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Antecedents and consequences of international marketing capabilities: insights from a systematic review

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Abstract

Purpose – Current research on international marketing capabilities (IMCs) remains fragmented, showing inconsistencies across theoretical, methodological and contextual dimensions. Therefore, a systematic synthesis of the literature is needed to identify the key antecedents and underlying mechanisms that shape IMCs. Additionally, this review examines how antecedents translate into meaningful outcomes across Global contexts and which theoretical perspectives are most appropriate to explain the development and effectiveness of IMCs.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses framework to identify and screen relevant studies. The selected articles were analyzed using the antecedents-mechanisms-decisions-outcomes (AMDO) framework to extract multi-level antecedents, underlying mechanisms and outcomes of IMCs. Finally, the theory–context–method (TCM) framework was employed to identify theoretical foundations, contextual boundaries, methodological trends and scope for future research.

Findings – The review identifies four levels of antecedents influencing IMCs. These antecedents operate at the firm, market, business and institutional levels. The study suggests that IMCs can be conceptualized as a higher-order construct comprising multiple interrelated capabilities that facilitate firms' competitiveness in international markets. AMDO framework demonstrates that these antecedents operate through underlying mechanisms, including dynamic, adaptive, digital and relational capabilities. These mechanisms, in turn, generate outcomes related to strategic orientation, organizational capability, relational and governance mechanisms, and performance. The review reveals that the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities theory and institution-based view are the dominant theoretical foundations underpinning IMC research.

Originality/value – This literature review advances the IMCs literature by synthesizing evidence through AMDO framework and integrating insights from the TCM framework. The review identifies multi-level antecedents, underlying mechanisms shaping IMCs, reconceptualizes IMCs as a higher-order capability construct, and proposes a future research agenda to advance scholarly understanding.

Keywords International marketing, SLR, Marketing capability, PRISMA, ADO, TCM

Paper type Research article

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Introduction

International marketing capabilities (IMCs) are firm-specific and path-dependent competencies that help the effective deployment of marketing resources and strategies to achieve competitive advantage in international markets (Morgan *et al.*, 2009; Von Janda *et al.*, 2021). These capabilities become more significant for firms rooted in emerging economies that are aiming for global expansion and such firms frequently face liabilities of foreignness, resource constraints and institutional instability (Kaufmann and Roesch, 2012). IMCs usually consist of the integration of market knowledge, the ability to sense and respond to customer and supplier needs, and the capacity to develop and sustain relationships with a broad range of stakeholders (Nath *et al.*, 2010; Yu *et al.*, 2014) and IMCs facilitate firms in successful internationalization by enabling them to achieve better positioning and improved marketing performance (Morgan *et al.*, 2012). As these capabilities are embedded in organizational routines and evolve over time, they are difficult for competitors to imitate, therefore ensuring that IMCs contribute to sustained competitive advantage (Morgan *et al.*, 2012).

Notably, researchers have produced a growing body of scholarly work on IMCs, reflecting the increasing maturity and significance of the field. For instance, recent studies have examined: ambi-cultural sensitivity and resource dynamism in B2B relationships (Saragih, 2025); big data and artificial intelligence (AI) analytics in value-chain innovation and international marketing strategy (Zong *et al.*, 2025); cross-border digital platforms and discretionary adaptation strategy of exporters in emerging markets (Liu *et al.*, 2025); international marketing agility and cost leadership strategies of frontier emerging market exporters in advanced economies (Khan *et al.*, 2025); and the role of AI capabilities in enhancing export performance (Kumar *et al.*, 2025). In addition, a recent systematic review by Pfajfar *et al.* (2024) synthesizes previous studies in this domain. Although this review advances understanding of IMCs, it is largely restricted to the dynamic capabilities' perspective, leaving other theoretical and conceptual dimensions underexplored (Table 1) and, therefore, the current body of knowledge remains fragmented and, more importantly, reflects multiple theoretical perspectives to explain the antecedents and outcomes of IMCs. The resource-based view (RBV) (Asseraf and Shoham, 2019; Kaufmann and Roesch, 2012; Reimann *et al.*, 2022), dynamic capability theory (DCT) (Moi and Cabiddu, 2021; Gnizy, 2019), organizational learning theory, the knowledge-based views (KBVs) and institution-based perspectives (Eisend *et al.*, 2016; Lin and Chuang, 2016) are among the prominent theoretical lenses used to conceptualize and explain the role of IMCs.

Furthermore, the literature is not only theoretically fragmented but also conceptually inconsistent. Some studies treat IMCs as a static resource while others view them as dynamic processes shaped through deployment and renewal. In addition, the current literature emphasizes the possession of capabilities rather than their development and reconfiguration, and empirically, the literature is therefore equally fragmented as the key antecedents of IMCs and their effectiveness across contexts remain inconclusive. For instance, the role of digital enablers, such as analytics and platform infrastructure, in capability development, have received limited attention, while previous studies have primarily emphasized performance outcomes through IMCs. Similarly, emerging perspectives, such as AI, big data, platforms and sustainability, received limited scholarly attention in the context of IMCs and a comprehensive literature review is needed to identify these gaps and contribute to the advancement of the international marketing literature.

Addressing these gaps, the study formulates the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the antecedents, mechanisms and outcomes of IMCs in literature?

RQ2. What theories have been applied across contexts and methods to conceptualize IMCs?

