

## The use of digital marketing channels in the internationalization strategies of B2B companies: The perception of Portuguese managers

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### Abstract

In the age of globalization, digital marketing is an essential strategy for companies in all business sectors. While the literature highlights the effectiveness of digital marketing in the Business-to-Consumer (B2C) market, its adoption and performance in Business-to-Business (B2B) markets require further research. This article aims to address this gap by exploring the ability of digital marketing to facilitate the internationalization of B2B companies. Two research objectives were established: (i) to understand the attitudes of those responsible for B2B companies regarding digital marketing in their internationalization strategy; (ii) to explore the preferences and effectiveness of digital marketing channels for entering and enhancing their presence in international markets. The study employed a qualitative methodology, conducting 15 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with managers of Portuguese B2B companies, whether they had international experience or were planning to expand internationally, followed by subsequent content analysis. The results indicate that some participants remain skeptical about the effectiveness of digital marketing in the B2B context, while others recognize the role of digital channels in attracting international customers, facilitating relationship management, and justifying new investments.

**Keywords:** Digital channels, Digital marketing, Internationalization strategy, Technology adoption.

### To cite this article:

Filipe, S., Barbosa, B., & Amaral Santos, C. (2024). The use of digital marketing channels in the internationalization strategies of B2B companies: The perception of Portuguese managers. *International Journal of Marketing Innovation and Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 17-24.  
[doi.org/10.34624/ijmis.v2i01.34522](https://doi.org/10.34624/ijmis.v2i01.34522).

**Received:** November 03, 2023; **Accepted:** October 25, 2024; **Published:** October 25, 2024

## 1. Introduction

Globalization and the internalization of enterprises have created important opportunities for market expansion (Burakovs'kyj, & Voloshyn, 2021; Gao et al., 2010). Specifically in the case of Portuguese companies, this opportunity for internationalization becomes more pressing, as the internal market is often not enough to ensure their survival or the desired profitability. In this context, companies often choose to enter foreign markets to achieve their strategic and marketing objectives. However, an internationalization process is something much more complex than a simple entry into the international market (Nurfarida et al., 2022), and it involves taking some risks and investing in resources (Eriksson et al., 2015). Not all entrepreneurs will be willing to take on the risks inherent in internationalization and/or will have the necessary resources for this process. In this sense, digital marketing can be a way to minimize obstacles in this process and leverage the effectiveness of internationalization strategies.

Digital tools combined with traditional marketing lead to better business performance, so the potential contributions and benefits are widely recognized (e.g., Fortes et al., 2016; Lee & Falahat, 2019; Lee et al., 2019). In this context, digital marketing is an essential strategy for companies in all business sectors, including B2B markets, as demonstrated by contributions in the literature (e.g., Chong et al., 2016; Lee & Falahat, 2019; Watson et al., 2018) and may facilitate and/or enhance internationalization strategies (Limani & Broja, 2020), playing an important role in the survival, development, and success of small and new companies and new investments in the markets (Hervé et al., 2020; Hervé et al., 2021; Teixeira et al., 2018).

While the literature highlights the effectiveness of digital marketing for the Business to Consumer (B2C) market, its adoption and performance in Business to Business (B2B) markets need further research. In addition, most studies on the contributions of digital marketing in enhancing internationalization are focused on small and medium-sized enterprises. This article aims to fill these gaps by exploring the ability of digital marketing to leverage the internationalization strategies of B2B companies. Thus, two research objectives were established: (i) to understand the attitudes of those responsible for B2B companies towards digital marketing in their internationalization strategies; (ii) to explore the preference and effectiveness of digital marketing channels to enter and enhance the presence in international markets.

This article addresses a topic that is still little considered in the academic literature, as it analyzes the use of digital marketing to promote internationalization in the B2B context and the attitudes and difficulties faced by companies that neglect digital marketing when approaching global markets. The insights of B2B managers offer empirical evidence that can inspire other managers and provide relevant suggestions for future research.

This article consists of 4 main sections. After this introduction, the second section is dedicated to the literature review, offering a synthesis of the most relevant contributions to internationalization strategies and, in particular, the adoption and benefits of digital marketing by B2B companies for this purpose. Subsequently, section 3 describes the methodology conducted by the authors in conducting the empirical study and section 4 presents and discusses the main results of the empirical study. The article culminates in section 4 with the conclusion, identifying its main limitations and suggesting possibilities for future research.

## 2. Literature review

The literature review focuses on two main subtopics: (i) opportunities offered by the internet in internationalization strategies; (ii) the adoption and contributions of digital marketing in B2B companies.

