)	The degree of digitalization is positively associated with entrepreneurial orientation. Proactiveness is positively related to the scope of internationalization, and risk-taking to the speed of internationalization
Hossain et al. (2021)	Antecedents	E-marketplace entry decision	Technological, organizational, and environmental factors may influence the e-marketplace entry decision
Hui (2020)	Outcomes	Export entry costs	E-commerce platforms facilitate global trade by reducing export-related costs, benefitting small sellers
Hultman et al. (2023)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Social media tactics to engage with customers	The use of certain social media tactics impacts customer performance in export operations
Jean and Kim (2020)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Platform and web capabilities	Platform and web capabilities positively associate with export marketing capabilities that, in turn, impact export performance
Jean et al. (2020)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Drivers of digital platform risks, entrepreneurial orientation, and scope of internationalization	Foreign market factors and domestic institutional voids impact digital platform risk. Digital platform risk negatively impacts INVs' internationalization scope, but this relationship is mitigated by entrepreneurial orientation

(continued)

Table 4.

Study	Focus of analysis	Issues examined	Main findings
Jin and Hurd (2018)	Outcomes	Use of an e-commerce platform	Digital platforms reduce entry barriers, help to overcome lack of resources, and facilitate access to networks, but do not eliminate the need for local staff
Kim and Lee (2016)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Information and marketing capabilities, e-commerce use, asset specificity, and e-commerce net benefits	Information capabilities impact the level of e-commerce use in exporting and e-commerce performance
Kromidha and Robson (2021)	Phenomenon	Extent of firm's digital presence (no. of followers in the social media; website traffic)	The number of social media followers of a firm is a better indicator of firm internationalization than website traffic
Lee and Falahat (2019)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Use of digital technologies, resources, and international capabilities, competitive advantage	The use of digital platforms only indirectly impacts competitive advantage in international markets
Lee et al. (2022)	Outcomes	Experience of using foreign and domestic social network services (SNS) and platforms	Foreign SNS and B2B digital platforms have a stronger positive impact on SMEs' international orientation than their use of similar domestic digital platforms. Domestic and foreign market e-commerce policy uncertainty increases digital platform risk
Lee et al. (2023)	Antecedents	Digital platform risk; domestic and foreign market e-commerce policy uncertainty	Domestic and foreign market e-commerce policy uncertainty positively impacts digital platform risk
Lehdonvirta et al. (2019)	Outcomes	Service micro providers benefit from using global online platforms	Service micro providers use platforms as signaling mechanisms to inform international clients of their quality, thus allowing them to overcome negative country image
Mäki and Toivola (2021)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Adoption of e-commerce for internationalization; digital capabilities	The adoption of e-commerce provides many benefits to small firms. Information capabilities have a positive impact on internationalization
Neubert (2018)	Outcomes	Digitalization and speed of internationalization	Firms can benefit from adopting digital technologies, allowing them to use more efficient foreign market development processes and make better decisions
Pereira et al. (2022)	Antecedents	Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic	Firms reduced their use of electronic commerce during the Covid-19 pandemic to focus on the domestic market

Table 4.

(continued)

Study	Focus of analysis	Issues examined	Main findings
Qi <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Phenomenon and Outcomes	International risk reduction of e-commerce platforms	Cross-border e-commerce reduces uncertainty and opportunism, increases trust, allows firms to reduce their investments abroad, and provides market knowledge
Reim <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Antecedents, Phenomenon and Outcomes	Lack of resources and capabilities for internationalization; business model	Identifying business model challenges related to value creation, delivery, and capture along the internationalization process
Rialp-Criado <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Phenomenon	Speed of use of social media	The speed of social media usage positively impacts the speed of firm internationalization, regardless of firm size
Rienda <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Social media presence, corporate website	Social media presence positively impacts international performance, but only for companies with a corporate website
Singh <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Antecedents	National e-commerce policy	A national e-commerce policy emphasizing export efficiency and lessening anticompetitive concerns can boost SME internationalization using digital platforms
Tobiassen and Pettersen (2023)	Outcomes	Social media networking; physical networking	Networking via social media allows firms to access resources and build relationships, but it does not eliminate the need for physical networking
Tolstoy <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Antecedents	Investments in resources, digital and marketing capabilities	Investment in certain resources and capabilities (marketing and digital) may impact e-commerce internationalization processes
Tolstoy <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Online marketing capabilities, marketing ambidexterity	Online marketing capabilities are important to achieve higher performance in international e-commerce, but marketing ambidexterity is necessary to get this positive effect
Tolstoy <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Outcomes	International marketing analytics; International networking activities	Cross-border e-commerce platforms allow effectual market creation positively impacting international performance. This effect is facilitated by achieving insidership in foreign markets (using international marketing analytics and international networking activities)