This review addresses these questions by synthesizing the literature into an integrated map of antecedents, deployment mechanisms and outcomes across theories, contexts and methods.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of prior review studies and the contribution of the present review

Basis of comparison	Comparative analysis and contribution
Prior review	• According to Pfajfar *et al.* (2024), two previous reviews on IMCs were conducted by Morgan *et al.* (2018) and Tan and Sousa (2015), however, neither explicitly focused on studies adopting the dynamic capability view (DCV) • Pfajfar *et al.* (2024) extended prior systematic reviews by highlighting the importance of the DCV, which was previously used to interpret causal relationships (Tan and Sousa, 2015) and to classify IMCs (Morgan *et al.*, 2018)
Focal construct	• IMCs applying DCV
Theoretical lens	• To conduct a literature review mapping current studies on IMCs that employed DCV • A multi-level analytical approach was adopted, combining inductive and deductive coding, and following the logic of antecedents-phenomena consequences
Review framework	• Synthesis of 20 rigorously selected previous empirical studies on IMCs applying DCV • Using a two-stage inclusion and exclusion criteria • Antecedents-consequences framework to propose emerging nomological net for focal capabilities
Main contribution	• Providing a significantly improved conceptualization of IMCs, research agenda for IMCs research, multi-level antecedents using AMDO framework and recommendations for future research based on theory–context–method (TCM) framework
Remaining gap	• Building on Pfajfar *et al.* (2024), the present review extends prior work by integrating the mechanism into the AMDO perspective with the TCM framework • What is the relationship between AMO and TCM, and what present insight into how theories are applied to establish the relation between antecedents and outcomes • Unboxing mechanism and boundary condition of the impact of focal capabilities on international performance
Present review extends	• This study extends AMO by adding mechanism(s) and discussing IMCs as a process perspective • This study included different theoretical perspectives, such as resource-dependence theory, transaction cost theory and resource versatility to uncover IMCs • Future research directions aligned with TCM are presented • Increased the sample ($n = 43$) from the previous study by Pfajfar *et al.* (2024) ($n = 20$)

Source(s): Authors' own work

The synthesis examines whether and how IMC can be understood as process-oriented capabilities and identifies the theoretical perspectives that best explain capability formation, deployment, renewal and boundary conditions. This review extends the ADO framework by incorporating mechanism and integrating insights from the theory–context–method (TCM) perspective. It further explores how capabilities are formed, configured, and translated into outcomes under digital, emerging and institutional contingencies. Additionally, this review consolidates existing knowledge, guides future research and provides valuable insights for scholars and practitioners to support evidence-based decision-making.

By applying the IMPACT (interestingness, matching, parsimony, applicability, conceptual rigor and testability) criteria for theory selection (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2025) and using the TCM framework, the review shows that prior research on IMCs is strongly anchored in the RBV and DCT. However, complementary theories are employed where they add distinct explanatory value and DCT emerged as the strongest lens for integrating the reviewed studies. DCT was originally proposed by Teece *et al.* (1997) and later refined by Teece (2007) explains how firms sense opportunities and threats, seize opportunities through strategic action and reconfigure resources to maintain competitiveness in dynamic environments. As a result, in this review, DCT is employed as the synthesis lens rather than as *a priori* search filter. International marketing firms must continuously adapt to institutional, technological and competitive changes and, as such, DCT has become more significant as it explains how IMCs are formed, deployed, renewed and reconfigured under changing cross-border conditions. RVB is another important theoretical lens for this review as it clarifies the resource and capability foundations of IMCs and explains how formal and informal institutional conditions shape capability deployment. Similarly, knowledge-based and learning perspectives are used to explain knowledge recombination processes, whereas network and social capital perspectives explain relational access to foreign market resources. This layered use of theory preserves the theoretical plurality revealed by the review while providing a coherent basis for synthesis, contribution and future research.

The remainder of this article covers the research methodology, results and discussion, which include the AMDO and TCM frameworks, and the conclusion.

Methodology

A systematic literature review is defined as "a systematic, transparent approach for obtaining, analyzing, and evaluating the findings of studies on a specific topic or research question" (Liberati *et al.*, 2009; Davis *et al.*, 2014; Xiao and Watson, 2019). A predefined and transparent protocol minimizes the potential biases associated in the identification, selection and synthesis of evidence during the review process. In this study, the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Liberati *et al.*, 2009) are used as the review protocol and comprise four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment and inclusion (Page *et al.*, 2021) (Figure 1). PRISMA has been widely adopted across disciplines, including marketing research, to enhance the transparency and reproducibility of evidence synthesis (Siddaway *et al.*, 2019; Chandra and Nida, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the systematic selection process used in this review and the final set of studies included for

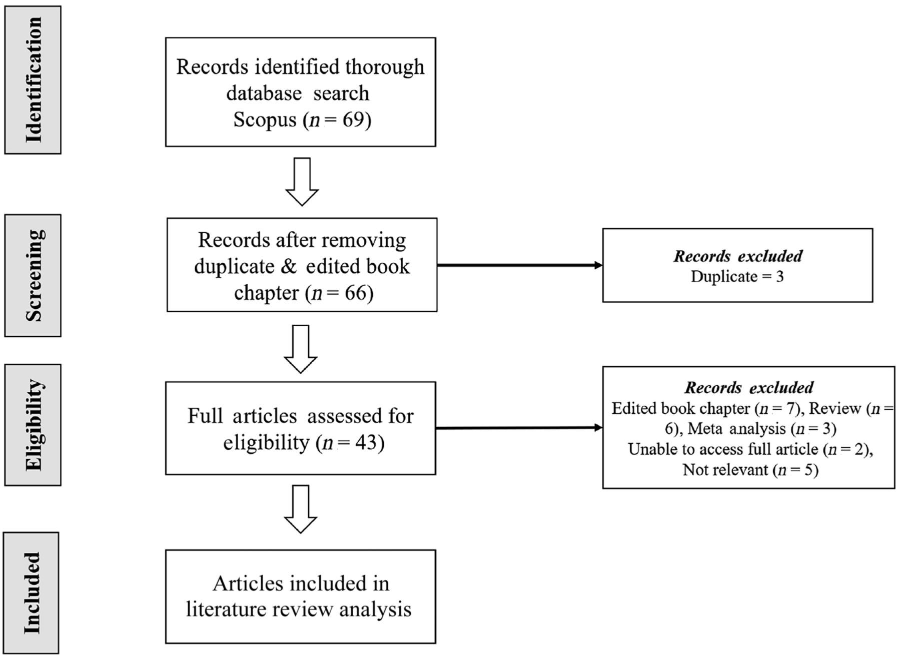

Figure 1. Review procedure based on the PRISMA protocol. **Source**: Authors' own work

developing the antecedents–mechanisms-decision–outcomes (AMDO) framework for IMCs, as well as to identify the theoretical and methodological approaches employed in the literature.

