



# Driving SME internationalization through digital transformation strategies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize the existing empirical evidence on digital platform strategies adopted by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) for internationalization, to map the types of platforms used, the strategic approaches employed, the factors mediating and moderating their effectiveness, and the emerging trends reshaping the digital internationalization landscape.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 protocol. A keyword-based search of the Scopus database retrieved peer-reviewed, open-access, English-language articles in their final publication stage, published between 2015 and 2025. Fifty-nine articles met all inclusion criteria and were subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The theoretical foundation draws on the Resource-Based View (RBV), dynamic capabilities theory, institutional theory, and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework.

**Findings** – Five themes were identified. First, social platforms consistently outperform commercial platforms in driving internationalization outcomes; hybrid strategies that combine owned digital assets with selective third-party platform engagement are the most effective approach. Second, business model innovation (BMI) mediates the platform-performance relationship, functioning as an absorptive pathway that converts platform capabilities into sustained international performance gains. Third, managerial digital competencies and organizational culture are foundational prerequisites for successful digital internationalization. Fourth, regional infrastructure, institutional environment, and sector type significantly moderate platform effectiveness, with platforms serving a compensatory role in weak institutional contexts. Fifth, AI, blockchain, and FinTech extend SME platform capabilities considerably but face significant barriers to adoption.

**Research limitations** – The review is limited to a single database (Scopus), English-language publications, and open-access articles in the final publication stage, which may have excluded relevant studies. The predominance of manufacturing- and technology-intensive SME contexts in the reviewed literature limits the generalizability to service-oriented and informal-economy SMEs. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies; adaptive digital maturity models that integrate ecosystem dynamics; mixed-methods investigations of platform trust-building mechanisms in weak institutional environments; and SME-specific Industry 4.0 implementation frameworks.

**Implications** – For SME practitioners, the findings recommend prioritizing investment in social platforms, pairing platform adoption with deliberate business model reconfiguration, and adopting hybrid digital strategies. For policymakers, developing an integrated digital ecosystem that addresses connectivity infrastructure, digital literacy, and gender equity is essential. Platform providers should co-design SME-friendly solutions that address skill, financial, and integration barriers. Theoretically, the study advances dynamic capabilities and institutional theories by repositioning BMI as an absorptive pathway and documenting the dual compensatory-efficiency role of platforms across institutional contexts.

**Originality** – This review is among the first to systematically synthesize the multi-dimensional literature on digital platform strategies and SME internationalization across commercial, social, hybrid, and emerging platform types within a single integrative framework. It contributes new theoretical insights by positioning BMI as an absorptive pathway, establishing the superiority of social over commercial

platforms, and documenting environmental dynamism as a boundary condition on intellectual capital conversion. It further advances understanding of how platforms compensate for institutional voids in developing and emerging market contexts.

**Keywords:** Digital Platform Strategies, SME Internationalization, Business Model Innovation, Digital Resilience.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The rapid movement of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped the global business landscape, creating new opportunities and challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) seeking to expand beyond domestic markets. Digital platforms have emerged as central instruments for SME internationalization. Through these platforms, SMEs can now access global markets, overcome traditional resource constraints, and engage in knowledge sharing and value co-creation in ways that were previously unavailable to firms of their size (Luu et al., 2026; Nahar & Alam, 2026; Zhang et al., 2025).

Historically, internationalizing a business required substantial financial capital, extensive managerial expertise, and established physical networks in target markets. These requirements effectively put international expansion out of reach for many SMEs, which typically operate with limited resources compared to large multinational corporations. However, the proliferation of e-commerce platforms, social media networks, cloud-based collaboration tools, and interactive digital platforms has significantly lowered the barriers to market entry (Bargoni et al., 2024; Malhotra & Mishra, 2023). Today, an SME in Southeast Asia can reach customers in Europe through platforms such as Alibaba or Amazon, while simultaneously building brand awareness and customer relationships via Instagram (Jin & Hurd, 2018; Pires & Santos, 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic further expedited this change. SMEs that had already adopted digital platforms showed greater resilience and adaptability as physical trade routes were disrupted and in-person commercial interactions became more difficult (Lee et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). Based on the findings of Zhang et al. (2025) and Su et al. (2022), SMEs in China that consistently adopt information technology exhibit higher export intensity and better adaptability to economic shocks. This data emphasizes the strategic significance of digital platforms as foundational infrastructure for long-term global growth as well as tools for efficiency.