(continued)

Table 4.

Study	Focus of analysis	Issues examined	Main findings
Troise et al. (2023)	Outcomes	Use of equity crowdfunding and reward crowdfunding	Equity crowdfunding and reward crowdfunding play a key role in helping companies overcome their resource constraints to internationalize
Vadana et al. (2020)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Digitalization of value chain activities; company resources; bricolage capabilities; international experience	Digitalization of value chain activities allows a better use of company resources to face challenges and opportunities in foreign markets
Virglerová et al. (2022)	Antecedents and Outcomes	Use of social media	The use of social media had a significant association with business performance but not with company internationalization
Westerlund (2020)	Antecedents	Internal resources, use of information systems, partnering, and cyber resilience	There is a positive association between internal resources, the use of information systems, partnering, and the ability to deal with cyber risks
Williams et al. (2020)	Antecedents	Foreign knowledge acquisition, use of domestic or foreign social networking sites, international orientation	The use of domestic social networking sites has a positive effect on the international orientation of internet SMEs, while the use of foreign ones has a negative effect
Witek-Hadjul et al. (2022)	Antecedents and Phenomenon	Motives for cross-border e-commerce adoption	Fashion firms present both proactive and reactive motives in the adoption of e-commerce for their foreign expansion

Table 4. Source(s): Created by authors

non-significant ([Cassia and Magno, 2022a](#)) and positive results ([Kim and Lee, 2016](#)). Some capabilities act as mediators, positively influencing internationalization through other capabilities. For example, online marketing capabilities impact international performance through marketing ambidexterity ([Tolstoy et al., 2022](#)) and certain digital capabilities through business model innovativeness ([Anwar et al., 2022](#); [Cassetta et al., 2020](#)). Drawing from network theory, some studies explore how networking processes and capabilities play a role in digital internationalization. For instance, [Fraccastoro et al. \(2021a\)](#) examine how companies bundle their social media capabilities with foreign partners, and [Lee et al. \(2022\)](#) assess the role of experience in utilizing social media platforms.

Environmental factors

Another set of studies focuses on environmental factors that impact internationalization using digital platforms. Issues examined include the impact of (1) home country institutional voids, foreign market uncertainty and foreign market competition ([Jean et al., 2020](#)), (2) platform-related national policies ([Lee et al., 2023](#); [Singh et al., 2023](#)), (3) government support, industry factors, customer readiness and cultural factors ([Hossain et al., 2021](#)), as well as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic ([Guo et al., 2023](#); [Pereira et al., 2022](#)). The theoretical perspectives utilized encompass institutional theory, TCE, diffusion theory, the technology-organization-environment framework, and knowledge management theory.

Adoption and use of digital platforms for internationalization

Several papers have analyzed the adoption of digital platforms by small firms for their international activities, employing various theories, including the diffusion of innovations theory (Eid *et al.*, 2020; Hossain *et al.*, 2021), the technology acceptance model (Eid *et al.*, 2020), the technology-organization-environment framework (Aronica *et al.*; Hossain *et al.*, 2021), and the early mover advantages perspective (Deng and Wang, 2016).