Identification: A search strategy was developed to identify the relevant literature for this systematic review. The search was conducted in the Scopus database on 5 August 2025 at 4:23 p.m. (Indian Standard Time) and two separate dot CSV files were downloaded using the search strings TITLE-ABS-KEY ("marketing capability" AND "international marketing"; "marketing capability" AND "global market"). Restricting the search to these two keyword combinations, applied separately, aligns with recommendations from recent systematic review studies. The search terms were applied to titles, abstracts, and author keywords with a total of 69 articles retrieved and duplicate records subsequently removed. Based on previous studies, this is considered to be the most effective method for identifying and screening the relevant articles.

Screening: After downloading the dot CSV data file, relevant articles were screened based on the document type (article, book chapter, conference paper and review) and languages. According to Paul and Dhiman (2021), nonjournal articles are often excluded because they typically lack rigor and a thorough peer review process, and book chapters are generally not included in systematic reviews. Therefore, three duplicate articles and seven book chapters were excluded from further analysis. Papers published exclusively in English were selected as it is considered the most dominant language of international scholarly communication. Ultimately, 59 articles met our inclusion criteria and were retrieved for the next stage of analysis.

Eligibility: Before conducting the keyword search in the Scopus database, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was established. At this stage, studies lacking full-text availability, not relevant to the research objectives, or categorized as nonempirical articles were excluded. Consequently, 43 full-text articles were retrieved and advanced to the next stage of analysis as well as empirical studies that included antecedents, mediator or moderator, and outcome variables that met primary eligibility criteria. Other articles, including nonempirical papers, meta-analysis and review articles, were also excluded.

Inclusion: The next step involved quality assessment, including abstract screening and article selection, resulting in a final sample of 43 complete and accessible articles. Information from each article was coded according to the author, year, title, research approach (quantitative, qualitative or mixed), sample size, theory used, antecedents, mediator and moderator, dependent variable, context and key contributions, all of which was coded using Excel. Using content analysis, the articles were reviewed and key information related to the integrated TCM framework (Paul *et al.*, 2017) was systematically extracted. This framework was chosen to enhance rigor (method), improve representation (context) and expand knowledge (theory). Information regarding the antecedents and outcomes of marketing capabilities was also extracted, and the ADO framework guided this review to examine the antecedents and consequences of IMCs, including how these capabilities are conceptualized and measured.

A robustness check was adopted and implemented to safeguard the foundational procedures and contributions of the review (Lim, 2025). More specifically, the author team audited all search and screening decisions, data extraction logic and coherence between the reported findings, interpretations, and future research agenda. One author was explicitly involved in reviewing the protocol as well as a sample of coded articles to assess the defensibility of inclusion decisions and the use of independent coding procedures. Furthermore, any discrepancies were resolved through documented discussions, thus supporting the trustworthiness of the synthesis.

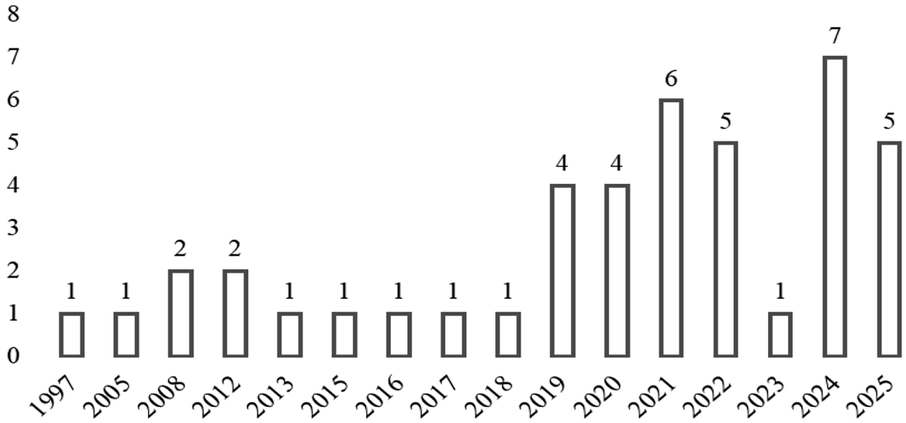

Figure 2. Number of articles published per year. **Source**: Authors' own work

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics of the studies

The yearly trends in the number of scientific articles published between 1997 and 2025 are illustrated in Figure 2. Although there were only a few studies in this domain published between 1997 and 2015, a significant increase has been observed since 2018, with more than 50% of articles published during the past three years. An overall upward trend was evident throughout the study period with the highest number of publications recorded in 2024, with a total of 12 articles.

Table 2 presents the top 15 articles, their citation counts, and the international marketing and exporting publications. The foundational role of marketing capability in enhancing export performance, as demonstrated by Morgan *et al.* (2012, 2018) and Buccieri *et al.* (2020a, b) in articles published in the *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science*, the *Journal of International Marketing* and the *International Business Review*, received the highest number of citations. Research on dynamic capabilities, digital transformation and innovation (Buccieri *et al.*, 2020a, b; Buccieri, 2020; Moi and Cabiddu, 2021) reflects evolving market conditions with the *International Marketing Review* publishing the highest number of relevant articles on marketing capability.

Marketing capability classifications in the context of international marketing. Marketing capabilities refer to organizational processes, knowledge and routines through which firms deploy resources and create value for customers to achieve competitive advantage. In international markets, these capabilities are particularly important because firms must respond to heterogeneous customer needs, institutional differences and rapidly changing competitive environments. Consequently, several scholars have proposed different ways of classifying marketing capabilities according to their strategic functions and roles.