Research on digital platform strategies for SME internationalization spans a wide range of platform types and strategic approaches. Commercial platforms enable direct market access, cross-border transactions, and supply chain integration (Chen et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). Social platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu, serve different strategic but equally critical functions: they facilitate marketing, customer engagement, emotional connection, and network building, and studies consistently show that social platforms tend to yield stronger internationalization outcomes than purely commercial platforms (Ragazou et al., 2022). Beyond these established categories, emerging platform types are increasingly enabling SMEs to engage in value co-creation, ecosystem collaboration, and advanced market intelligence (Mohamad et al., 2022; Ragazou et al., 2022).

A growing body of empirical evidence supports the adoption of hybrid digital strategies among SMEs. This approach combines ownership of proprietary digital assets, including company websites, mobile applications, and CRM systems, with selective engagement on third-party partner platforms. This approach allows firms to balance scalability and global reach with operational control and brand consistency (Pires & Santos, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Business model innovation plays a critical mediating role in this process: SMEs that successfully adapt their business models to leverage digital platform capabilities tend to outperform those that adopt platforms without corresponding organizational change (Anwar et al., 2024; Dung & Dung, 2024).

Grginović (2025) and Boateng & Olexová (2024) highlight that the effectiveness of digital platforms is neither automatic nor universal. Their findings consistently identify managerial digital competencies, including digital synchronization, virtual networking, and agile leadership, as foundational prerequisites for successful digital internationalization. Organizational culture, leadership commitment, and a firm's overall digital maturity all moderate the extent to which a company can translate platform access into actual international performance (Baojing et al., 2024; Espina-Romero et al., 2025). Higher levels of internal digitalization are generally associated with greater benefits from platform adoption. Paradoxically, however, Zhang et al. (2025) found that strong internal digitalization can, in certain circumstances, limit the gains from commercial platform use by creating competing organizational priorities and resource tensions.

External determinants play a critical role, as regional and institutional frameworks significantly moderate the adoption of digital platforms and dictate the resulting internationalization outcomes for SMEs. Studies from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Sub-Saharan Africa illustrate how the quality of digital infrastructure, government policy support, and the strength of institutional environments moderate the relationship between platform use and export performance (Edeh et al., 2025; Joseph et al., 2025; Su et al., 2022). In regions with weaker institutional frameworks, digital platforms often serve a compensatory function, helping SMEs overcome market uncertainties and entry barriers that would otherwise be prohibitive (Joseph et al., 2025; Nahar & Alam, 2026). The capacity of digital platforms to drive international expansion is primarily channelled through a firm's intellectual capital, specifically its human, relational, and innovation-based assets. Nevertheless, this mediating effect is susceptible to external conditions, as high environmental dynamism can attenuate the strength of the relationship between these digital capabilities and international outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2022; Le et al., 2024).

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital platform strategies for SME internationalization by examining these strategies in detail. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from the Resource-Based View (RBV), institutional theory, dynamic capabilities, and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) model, the study adopts an integrative perspective that accounts for both internal organizational factors and external contextual moderators (Ahmed et al., 2022; Low et al., 2022; Nahar & Alam, 2026). This approach responds to calls in the literature for more comprehensive, context-sensitive research that moves beyond single-framework analyses and isolated case studies (Anwar et al., 2024; Fernandes et al., 2023).

## METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to systematically examine the literature on digital platform strategies for SME internationalization. This methodological approach was chosen to identify core concepts, emerging trends, and prevailing challenges in integrating digital platforms into SMEs' internationalization strategies. The review followed a transparent and replicable protocol guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021), involving the following steps:

1. The primary database searched was Scopus (Elsevier), selected for its broad coverage of internationally peer-reviewed journals in international business, digital entrepreneurship, innovation management, and information systems.
2. A keyword-based search strategy was implemented using terms such as "digital platform," "e-commerce," "social media," "digital transformation," "internationalization," "cross-border," and "Global Market." Search queries were constructed using Boolean operators AND and OR applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields.
3. Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed articles with final publication status and open access availability, published between 2015 and 2025, written in English, and focusing on digital platform strategies and/or internationalization within the SME context.
4. Exclusion criteria eliminated grey literature, opinion pieces, book chapters, conference proceedings without peer review, articles not written in English, publications outside the 2015–2025 timeframe, articles with non-final publication status (e.g., articles in press), non-open access publications, and studies not directly addressing digital platforms or SME internationalization.
5. The selected literature was analyzed through thematic analysis to extract key insights on strategic approaches, implementation challenges, and real-world outcomes associated with digital platform-based internationalization (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Table 1.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>
Publication Status	Final stage (published articles)	Articles in press, preprints, or retracted publications
Access Type	Open access	Non-open-access or paywalled publications
Time Period	2015–2025	Publications before 2015 or after 2025
Language	English	Non-English language publications
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Book chapters, editorials, grey literature, opinion pieces, and non-peer-reviewed conference papers
Topical Relevance	Studies addressing digital platform strategies and/or SME internationalization	Studies that do not address SMEs or are not relevant to digital platform use or the internationalization context.
Methodological Quality	Identifiable research design and analytical method	Studies without a discernible or verifiable methodology