While the adoption of digital platforms can positively impact internationalization (Rialp-Criado *et al.*, 2020), their use does not guarantee foreign market entry (Aronica *et al.*, 2021; Virglerová *et al.*, 2022). Examining different groups of Spanish exporters based on their potential or actual adoption of social media platforms, Alarcón-del-Amo *et al.* (2018) found an association between social media expertise and export performance. Witek-Hajduk *et al.* (2022) identified proactive and reactive motives for e-commerce adoption among Polish firms. From an emerging markets perspective, Da Fonseca *et al.* (2023) found that the use of social media platforms supports the early international steps of Brazilian SMEs, primarily targeting the diaspora. However, sustained growth requires additional investments to establish a solid presence in foreign markets. Examining early adopters of cross-border B2B portals among Chinese firms, Deng and Wang (2016) found a U-shaped curve in early mover advantages.

Benefits and risks of internationalization enabled by digital platforms

Digital platforms can facilitate international opportunity development (Ahsan and Musteen, 2021), reduce export-related costs (Hui, 2020), lower entry barriers, and increase access to foreign networks (Jin and Hurd, 2018; Tobiassen and Pettersen, 2023). Additionally, digital platforms enable market information gathering and enhance online word-of-mouth (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021b), among other benefits. However, even when utilizing digital platforms, local staff may still be necessary (Jin and Hurd, 2018), and social media networking alone may not suffice, requiring physical networking efforts (Tobiassen and Pettersen, 2023).

Implementing an internationalization strategy enabled by digital platforms can potentially develop or enhance capabilities that impact international performance. Knowledge acquisition has garnered particular attention from researchers. Cassia and Magno (2022b) and Tolstoy *et al.* (2023) report a positive relationship between knowledge acquisition via e-commerce platforms and performance. Guo *et al.* (2023) highlight how knowledge integration through digital platforms contributed to organizational resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Examining multiple case studies, Glavas *et al.* (2019) also provide evidence of digital platforms' role in providing tacit and explicit knowledge for SME internationalization. Moreover, they assist SMEs in acquiring strategic flexibility (Fan *et al.*, 2023) and digital internationalization experience (Glavas *et al.*, 2019), thereby impacting performance. Two studies examined the benefits of domestic versus foreign digital platforms for international activities, yielding conflicting results. Lee *et al.* (2022) find that foreign platforms have a stronger impact on international orientation, while Williams *et al.* (2020) report that domestic platforms perform better regarding international orientation and knowledge acquisition.

Two papers addressed the risks of using digital platforms in SMEs' internationalization from a TCE perspective. While one paper discusses digital platform risks, the other explores risk reduction in SME internationalization. Jean *et al.* (2020) report that product specificity and foreign market factors impact digital platform risk, which, in turn, negatively affects the internationalization scope of Chinese international new ventures, with entrepreneurial orientation potentially mitigating this impact. In contrast, based on a case study, Qi *et al.* (2020) examine how using e-commerce platforms may reduce uncertainty and opportunistic behavior in international activities.

Figure 2 presents an integrated framework for SME internationalization enabled by digital platforms. As discussed, adopting a digital international strategy depends on a company's resources and capabilities (both digital and traditional) and environmental factors (industry, home country, and host country factors). Most studies focus on developing digital capabilities by firms to use in their international activities. In several studies, digital capabilities are combined with traditional capabilities, sometimes mediating the relationship between digital capabilities and internationalization outcomes. While adopting digital platforms can positively impact internationalization, it brings out risks and benefits (such as foreign knowledge acquisition, international opportunity development, digital internationalization experience, digital networking, and strategic flexibility) that must be balanced. Importantly, this is not the only possible path for companies with digital capabilities, as they can internationalize without adopting digital platforms.

Nearly all studies conclude that digital resources and capabilities, whether integrated into an international strategy enabled by digital platforms or not, generally have a positive impact on internationalization, measured by foreign market entry, sales abroad, international intensity, or international financial performance, as well as specifically on the firm's digital internationalization. Learning emerges as a crucial element in this process, as firms acquire knowledge and experience in international and digital operations. This learning trajectory enhances the company's initial resource endowment, leading to a virtuous cycle with long-term benefits.