Day (1994) proposed outside-in capabilities (e.g. market sensing and customer relationship management), inside-out capabilities (e.g. internally focused operational processes) and spanning capabilities, which integrate internal resources with external market knowledge. Based on these perspectives, Day (2011) discussed marketing capabilities in terms of their ability to cope with environmental change and highlighted static, dynamic and adaptive capabilities. Static capabilities are relatively stable and described as routine marketing processes that support the efficient execution of recurring activities. However, dynamic marketing capabilities are defined as an organization's ability to integrate, develop and reconfigure its marketing capabilities in response to changing market conditions, whereas

Table 2. Top 15 articles with citation

S.N.	Author	Title of the article	Citations	Source title
1	Morgan *et al.* (2012)	Export marketing strategy implementation, export marketing capabilities and export venture performance	355	*Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*
2	Buccieri *et al.* (2020a, b)	International new venture performance: Role of international entrepreneurial culture, ambidextrous innovation and dynamic marketing capabilities	191	*International Business Review*
3	Morgan *et al.* (2018)	Marketing capabilities in international marketing	138	*Journal of International Marketing*
4	Kaleka and Morgan (2019)	How marketing capabilities and current performance drive strategic intentions in international markets	92	*Industrial Marketing Management*
5	Keskin *et al.* (2021)	The simultaneous effect of firm capabilities and competitive strategies on export performance: the role of competitive advantages and competitive intensity	59	*International Marketing Review*
6	Moi and Cabiddu (2021)	Leading digital transformation through an agile marketing capability: the case of Spotahome	57	*Journal of Management and Governance*
7	Dinner *et al.* (2019)	Psychic distance and performance of MNCs during marketing crises	48	*Journal of International Business Studies*
8	Zahoor and Lew (2023)	Enhancing IMC and export performance of emerging market SMEs in crises: strategic flexibility and digital technologies	48	*International Marketing Review*
9	Mahmoud *et al.* (2020)	Social media resources and export performance: the role of trust and commitment	42	*International Marketing Review*
10	Kaufmann and Roesch (2012)	Constraints to building and deploying marketing capabilities by emerging market firms in advanced markets	39	*Journal of International Marketing*
11	Gnizy (2019)	The role of inter-firm dispersion of IMC in marketing strategy and business outcomes	39	*Journal of Business Research*
12	Reimann *et al.* (2021)	The influence of dynamic and adaptive marketing capabilities on the performance of Portuguese SMEs in the B2B international market	38	*Sustainability*
13	Calabrese *et al.* (2005)	Strategy and market management of new product development and incremental innovation: evidence from Italian SMEs	33	*International Journal of Product Development*
14	Asseraf and Shoham (2019)	Crafting strategy for international marketing: outside-in or inside-out?	32	*International Marketing Review*
15	Reimann *et al.* (2022)	Adaptive marketing capabilities, market orientation and international performance: the moderation effect of competitive intensity	22	*Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*

Source(s): Authors' own work

adaptive marketing capabilities focus on continual learning, market awareness and the adjustment of marketing strategies according to new opportunities and challenges that emerge. In addition, Vorhies and Morgan (2003, 2005) also categorized marketing capabilities into specialized and architectural capabilities, highlighting the need for coordination of marketing activities.

However, Baden-Fuller and Teece (2020) argued that to deal with the uncertainties of international market environments IMCs require operational efficiency as well as capabilities related to the market intelligence generation combined with relationship development and management. IMCs include dynamic capabilities that transform marketing assets to create superior customer value (Roach *et al.*, 2018) without involving competencies confined to a single function; rather, they comprise capabilities that facilitate organizational renewal, which is driven by the ability to monitor environmental changes and capitalize on new opportunities through resource reallocation (Wilden *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, this review adopts a similar perspective and conceptualizes IMCs as a multi-dimensional construct.

Antecedents and consequences of IMC

A systematic literature review is the rigorous process of synthesizing existing knowledge within a specific research domain. However, reviewing IMCs in isolation limits our understanding, including its antecedents, underlying mechanisms and consequences, all of which are considered comprehensively in this study. The review adopts the AMDO framework to organize the literature into interconnected dimensions, which identifies the factors that shape capability development (antecedents), extracts the strategic decisions and capability deployment processes undertaken by firms (mechanisms and decisions) and presents the resulting organizational and market outcomes (outcomes). This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how IMCs are developed, utilized and translated into competitive advantage.

Antecedents: Synthesis of the literature reveals that IMCs are shaped by a diverse set of interrelated antecedents that operate at different organizational levels (Figure 3 shows the four-level classifications of antecedents, i.e. firm, market, business and industry-level factors). This multi-level classification provides a comprehensive understanding of how internal resources, strategic orientations, market dynamics and external institutional conditions jointly contribute to the development and deployment of IMCs. Furthermore, the source of influences is considered a key criterion for categorization, encompassing internal organizational capabilities, customer and market interactions, managerial strategic decisions and the external environment (Table 3).

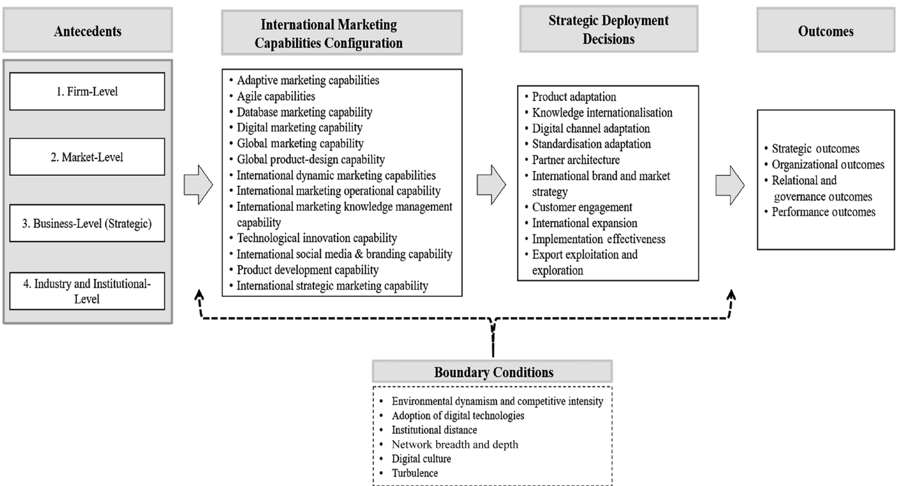

Figure 3. AMDO framework of IMC. **Source**: Authors' own work

Table 3. Multi-level antecedents (i.e. firms, market, business and industry) of IMC