Source: Developed by the authors (2026)

After selecting the literature, a thematic synthesis of the studies was conducted. The literature was organized based on the interactions among digital platform adoption, business model innovation, and SMEs' internationalization outcomes, highlighting recurring themes, obstacles, and facilitators that shape the execution of digital platform strategies. This analytical approach yielded a refined understanding of the relationship between digital platforms and competitive international performance, particularly in light of regional and institutional dynamics.

To present findings clearly, results are organized within a thematic framework that describes relationships among platform types, strategic approaches, organizational capabilities, and internationalization outcomes. This structured representation explains critical factors that influence SME digital internationalization and highlights practical implications for enhancing competitive positioning through platform-based strategies.

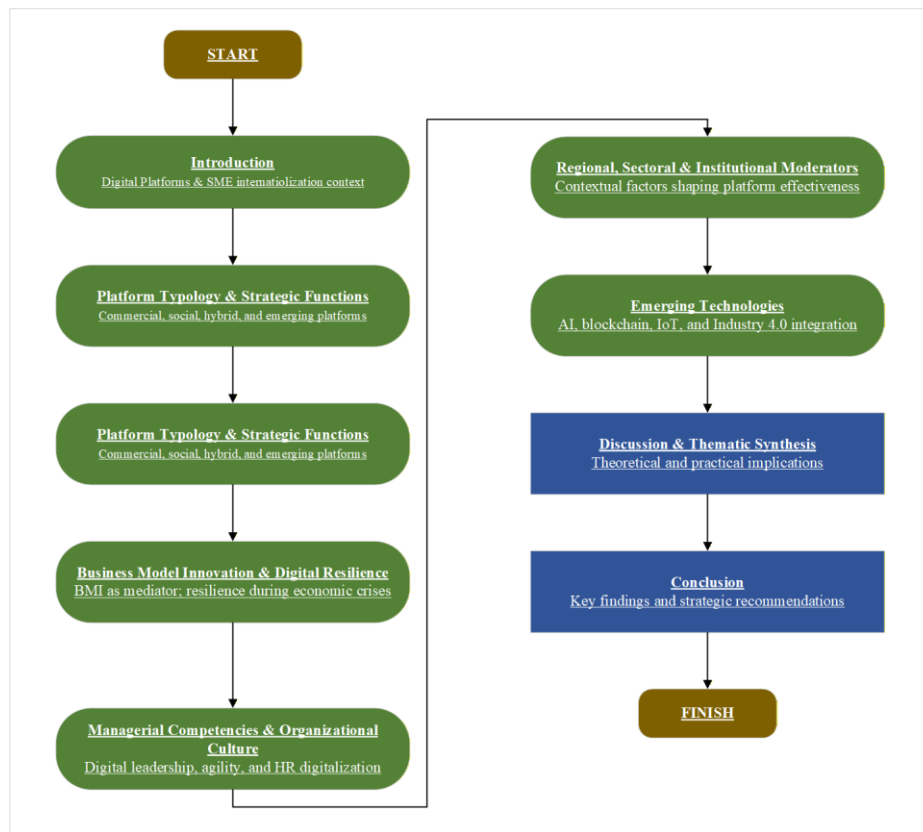


Figure 1. Flowchart of the research

The study process follows the flow depicted in Figure 1, beginning with an introduction to digital platforms and their role in SME internationalization. The review then addresses the types and strategic functions of digital platforms, followed by an examination of managerial competencies, organizational culture, and contextual moderators. Case-based insights are integrated to illustrate real-world applications, followed by the identification of research gaps and emerging trends. Finally, the study synthesizes findings into strategic recommendations for SME practitioners, policymakers, and future researchers.