Potential avenues for future research

Research on digital internationalization and internationalization enabled by digital platforms is still in its infancy. Scholars have primarily focused on investigating the early stages of the adoption process, the antecedents of the phenomenon, and the benefits accrued by SMEs leveraging digital platforms for international market entry. However, there remain numerous unexplored research avenues that offer opportunities to further enhance our understanding of this phenomenon (Table 5).

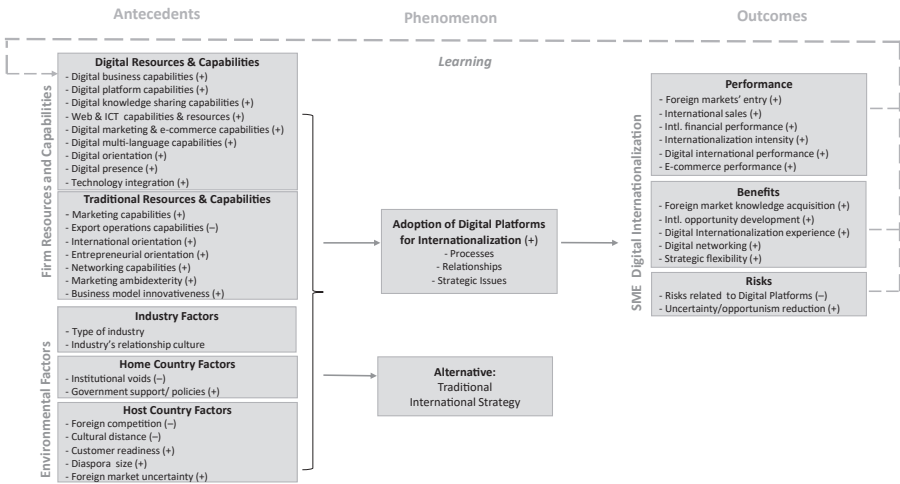


Figure 2.
Integrated framework
for the
internationalization of
SMEs enabled by
digital platforms

Note(s): (+) or (-) indicate expected impact impact
Source(s): Created by authors

Issues	Research questions	
Antecedents	Internal	- To what extent do specific combinations of resources and capabilities impact SME internationalization strategies enabled by digital platforms? - What role do resource configurations and capabilities orchestration play in achieving successful SME internationalization strategies enabled by digital platforms? - What characteristics of the decision-maker (entrepreneur or manager) and the firm appear to impact SME internationalization strategies enabled by digital platforms? How do these compare with those identified in traditional and rapid internationalization processes? - How do SMEs choose a specific digital platform for internationalization? Is there an association with the types of services the digital platform offers or other platform characteristics? - Do SMEs start their internationalization using a single platform or multiple platforms? - Does prior use of a digital platform in the domestic market influence its adoption to internationalize?
	External	- To what extent do unsolicited orders from foreign buyers using digital platforms trigger SME internationalization? - What is the impact of digital distance on SME internationalization? How does it compare with the traditional psychic and cultural distance concepts? - Do SMEs from developing economies face unique challenges in adopting digital platforms for internationalization compared to those from developed countries? - Does the impact of digital platforms and digital capabilities on SME internationalization vary across regions, home countries, industries, and other contextual factors?
Phenomenon: SME internationalization enabled by digital platforms	Process	- To what extent do institutional and cultural differences between home and host countries affect SMEs' adoption of digital platforms for internationalization? - To what extent are traditional internationalization theories applicable in explaining the internationalization process of SMEs using digital platforms? - What type of learning is relevant in internationalization processes enabled by digital platforms? - How does commitment manifest in this context? Is it commitment to the platform, to platform members, to digital internationalization, or to internationalization? - How is tacit knowledge acquired in a digital platform, and what types of tacit knowledge are required for SMEs to advance in their internationalization process? - Is the speed of foreign market knowledge acquisition different when SMEs use digital platforms compared to other digital methods? - How do managers and employees learn about cultural differences using digital platforms? - How do the resources and capabilities required for internationalization using digital platforms evolve as SMEs advance in their internationalization process? - What is the nature of the international opportunity recognition process when using digital platforms? - How do SME managers' perceptions of risks related to the use of digital platforms change over time? - Can SMEs become dependent on digital platforms for their international activities? If so, how can this situation be overcome?
	Relationships	- How are international buyer-seller relationships established within digital platforms? How do they differ from those in the physical environment? - What are the specific uses and interactions associated with different types of digital platforms used for SME internationalization? - How do SMEs engage with multiple digital platforms in the same transactions? - What type of relationship do SMEs establish with digital platforms in an international context? Do SMEs have a voice in suggesting improvements to the platform's design, governance, or structure?
	Strategic Issues	- Under what circumstances do SMEs need to establish a physical presence in foreign countries in addition to utilizing digital platforms? - When using a hybrid strategy, do SMEs follow a specific establishment chain? Does the adoption of digital platforms for internationalization come before or after physical internationalization? - What types of conflict emerge when SMEs use hybrid internationalization strategies, and how are they managed? - Are there differences in using digital platforms along the internationalization process by exporting SMEs and SMEs with physical operations abroad? - Is the scope of SME internationalization enabled by digital platforms horizontal (many countries, limited sales per country) or vertical (few countries, larger sales)?