Level	Antecedents	Sources
1. Firm-level (Internal organizational capability)	• Market orientation • Learning orientation • Customer orientation • Big data–based AI analytics capability • Explorative innovation • Exploitative innovation • Sensing ability (SEN) of the firm • Cultural intelligence • Social media resources • Intelligent process recommendation systems • Customer intelligence • Marketing intelligence	Ren *et al.* (2021), Reimann *et al.* (2022), Mostafiz *et al.* (2024), Chatterjee *et al.* (2024), Hazzam and Wilkins (2022), Mahmoud *et al.* (2020), Zong *et al.* (2025)
2. Market-level (Customer/ market interactions)	• Product adaptation to international markets • Use of social media technologies for market engagement • Customer market interaction mechanisms • Market responsiveness and adaptation dynamics	Bauer *et al.* (2020), Hazzam and Wilkins (2022)
3. Business-level (Managerial strategic decision)	• Marketing communications strategy • International entrepreneurial orientation • International entrepreneurial culture • Outside-in (OI) strategic approaches • Inside-out (IO) strategic approaches • Presence and strategic role of the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO)	Chang *et al.* (2024), Buccieri *et al.* (2020a, b), Asseraf and Shoham (2019), Liu *et al.* (2025)
4. Industry and institutional-level (External environment)	• Formal institutional distance • Informal institutional distance • Platform’s international infrastructure	Liu *et al.* (2025)

Source(s): Authors’ own work

(1) *Firm-level antecedents* are primarily based on the RBV and dynamic capabilities theory. According to these theories, firms put emphasis on the development of internal resources and competencies that provide the foundation for IMCs. The reviewed studies consistently identify market orientation, learning orientation, customer orientation, big data–based AI analytics capability, explorative and exploitative innovation, market sensing, marketing intelligence, customer intelligence, cultural intelligence and marketing communication strategies as critical drivers of IMC development. These capabilities enable firms to acquire, integrate and leverage market knowledge, thereby enhancing their responsiveness to a changing international business environment and strengthening competitive advantage.

Recent studies suggest that firm-specific capabilities facilitate internationalization and improve performance in international markets. For example, internal development, manufacturing and marketing capabilities significantly enhance organizational outcomes; however, the benefits may vary depending on the level of external institutional support (Lee and Bai, 2026). Furthermore, studies on SMEs and international ventures suggest that firm-level resources and dynamic capabilities facilitate international expansion, innovation and export competitiveness under the conditions of environmental uncertainty and rapid technological change (Lakshman *et al.*, 2025; Costa *et al.*, 2024).

Research also indicates that AI-enabled analytics and digital capabilities strengthen firms' ability to create value and respond strategically to market changes, and further highlights the growing role of technological capabilities in IMC development (Joshi *et al.*, 2026). Moreover, the effectiveness of vigilant and open marketing capabilities is influenced by institutional support and environmental conditions, which means that internal capabilities and external contexts jointly shape export performance (Mansouri and Kaswengi, 2025). The synthesis emphasizes that firm-level antecedents constitute the primary building blocks through which organizations develop and deploy effective IMCs.

(2) *Market-level antecedents* are aligned with market sensing and responsiveness theories and it is through these that firms adapt to international market and customer dynamics (Day, 1994; Morgan *et al.*, 2018) as well as product adaptation, social media for digital engagement, market responsiveness and adaptation, and customer interaction mechanisms, all of which have been identified as key market-level antecedents that influence IMC development (Bauer *et al.*, 2020; Hazzam and Wilkins, 2022; Mahmoud *et al.*, 2020).

(3) *Business-level antecedents* contribute to international entrepreneurship and strategic marketing literature. They explain how firms proactively expand across borders and represent important drivers of IMC development. The strategic orientations shape firms' willingness and ability to innovate and adapt to foreign market requirements and help leverage internal resources alongside external market intelligence to support successful international expansion and competitive advantage (Buccieri *et al.*, 2020a, b; Asseraf and Shoham, 2019; Morgan *et al.*, 2018).

(4) *Industry and institutional-level antecedents* extend the IMCs literature by incorporating institutional and ecosystem-level influences that shape firms' capability development as well as deployment across borders. The reviewed studies identify formal and informal institutional distance, cross-border digital platform infrastructure and managerial decision-making support as important contextual antecedents influencing IMCs. Institutional conditions affect firms' access to resources, market opportunities and strategic flexibility, while digital platform infrastructure facilitates capability development by enhancing cross-border connectivity, information exchange and market adaptation (Liu *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, recent evidence has argued that the effectiveness of marketing capabilities depends on firm-specific resources in addition to institutional support and broader environmental conditions. As a result, it is crucial to highlight the interaction between internal capabilities and external contexts (Mansouri and Kaswengi, 2025).

Overall, these findings underscore that IMCs are embedded within complex institutional and industry environments and are best understood through a multi-level perspective rather than a single-theory explanation.

Mechanisms: Figure 3 illustrates how multi-level antecedents are translated into organizational outcomes through underlying capability mechanisms. The synthesis of previous studies highlights that IMCs operate as intermediate mechanisms enabling firms to convert internal resources and external market stimuli into effective strategic actions. This also clarifies that capability does not represent a single competence but comprises a configuration of complementary capabilities previous researchers labeled: dynamic, adaptive, digital, ambidextrous innovation, product development and database marketing capability. Dynamic and adaptive marketing capabilities emerge as the dominant mechanisms in the literature, with dynamic capabilities enabling firms to sense market changes, acquire and integrate knowledge, reconfigure resources and proactively respond to evolving international environments (Day, 2011; Hunt and Madhavaram, 2020). Adaptive capabilities enhance organizational learning, strategic flexibility and stakeholder engagement, thus allowing firms to anticipate opportunities and maintain closer alignment with changing market requirements (Day, 2011; Guo *et al.*, 2018; Schoemaker and Day, 2009). Digital marketing capabilities strengthen firms' ability to leverage analytics, digital platforms and real-time stakeholder interactions to create value and coordinate marketing activities across borders (Kane *et al.*, 2015; Kannan and Li, 2017; Wang, 2020). While the literature also suggests that database marketing capabilities facilitate targeted decision-making by improving customer information management, some studies suggest that excessive reliance on data may reduce strategic effectiveness (Blattberg *et al.*, 2008).