### 2.1. Opportunities offered by the internet in internationalization strategies

The internationalization of companies consists of their involvement in international markets, operating within the foreign market. This internationalization process can be carried out in several ways: exporting, licensing, joint ventures, and establishment of subsidiaries, among others (Johanson & Vahlne, 1990). Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), especially in developed regions, often internationalize to gain knowledge, adopt innovative practices, and improve their overall performance (Boermans & Roelfsema, 2016). According to Cuervo-Cazurra et al. (2015), a company's international expansion is driven by four reasons: to sell more, in which the company exploits the existing resources at home and obtains better conditions from the host country; buy better, in which the company exploits existing resources abroad and avoids poor conditions in the country of origin; upgrade, in which the company exploits new resources, and obtains better conditions from the host country; and escape, in which the company exploits new resources and avoids the poor conditions of the country of origin.

The diffusion of the internet, the development of information and communication technologies, and advances in digital technology facilitate the internationalization process of companies in various areas (Bell & Loane, 2010; Jean & Kim, 2020; Ramoniené et al., 2015). The internet enables all companies, in the B2B and B2C context, and from its inception, to improve their activities in the international market and explore new international opportunities. This has the advantage of allowing companies to reach new markets/customers, constituting a complementarity or even an alternative to physical presence (Sinkovics et al., 2013), making it possible to reduce some costs and risks inherent to internationalization. Nowadays, any company that intends to start and develop an internationalization process needs to understand the benefits and potential of the digitalization (Hervé et al., 2020; Hervé et al., 202; Lee et al., 2019; Limani & Broja, 2020).

The internet facilitates the execution of many day-to-day activities of companies, and its use as a strategic tool has increased

strongly (Pezderka & Sinkovics, 2011). The widespread use of the Internet and the advancement in digital technology has provided the opportunity for companies to leverage their information processing resources and be globally connected (Sinkovics et al., 2013). According to Bell and Loane (2010), if initially the internet was described by the academic literature as an enabler for the internationalization of companies, allowing them to establish a global presence, obtain more information about international markets and communicate effectively with these markets, more recently the literature identifies it as a creator and driver of innovative international opportunities (Bell & Loane, 2010). Over time, the academic literature has developed research on the use of the internet and Web 2.0 for the internationalization of companies. Some more theoretical approaches seek to propose research models (e.g., Alrawi, 2007; Berthon et al., 2012; Buttriss & Wilkinson, 2003; Burakovs'kyj, & Voloshyn, 2021). At the same time, other authors have conducted empirical studies with the application of qualitative methodologies (e.g., Bell & Loane, 2010; Etemad et al., 2010; Mathews & Healy, 2007; Ojala et al., 2018) and quantitative methodologies (e.g., Bianchi & Mathews, 2016; Kim, 2019; Lal, 2004; Moon & Jain, 2007; Mostafa, et al., 2005; Sinkovics et al., 2013) to better understand this phenomenon.

The deliberate use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for internationalization purposes is called "internetization" by Bell et al. (2001) and "active online internationalization" by Yamin and Sinkovics (2006). Etemad, et al., (2010) state that "internetization" is a necessary condition for internationalization in the emerging economy, considering it as a process of adoption, diffusion and development of internet-based technologies that has been increasingly used for internationalization, especially by innovative companies.

## ***2.2. The adoption and contributions of digital marketing in B2B companies***

Digital marketing is a new marketing approach boosting traditional marketing with digital elements (Järvinen et al., 2012), namely websites, social networks, online stores, mobile applications, among others. These elements stand out as channels of communication with the customer and also as sales channels, and for allowing companies to reach their customers quickly. More recently, and as Puspaningrum (2020) points out, marketing has turned to social media, given that on these platforms companies establish closer relationships with the target audience, allowing them to influence the consumer's purchase decision-making processes and generate word-of-mouth communication. According to Torres (2012), for companies to be able to invest and define strategies, they have to previously identify the digital assets that their target audiences use the most, that is, the set of online points of contact between the company and its target audience.

Digitalization, and especially social media, has had important consequences for companies, products and brands (Muntinga et al., 2011). Digital marketing offers opportunities for SMEs to attract new customers and retain existing ones more effectively, as well as developments in digitalization, which, like social media, are positively related to the growth, performance and competitiveness of these companies (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Thus, it becomes evident that digital marketing is indispensable nowadays for any type of business, namely in B2B companies (Angelos et al., 2017). However, there are still differences in academic research and at the business level between B2B and B2C contexts.

Most of the academic literature focuses its studies on B2C companies (Iankova et al., 2019), highlighting themes such as customer acquisition, brand building, and purchase/post-purchase, while the academic literature in the B2B context is still scarce (Salo, 2017), being essentially directed towards segmentation, customer engagement, content provision, and lead nurturing (Vieira et al., 2019).

In the business environment, it is also noted that there is still some resistance to the adoption of digital marketing by B2B companies. The managers of these companies use social listening insufficiently in marketing activities, a practice that would be peculiarly advantageous both in the identification of business opportunities and in the recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of brands (Angelos et al., 2017). These managers still have some uncertainty about the relevance of some digital marketing tools and consider their adoption as more challenging and demanding compared to B2C companies (Iankova et al., 2019).