*(continued)***Table 5.**
Suggested research
questions

Table 5.

Issues	Research questions
Outcomes	• To what extent and under what circumstances do the anticipated benefits of utilizing digital platforms for SME internationalization, as outlined in the digital platform literature, hold? • To what extent and how does using digital platforms for internationalization alleviate the liabilities of smallness, foreignness, emergingness, and outsidership for SMEs? • Do digital platforms help SMEs to build legitimacy in host markets, and through what mechanisms? • How does the use of digital platforms impact SMEs de- and re-internationalization movements? • What are the differences in international performance between firms that use digital platforms for internationalization and those that use e-marketplaces? • What are the main reasons for under-performance or failure associated with internationalization enabled by digital platforms?

First, existing research has primarily focused on the antecedents of internationalization enabled by digital platforms, emphasizing internal antecedents related to firms' resources and capabilities, as well as some external antecedents such as platform type, industry characteristics and country-specific factors. The most frequently employed theoretical perspectives in the empirical literature are the RBV and the dynamic capabilities perspective, which align with efforts to understand the resources, capabilities, and transformative effects associated with adopting digital platforms for internationalization. However, there are other antecedents (and combinations thereof) that warrant further investigation. These include macro-level factors, such as cultural and institutional characteristics, the home and host country levels of economic development, the nature of virtual distance, and meso-level factors related to different platform types and their characteristics. Additionally, micro-level factors internal to the firm, such as the acquisition and relevance of tacit knowledge, issues related to resource configurations (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000), capability orchestration, and managerial and organizational characteristics, should be explored in comparison to those identified in existing literature on SMEs' traditional internationalization. As to external factors, institutional theory can be a valuable theoretical perspective to examine these issues.

Second, a significant research opportunity lies in exploring the internationalization process enabled by digital platforms. Issues requiring exploration include assessing the applicability of traditional internationalization process theories, such as the Uppsala model (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 2009), and theories related to the international opportunity recognition process (Chandra, 2017). Both static and dynamic aspects of the process require further research. For instance, do the requirements for successful internationalization evolve throughout the process (as suggested by Da Fonseca *et al.*, 2023)? Do SMEs need to acquire different types of tacit knowledge as internationalization progresses? Issues related to uncertainty and risk, opportunity recognition, and exploitation must be investigated within the context of internationalization enabled by digital platforms. The issues of learning and commitment to digital internationalization deserve more scholarly attention, given their foundational role in traditional internationalization process studies (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). When applied to internationalization using digital platforms, the specific nature of these constructs requires clarification. For example, in analyzing commitment in this context, is it primarily a commitment to the platform, other platform members, digital internationalization, or internationalization itself? Uncertainty and risk have only been briefly touched upon in this literature (Jean *et al.*, 2020; Qi *et al.*, 2020); future studies should explore how SMEs perceive, respond to and manage uncertainty and risk throughout the process. Understanding the potential risk of SMEs becoming overly dependent on digital platforms is particularly pertinent. Process studies require longitudinal methods, yet few

empirical studies in the current literature have adopted such approach. Incorporating longitudinal research designs would enhance the comprehension of the dynamics involved in the digital internationalization process.