These mechanisms bridge the relationship between antecedent conditions and organizational outcomes that facilitate firms to deploy resources effectively and adapt to market dynamics. However, their effectiveness is further conditioned by contextual factors, such as environmental dynamism, competitive intensity, technology adoption and firms' cosmopolitan orientation, which indicates the successful deployment of IMCs depends on both internal capability configurations and external environmental conditions.

Strategic deployment decisions: Figure 3 shows how firms deploy IMCs they have developed. After firms gain IMCs in the form of market knowledge, digital marketing, innovation and branding, they must decide how to apply these capabilities in the international market. Strategic decisions related to product adaptation, market participation, knowledge internationalization, standardization-adaptation strategies, partner orchestration, digital marketing channels and brand strategy represent important deployment mechanisms (AlQahtani *et al.*, 2025; Asseraf and Shoham, 2019; Lin and Chuang, 2016). These strategic decisions constitute the means through which IMCs are translated into organizational and performance advantages with the key implication being that simply possessing marketing capabilities alone is insufficient, but instead they must be strategically deployed by firms to compete effectively in international market environments.

Outcomes: In a broader sense, the literature conceptualizes the outcomes of IMCs into four dimensions: *strategic orientation* (export exploration, international market strategy, international brand equity, discretionary adaptation strategy and competitive intensity); *organizational capability* (internal implementation effectiveness, external implementation effectiveness, value-chain innovation, commercialization and product adaptation); *relational and governance mechanisms* (commitment and trust, governance structure rational versus contractual) and *performance outcomes* (firm performance, business performance, export performance, firm international marketing performance, strategic actions and performance, and international new venture performance). It is posited that IMCs generate value beyond traditional performance measures by shaping strategic orientations, enhancing internal effectiveness and strengthening relational governance mechanisms, a perspective largely grounded in the international marketing literature. Furthermore, this multi-dimensional structure suggests IMCs function as higher-order capabilities that enhance strategic decision-making, organizational effectiveness and inter-firm relational structures, thereby contributing to superior international performance (Ren *et al.*, 2021).

Boundary conditions: In addition to moderating effects, the outcomes of IMCs are conditioned by environmental dynamism, competitive intensity, environmental turbulence, sales integration, information processing capabilities, marketing and leadership support, the depth and breadth of international networks and digital diversity.

Analysis based on TCM

Theories used: In the literature marketing capabilities are conceptualized based on several theoretical perspectives explaining the relationship with phenomena occurring in international environments. RBV (Riemann *et al.*, 2022; Bauer *et al.*, 2020; Keskin *et al.*, 2021) and DCT (Tan and Sousa, 2015; Chen *et al.*, 2019; Hazzam and Wilkins, 2022) are the most frequently used theories (Table 4), which indicates they are more suitable to address research problems and operationalizing marketing capabilities, especially in contexts characterized by dynamic and evolving phenomena. Furthermore, this review did not impose a single theoretical perspective prior to synthesis, but TCM analysis was used to show that prior research on IMCs is strongly anchored in both RVB and DCT. And other theories, such as institutional, knowledge-based, network, social capital and digital transformation, are used more selectively to explain specific mechanisms and boundary conditions. On this basis, DCT can serve as a synthesis lens rather than a search filter (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2025; Teece, 2007). This perspective explains how IMCs are formed, deployed, renewed and reconfigured under changing foreign market conditions (Teece, 2007; Morgan *et al.*, 2018; Pfajfar *et al.*, 2024) and is equally useful for understanding how firms manage relationships with stakeholders and respond to evolving market demands. Together, these theories provide a strong theoretical base closely connected to the broader international marketing literature. Other theories, such as institutional theory, organizational learning theory, institution-based views and KBVs, have also been used to explain IMCs within international marketing contexts.

Supporting theories help explain specific components of the IMC development process. For instance, RBV clarifies resources and capability foundations of international marketing whereas institutional theory sets out how formal and informal institutional conditions shape capability deployment (Mansouri and Kaswengi, 2025). The knowledge-based and learning perspectives make clear how firms acquire, integrate, and recombine knowledge to develop IMCs (Checchinato *et al.*, 2017), while network and social capital perspectives describe the relational access to market resources (Gnizy, 2019). Notably, the contemporary digital transformation perspectives illustrate how analytics, platforms and digital infrastructure reshape capabilities development and deployment (Moi and Cabiddu, 2021). DMCs refer to a firm’s ability to employ digitally enabled processes to interact with customers and partners in a

Table 4. Summary of theories used in IMC studies

Theoretical lens	Number of times used
Ambidexterity capabilities	1
Community trust theory	1
Configuration theory perspective	1
Digital marketing capabilities	1
Dynamic capabilities theory	15
Firm internationalization theory	1
Institutional theory	2
International entrepreneur theory	1
Organizational learning theory	2
Performance-feedback theory	1
Psychic distance paradox	1
Resource-based view theory	12
Social capital theory	1
Stakeholder theory	1
Strategic flexibility	1
Theory of resource advantage (R-A)	1

Source(s): Authors’ own work

targeted, measurable and integrated manner, thereby creating new forms of value regardless of geographical distance or temporal constraints (Kannan and Li, 2017; McIntyre and Virzi, 2019). More specifically, DMCs represent a firm's ability to adapt resource configurations and develop new competencies for managing stakeholder communication in real time (Kane *et al.*, 2015). In addition, by improving the efficiency of social networking activities, market analysis and stakeholder engagement, DMCs strengthen the relational capabilities required to capitalize on digitalization opportunities (Wang, 2020). Moreover, DMCs must remain inherently adaptive to enable flexible and responsive decision-making.