Digital marketing is an essential strategy for companies in all business sectors, including B2B markets, as demonstrated by recent contributions in the literature (e.g., Chong et al., 2016; Lee & Falahat, 2019; Watson et al., 2018) and may facilitate and/or enhance internationalization strategies. However, some studies show that companies do not use the full potential of new digital tools and are consequently not benefiting from the opportunities they offer (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

Despite the clear recognition of the opportunities offered by the internet in internationalization processes and the positive indicators of the importance of digital channels in B2B companies, there are still some barriers at the business level that need further study and that require academic research in this context.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative methodology, through in-depth interviews with 15 managers of Portuguese B2B companies who had international experience or intended to expand internationally. The methodology was considered the most appropriate, meeting the defined objectives. In addition, it has been found that this methodology has been used in studies on similar topics conducted in other countries (e.g., Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015).

For this purpose, non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used. However, it was ensured that the sample was diversified with regard to the company's B2B business sector, size expressed by the number of employees and seniority in the Portuguese market (from startups to companies established in the market for several decades). Regarding the profile of the interviewees, they held management positions in companies (e.g., General Manager, Marketing Director, Sales Director, International Sales Director) and had significant professional experience. Table 1 presents the characterization of the sample.

These interviews were conducted face-to-face during October and November 2018 and recorded in audio format with the informed consent of the participants. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed in full and the data were qualitatively analyzed based on content analysis.

Table 1 – Sample characterization

Enterprise	Sector B2B	Company Seniority (years old)	Number of collaborators	Internationalization	Digital Presence
E#1	Metalworking	25-49	>100	27 years old	Website only
E#2	Mould production	6-24	> 100	16 years	Website & Facebook
E#3	Industrial Automation	< 5	< 10	Since the beginning	Website & Facebook
E#4	Mirrors	25-49	50-100	24 years old	Website & Facebook
E#5	Lighting Products	< 5	50-100	1 year	Website, LinkedIn & Facebook
E#6	Research & Development	< 5	< 10	In preparation	Website & Blog
E#7	Tube Transformation	25-49	>100	Since the beginning	Site, Blog, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram & Pinterest
E#8	Cleaning products	25-49	<10	In preparation	Website & Facebook
E#9	Computer science	6-24	>100	10 years	Website only
E#10	Technology Products/Services	6-24	10 to 50	In preparation	Site, Facebook & LinkedIn
E#11	Lighting Products	< 5	50-100	Since the beginning	Website, Facebook & Instagram
E#12	Ceramic products	25-49	> 100	Since the beginning	Website only
E#13	Ceramic products	6-24	>100	Since the beginning	Website, Facebook, Youtube & Instagram
E#14	Assembly and painting services	6-24	50-100	7 years	Website only
E#15	Fish Processing	>50	>100	In preparation	Site, Facebook, LinkedIn & Instagram

Source: Own elaboration, 2023

Concerning the characterization of the sample in terms of international presence, as previously mentioned, most B2B companies that participated in this study operate in international markets, with five companies having an international presence since the beginning of their activity (E#3, E#7, E#11, E#12 and E#13), and four companies are still in the preparation phase of the internationalization process (E#6, E#8, E#10 and E#15). Regarding the digital presence, four of the fifteen companies have only the institutional website and do not have any presence on social networks (E#1, E#9, E#12 and E#14). The most common social networking platform used by participants is Facebook (used by 10 companies), followed equally by LinkedIn and Instagram (each used by 4 companies).

## 4. Results

This section presents the results obtained from the thematic analysis of the interviews' content and is subdivided into two main subtopics: (i) perceptions regarding the digital presence of B2B companies, (ii) the effectiveness of digital marketing in their internationalization strategies.

### 4.1. Insights into the digital presence of B2B companies

As previously identified, four of the companies that participated in this study stand out for the fact that they are digitally present and have only the institutional website, namely because they consider that social networks are only suitable for B2C companies.