Third, because digital platforms act as matchmakers (Song, 2019) connecting two or more parties, network theory and the ecosystems perspective provide robust theoretical foundations for understanding how relationships start, evolve, multiply, and eventually cease in these digital environments, and how value is co-created (Senyo *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between SMEs and digital platforms, including their communication dynamics and the roles SMEs play as complementors, can shed light on the evolving dynamics of this interaction. The examination of buyer-seller interactions in digital environments is particularly relevant. In addition to case studies, other qualitative methods such as netnographies involving buyer-seller dyads engaged in specific international digital transactions could capture different facets of the phenomenon. Moreover, experiments hold potential for generating novel insights into buyer-seller relationships and consumer responses within digital environments. For instance, negotiation experiments conducted in a digital setting may reveal how negotiation practices differ from those in physical interactions. Conducting such experiments across different cultures can allow to test whether negotiation practices are standardized in the digital realm or if cultural differences persist.

Fourth, strategic issues, particularly those related to hybrid internationalization (physical and digital), remain under-researched. While the literature offers insights into whether a digital internationalization strategy requires a local presence in foreign markets (Hultman *et al.*, 2023; Jin and Hurd, 2018; Tobiassen and Pettersen, 2023), a more comprehensive understanding is needed to determine the conditions under which a hybrid internationalization strategy becomes essential. Digital platforms may also impact SMEs' international strategies by enabling them to maintain a presence in foreign markets even after physically withdrawing. Aspects such as the scope, speed, and intensity of internationalization enabled by digital platforms compared to other forms of digital internationalization also deserve researchers' attention. These research themes allow using quantitative (surveys and panel data) and qualitative methods (case studies).

Fifth, while some studies have explored the outcomes and implications of SMEs' adoption of digital platforms, focusing on post-adoption performance, benefits accrued, and impacts on global competitive positioning, there are other ramifications worth considering. For instance, researchers have yet to determine the extent to which digital platform use influences how SMEs perceive and face liabilities of smallness, foreignness, emergingness, and outsidership (e.g. Arenius *et al.*, 2005; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020; Nambisan *et al.*, 2019), as well as its role in building legitimacy in foreign markets. A related issue concerns validating other benefits suggested in the literature as outcomes of the internationalization process. Moreover, there is limited research on the reasons behind SMEs' failures in their international endeavors (Lee *et al.*, 2020). Addressing issues related to de-internationalization and re-internationalization using digital platforms, akin to Yu *et al.*'s (2022) study on how digital transformation impacts Chinese firms' re-internationalization, is crucial. Again, longitudinal methods could shed light on the non-linear internationalization processes often observed in SMEs, including episodes of de- and re-internationalization.

Finally, it is worth noting that research on this topic is significantly skewed towards Europe, with a prevalence of studies from Northern and Southern Europe, and China. Therefore, there is a need for more studies encompassing the Americas, including the U.S., other Asian countries, and Africa. Research focusing on emerging market could provide insights into how SMEs leverage digital platforms to overcome institutional voids.

Conclusion

Research on the impact of digital platforms on SME internationalization is still in its early stages, as is the research on the interplay between digitalization and internationalization. This gap led Katsikeas *et al.* (2019, p. 3) to assert that “academic research has been left behind practice development,” which remains pertinent five years later in a rapidly evolving environment. To contribute to advancing research on digital internationalization, this paper assesses the role of digital platforms in SME internationalization. Given that most digital platforms are not bound by location, they offer wide geographic reach, allowing SMEs to connect with customers across various countries. While beneficial for firms of all sizes (Nambisan *et al.*, 2019), this feature is particular advantageous for smaller firms striving to overcome resource scarcity and the liabilities of newness, smallness, foreignness, and outsidership. Furthermore, digital platforms have the potential to significantly reduce the costs of doing business abroad. Therefore, their impact on SME internationalization warrants more scholarly attention.