This theoretical structure enables the review to preserve theoretical plurality while moving beyond a purely descriptive inventory of concepts.

Research contexts: Although the synthesis shows a significant contextual diversity in the reviewed studies, the research on IMCs is dominated by four countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, China and India (Figure 4). Notably, a substantial proportion of empirical studies originated in China, which may be attributed to the country's export orientation, rapid digitalization and the increasing international focus of Chinese firms. These features not only create a dynamic business environment in China but also compel Chinese firms to constantly revise and adjust their IMCs. As a result, Chinese firms are successfully meeting customer demands, adapting to technological changes and competing on a global level, all of which makes China an empirically rich context for investigating IMCs and their role in increasing international competitiveness. Despite this, however, the current concentration of studies limits the generalizability of existing findings and there remains a need for additional research examining IMCs across diverse institutional and market contexts (Checchinato *et al.*, 2017; Kaufmann and Roesch, 2012; Keskin *et al.*, 2021; Morgan *et al.*, 2012; Quan *et al.*, 2021; Reimann *et al.*, 2021).

Methodological approach: With respect to the research method adopted in published studies, 65.15% adopted a quantitative approach in their studies (Figure 5), 20.93% applied a qualitative approach, and 13.95% adopted a combined method. In terms of sample size, 4,336 was the largest sample size employed, whereas the smallest was 51 in the quantitative approach. Studies in this domain have adopted the cross-sectional survey method in terms of research methods, but this is insufficient to provide much insight into the development and cause-and-effect mechanism of IMCs.

An integrated AMDO–TCM framework for IMC analysis

By integrating AMDO and TCM, this study extends current understanding about IMCs and its findings move beyond simply identifying relationships to explaining why they occur (theory),

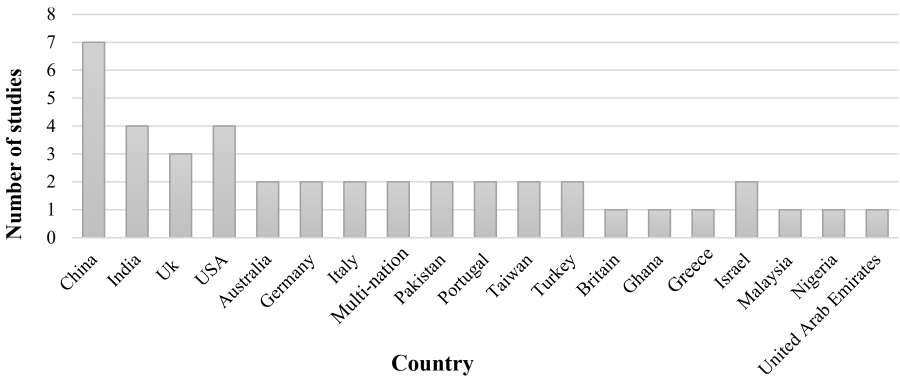

Figure 4. Geographical context of the studies conducted. **Source**: Authors' own work

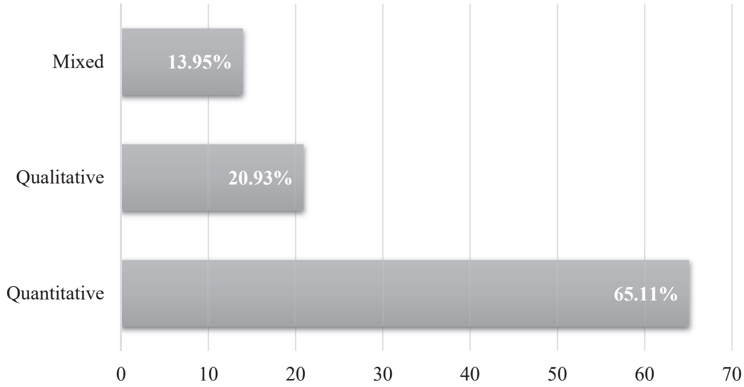

Figure 5. Distribution of research approaches in IMCs. **Source**: Authors' own work

where they emerge (context) and how they have been investigated (method). Both frameworks are complementary, with AMDO explaining causal relationships and TCM providing insights into theoretical foundations, contextual boundaries, methodological approaches and research gaps in the literature. This combination allows IMCs to be positioned not merely as mechanisms but as contextually contingent, theory-driven and methodologically robust higher-order capabilities. Further, AMDO reveals four levels of antecedents, which include firms, markets, business and institution-level factors, and shows diverse capabilities and outcomes, while TCM strengthens explanatory power and justifies the contribution of the AMDO framework. Furthermore, the TCM analysis reveals that the IMC literature is strongly rooted in RBV and DCT, with studies in emerging economies, particularly China, and incorporating fit perspectives, DMCs and organizational learning theory. The AMDO framework also identifies the process structure of IMCs research while illustrating what precedes capability development, how capabilities are deployed, and what outcomes follow, which is complemented by the TCM framework identifying the literature's knowledge structure by showing which theories explain those relationships, which contexts condition them, and which methods have generated the available evidence. Together, the two frameworks allow the review to diagnose what the literature has studied as well as how strongly those findings are theoretically explained, contextually bounded and methodologically supported. This integration constitutes an important contribution because prior studies have rarely synthesized multiple theoretical perspectives into a unified capability framework.

Conclusion

This study systematically synthesized three decades of literature on IMCs (1997–2025) using the PRISMA protocol, with a total of 43 articles meeting the established inclusion criteria included in the final analysis. The reviewed literature presented a wide range of antecedents associated with IMCs at the firm, market, business and industry levels, with each linked to four categories of outcomes: strategic orientation, organizational capability, relational and governance mechanisms, and performance outcomes. From the theoretical perspective, RBV and DCT were the dominant theories used to explain capability development and firm performance, while additional theoretical perspectives employed less frequently included the internationalization theory, international entrepreneurship theory, the capability-based view, social capital theory and institutional perspectives.