Still, this opinion was also shared by managers of companies with some presence on social networks, who considered that this type of presence was not an asset for B2B businesses:

*"We have social networks even though we don't give them much importance. (...) Social networks are aimed at the final audience (...) and we don't target [that audience]." (E#4)*

In some cases, perceptions of social media have been particularly negative. For example, the respondent from Company 14 considered that these are, in general, dangerous for brands, as they quickly disseminate any negative feedback, which can seriously affect their reputation:

*"I believe that a company's presence on a social network does not offer any advantages, it brings disadvantages, (...) Bad news, to say the least, in seconds you can tear down a brand, you know? In seconds he can knock down a mark." (E#14)*

However, the vast majority of the companies participating in this study have a presence on social media, especially Facebook. For these companies, it is unthinkable that digital channels should not be used in the daily life of the company:

*"It's crucial, there's no other possibility, nowadays the dynamics of the old salesperson who walks with the folder from house to house or client to client has ceased to exist, the first research and 90% of the work is on the internet, .... For example, those in the purchasing department that's what they do. They are locked in an office researching on the internet and contacting various suppliers worldwide, just like we demand from our promoters, you have the whole world to explore, we also demand that from purchases, we have the whole world to explore." (E#7)*

These results are in line with the literature, which recognizes that digital marketing is essential for the development of their businesses (e.g., Chong et al., 2016; Jean & Kim, 2020; Lee & Falahat, 2019; Watson et al., 2018). However, only a few participants identify the potential of social networks to establish closer relationships with target audiences (Puspaningrum, 2020), confirming that investment in these strategies depends on the prior identification of the platforms used by target audiences (Torres, 2012).

### 4.2. Effectiveness of digital marketing in internationalization strategies

The main form of internationalization used by the participants' companies was exports and direct investment.

Some participants considered that the internet does not offer any benefit for the internationalization strategy (e.g., E#9), and several assumed that they have doubts about the advantages of digital marketing for the internationalization of companies (e.g., E#1, E#10). However, several participants considered that having a website and presence in social media marketing fosters and enhances internationalization, both by traffic to the website (E#6) and by facilitating contact with current and potential customers (E#5).

Indeed, the main advantages of digital marketing for internationalization, as highlighted by the participating companies, are related to the speed and ease of contact with external partners (suppliers and/or customers), as illustrated in the following statement:

*"Because it allows you to get in touch with companies in an easier way, whether it's by Skype interview, videoconferences, or information sending, exchanging information. It is one of the ways that can make business easier." (E#5)*

Other participants added that digital tools are key to attracting new international customers and retaining current ones:

*"The website is obviously one of the biggest tools we have to be able to keep in touch with our customers, attract new customers... It's the first impression for someone who is out and has no way to contact us, it's key." (E#11)*

Other opinions also highlight the ability to leverage internationalization processes and minimize barriers:

"There are many international customers who have met us through the website. That's going to power everything up. If we have information such as who we work with, highlighting that you will be working more and more internationally, the more likely international companies are to contact you." (E#12)

These results are in agreement with Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) and Angelos et al. (2017) who highlight the positive impacts of the competitiveness and performance of companies provided by digital channels, facilitating contact with new and existing customers. The results indicate that such advantages are also evident in contexts of internationalization. However, as also pointed out by the literature, some resistance to the adoption of digital channels is evident (Angelos et al., 2017), and it is possible to infer that many Portuguese SMEs are not taking advantage of the full potential of digital tools, as suggested by Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015), namely because they do not understand their adaptability to the B2B context, which limits their adoption and investment in these strategies.

## 4. Conclusion

This article explores a topic that is still little considered in the academic literature, as it analyzes the use of digital marketing to promote internationalization in the B2B context and the attitudes and difficulties faced by companies that neglect digital marketing when approaching global markets.

The results show that some participants are skeptical about the effectiveness of digital marketing in the B2B context, but most recognize the role of digital channels in attracting international customers, facilitating relationship management and justifying new investments.

From this study, it is possible to highlight two types of implications for management. For B2B companies that intend to develop internationalization channels, it is recommended to study both the preferences of their current and potential customers regarding digital communication channels, as well as extra care to identify which sources of digital information and the platforms usually used by them to collect information and increase their knowledge about potential suppliers and alternatives of products and services. In this way, it will be possible to identify which digital marketing platforms and tools can make sense to approach the target audiences. For professionals and companies in consulting, communication, and other services related to the use of digital channels, it is recommended that they clearly communicate the benefits of digital channels for B2B companies, namely in internationalization processes.

The insights of B2B managers provide empirical evidence, which can inspire other managers and offer relevant suggestions for future research. With information and concrete examples of performance and results obtained through digital channels, it will be possible to address the fears and skepticism of those responsible for B2B companies regarding digital marketing strategies for their business sectors.

Even though it is a convenience sample, not representative of Portuguese companies, the results of this study allowed us to obtain interesting clues that can help entrepreneurs who intend to explore the potential of digital marketing to expand their business to international markets, and provide other researchers interested in the subject with possible topics that could be the target of further research.

As more empirical studies on digital marketing strategies for B2B companies are essential, it is urgent to address issues related to their effectiveness, namely in attracting leads, the impact of digital communication, including, through social networks, the B2B purchase decision process, and the effects of interaction with B2B customers on their satisfaction and loyalty.

## Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by the Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies (UIDB/04058/2020) + (UIDP/04058/2020), funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia. This article was presented and included in the proceedings of ICIEMC - International Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Marketing and Consumer Behaviour.

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