This paper makes significant contributions to the international marketing literature. First, it provides a comprehensive overview of existing research, analyzing the theoretical perspectives, methods, contexts, and empirical findings related to the studies on SME internationalization enabled by digital platforms, thereby mapping the scholarly progress in this area. Second, it presents an integrated framework based on the study’s outcomes. Third, it identifies and explores future research avenues, addressing overlooked micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors and reflecting on theoretical, geographical, and methodological aspects that could enhance our understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, the study provides practical insights for policymakers by highlighting a broad spectrum of internal and external antecedents that can either facilitate or hinder the internationalization of SMEs using digital platforms. This comprehensive view helps in understanding the conditions under which digital platforms can most effectively support the internationalization of smaller firms.

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Author (Year)	Type	No. of papers	Period	Focus	Firm type	Main research questions addressed by previous literature reviews
Bergamaschi et al. (2021)	Bibliometric	68	1996–2019	Interplay between digitalization and internationalization (IDI)	All	“What is the structure of the IDI domain? How did the related research develop over time? What emerges that is of interest to practitioners and scholars studying this evolution? What are the future patterns of the research?” (p. 985)
Dethine et al. (2020)	Bibliometric	21	2005–2020	Digital internationalization and SME export capabilities and resources	SMEs	“How can digitalization potentially impact SMEs’ international practices?” (p. 21)
Feliciano-Cestero et al. (2023)	Bibliometric	123	2002–2022	Digital transformation at the individual, firm, and macro levels and its impact on firms’ internationalization	All	“What are the theories, theoretical constructs, methodologies, and contexts of interest examined by prior researchers in digital transformation and its effects on firms’ internationalization process? What is the impact of digital transformation on firms’ internationalization process? What factors affect or threaten digital transformation in firms and, consequently, the level of firm internationalization?” (p. 2)

(continued)

Table A1.
Summary of previous literature reviews on digital internationalization

Author (Year)	Type	No. of papers	Period	Focus	Firm type	Main research questions addressed by previous literature reviews
Katsikeas et al. (2019)	Conceptual	n.a	1996–2019	Digitalization and international marketing strategies	All	What are “the opportunities and challenges faced by firms in this new digital era as regards their international marketing strategy”? How “international marketing practices can be revisited given these developments?” (p. 406)
Li et al. (2022)	Bibliometric	151	2007–2020	Impact of digitalization on MNEs	MNEs	“In what aspects does digitalization challenge the traditional theory of MNEs? How does digitalization affect EMNEs? How do its effects differ from those it has on developed market multinational enterprises (DMNEs)?” (p. 2)
Ojala et al. (2022)	Systematic	41	2003–2022	Digitalization and internationalization	All	“What are the main themes connecting digitalization, digital services, and IB? What is the role of digital services in companies’ international operations? How can the phenomenon be studied in the future to better understand the interactions between digital services and internationalisation?” (p. 8)

Table A1.

(continued)

Author (Year)	Type	No. of papers	Period	Focus	Firm type	Main research questions addressed by previous literature reviews
Vadana <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Conceptual	35	2000–2019	Value-chain digitalization and internationalization	All	“How are digitalized/-ing companies defined in the IE and IM literature? How can these companies’ DOD [degree of digitalization] and DOI [degree of internationalization] be measured? What are the consequences of the interaction between digitalization and internationalization?” (p. 471)
Watson <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Conceptual	94*	1995–2016	Relational, digital, and hybrid approaches to international market entry	All	What was “the evolution of international market entry research” (p. 30) from the perspective of international relationship marketing and digitalization? How do digital technologies influence international buyer-seller relationships?

Note(s): * Because the authors have examined international market entry articles covering digital and non-digital aspects, we refer only to the articles on digital strategies

Source(s): Created by authors

Table A1.

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