By addressing conceptual fragmentation in IMCs, this review suggested they be viewed as higher-order dynamic capabilities comprising multiple interdependent sub-capabilities. The synthesis advised IMCs should not be examined in isolation, but that attention should instead be directed toward capability configurations, their combined effects and the role of institutional conditions in shaping capability development and deployment. Furthermore, the AMDO framework highlighted the critical role of IMCs in enhancing firm performance in international markets despite current literature representing a geographical concentration of empirical studies in developed economies, with limited attention given to emerging and developing countries. This imbalance offers opportunities for future research as emerging market contexts provide valuable settings for examining the generalizability and boundary conditions of existing theories and empirical findings.

Implications

This review emphasized business capabilities in international environments and conceptualized IMCs as an integrated, higher-order system of capabilities. The synthesis of the literature suggested that isolated investments in technological tools, customer engagement and product development are insufficient for business success in international markets, and these capabilities need to be dynamically aligned and coordinated instead. Managers should therefore focus on capability orchestration where dynamic and adaptive capabilities, together with knowledge-based and relational capabilities, are jointly leveraged to enhance business performance under conditions of environmental turbulence and institutional complexity; accordingly, firms will then need to move beyond fragmented approaches to capability development and emphasize the cultivation of IMCs. This is particularly important for firms operating in emerging markets characterized by institutional voids and rapid technological change, and managers should adopt a configuration approach in which internal capabilities are aligned with external market conditions to achieve sustainable success in international markets.

Managers should treat IMCs as an organizational challenge rather than a collection of independent investments. Specific investments in analytics, social media, product adaptation, market sensing and partner relationships create value when they are coordinated around foreign market needs, but firms operating in institutionally distant or turbulent markets should prioritize routines for sensing market changes, reallocating resources, adapting offerings and coordinating partners. Similarly, firms embedded within international networks should strengthen partner orchestration and knowledge-sharing routines as these actions will translate the review's synthesis into practical capability-building priorities for firms pursuing international expansion.

Future research directions

Figure 3 illustrates the antecedents of IMCs, which are predominantly grounded in RBV and DCT. Although these theories provide a strong foundation for IMCs, future research should employ a broader range of theoretical lenses. More importantly, this review suggested firms consider contemporarily and contextually fit theories, such as digital transformation theories, KBV, behavioral theories and network perspectives, while examining capabilities, as these approaches may offer novel insights to address contemporary challenges, emerging trends and evolving international market conditions. For instance, employing digital transformation theories can enhance the understanding of capability development processes as well as the strategic importance of digital infrastructure as a source of competitive marketing capability. Furthermore, the role of partnerships, strategic alliances and digital platforms in shaping global marketing capabilities remains insufficiently explored. Future studies could investigate how firms embedded within international networks gain access to critical market resources and how such resources contribute to the development and deployment of IMCs.

Another important theoretical lens to examine IMCs through can be behavioral theories as they may provide valuable insights about the influence of cognitive biases, routines, and decision-making constraints on the development and utilization of marketing capabilities under conditions of uncertainty. Additionally, the role of green marketing capabilities and sustainable business practices in IMC development across both highly and less regulated markets requires further investigation, as there is a need for industry-specific perspectives on green marketing capabilities. For example, the development and deployment of IMCs may differ substantially between high-technology and traditional industries or service and manufacturing firms due to variations in sustainability requirements, market uncertainty, product intangibility and customer interaction, particularly in the context of AI, sustainability transitions and geopolitical disruptions.

This review also revealed that empirical research on IMCs in emerging markets is limited (Checchinato *et al.*, 2017; Kaufmann and Roesch, 2012; Quan *et al.*, 2021) and further research could be conducted within the context of emerging economies where developing IMCs need external institutional support. In addition, how institutional voids and gaps influence the importance of IMC antecedents as well as how firms develop marketing capabilities in environments characterized by weak institutional support, similarly needs further exploration. Researchers could also examine the phenomenon of leapfrogging in emerging markets, which can be explored by examining how firms adopt innovative marketing practices and digital technologies to accelerate the development of new IMCs. The current literature also lacks comparative contextual studies, and future studies could focus on trade tensions between the United States and China and/or economic sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States as these geopolitical disruptions significantly influence firms' strategic decisions and capability development processes and therefore require deeper investigation.

Methodologically, future researchers could employ diverse research designs. For instance, experimental studies may be conducted while simulating international market scenarios under controlled conditions, which might provide deeper insights into the cause and effect relationships associated with IMCs. Furthermore, capabilities are an evolving phenomena and longitudinal studies are desirable for gaining insights into governmental interventions, funding agencies and major international events. Longitudinal research would also help explain how firms transition from domestic operations to international markets and how capabilities evolve over time. Additionally, machine-learning techniques can be used to identify hidden patterns within large datasets, including annual reports, websites and social media platforms. Natural experiments, such as abrupt geopolitical changes or shifts in trade policies, may further enhance understanding of how exogenous shocks shape IMC development. Finally, meta-analytical approaches could synthesize existing empirical evidence and estimate the relative importance of different antecedents influencing IMCs.

Limitations

Despite the review presenting a diverse perspective on IMCs through the integration of AMDO and TCM frameworks it has several limitations. *First*, although the study followed a systematic selection process, the use of specific keywords and exclusion criteria may have omitted relevant studies and limited the inclusion of a broader range of publications. *Second*, the final sample comprised only 43 articles following the screening process guided by the PRISMA framework and this limitation may restrict the comprehensiveness of evaluation. *Third*, this study proposed an integrated AMDO–TCM framework, yet it remains conceptual in nature and has not been empirically tested. The proposed relationships, mediating role of IMCs, and multi-level interactions therefore provide a foundation for future empirical validation, while the relationships synthesized within the AMDO framework are derived primarily from quantitative studies, which highlight the statistically validated findings. However, this perspective and method may have overlooked the contextual richness, underlying mechanisms and nuanced insights generated through qualitative research.

Ethical approval
This article does not include any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent
This article does not contain any studies with human participants.

Data availability
No quantitative datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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