Table 2. PRISMA Protocol Stages Applied in This Review

Stage	Activity	Output
Identification	Keyword-based search conducted in Scopus using Boolean operators across title, abstract, and keyword fields	Initial pool of articles retrieved from the Scopus database (n = records identified)
Screening	Titles and abstracts reviewed against inclusion and exclusion criteria; duplicates removed	Refined list of potentially relevant articles after title/abstract screening and deduplication
Eligibility	Full-text assessment of methodological quality, topical relevance, final publication status, and open access availability	Articles meeting all quality and relevance standards after full-text review
Inclusion	Thematic synthesis of all articles passing the full eligibility assessment	Final set of 59 articles used in analysis and discussion

Source: Adapted from Page et al. (2021)

Through this detailed methodology and thorough analysis, this study aims to elucidate the complex dynamics between digital platform strategies and SME internationalization. By critically examining this relationship across diverse regional and sectoral contexts, the review provides

valuable insights to inform evidence-based policy, academic discourse, and the formulation of practical strategies, ultimately supporting a more digitally enabled and internationally competitive SME ecosystem.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A systematic search of the Scopus database identified 59 studies published between 2015 and 2025 that met all inclusion criteria. Specifically, the search retrieved an initial pool of articles during identification, which was reduced through title and abstract screening, followed by full-text eligibility assessment, yielding a final corpus of 59 peer-reviewed, open-access, English-language articles in their final publication stage. The thematic analysis of these studies produced five overarching themes, each capturing a distinct dimension of digital platform strategies for SME internationalization. The following subsections present the key findings organized by theme.

**Table 3.** Summary of Key Findings By Theme

Theme	Core Finding	Key References
Platform typology & strategic functions	Social platforms outperform commercial platforms in driving internationalization; hybrid models optimize scalability and brand control.	(Mohamad et al., 2022; Pires & Santos, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025)
BMI & digital resilience	BMI mediates the platform-performance link; strong internal digitalization can constrain commercial platform benefits	(Anwar et al., 2024; Dung & Dung, 2024; Luu et al., 2026)
Managerial competencies & organizational culture	Digital synchronization and agile leadership are foundational; organizational culture partially mediates the success of digital transformation.	(Baojing et al., 2024; Espina-Romero et al., 2025; Grginović, 2025)
Regional, sectoral & institutional moderators	Infrastructure gaps, institutional voids, and sector type significantly moderate platform effectiveness and internationalization outcomes	(Astuti, 2025; Edeh et al., 2025; Nahar & Alam, 2026)
Emerging technologies	AI, blockchain, and FinTech extend platform capabilities but face significant barriers to SME-level adoption.	(Cotrino et al., 2020; Enshassi et al., 2024; Rakshit et al., 2022)

Source: Authors' thematic synthesis (2026)

The findings synthesized from the reviewed literature reveal a complex and evolving landscape of digital platform strategies for SME internationalization. Across diverse geographic, sectoral, and institutional contexts, digital platforms consistently emerge as both enablers and constraints, reshaping how SMEs access global markets, build competitive capabilities, and sustain international growth. This discussion critically examines five interrelated themes identified through thematic analysis: (1) the typology and strategic functions of digital platforms; (2) the mediating role of business model innovation and digital resilience; (3) the influence of managerial competencies and organizational culture; (4) the moderating effects of regional, sectoral, and institutional contexts; and (5) the emerging role of advanced technologies in reshaping SME internationalization. Each theme is discussed in relation to the theoretical frameworks underpinning this review, including the Resource-Based View (RBV), institutional theory, dynamic capabilities, and the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework.

## Typology and Strategic Functions of Digital Platforms

A central finding of this review is that SMEs do not rely on a single category of digital platform but instead draw upon a diverse portfolio of platform types, each serving distinct strategic functions in the internationalization process. Commercial platforms, including e-commerce marketplaces and B2B procurement networks, primarily enable direct market access, cross-border transaction processing, and supply chain integration (Chen et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). Social platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu serve fundamentally different but equally critical purposes: they facilitate brand awareness, customer engagement, emotional connection, and network building across cultural boundaries (Brandão et al., 2019; Chauhan & Mehra, 2025). Emerging platform types, including Digital Interactive Platforms (DIPs), blockchain-based marketplaces, and AI-driven analytics environments, are increasingly enabling SMEs to pursue value co-creation, ecosystem collaboration, and advanced market intelligence (Mohamad et al., 2022; Ragazou et al., 2022).

A particularly significant finding, consistent across multiple studies, is that social platforms consistently demonstrate stronger positive effects on SME internationalization outcomes than commercial platforms (Zhang et al., 2025). This finding challenges the conventional assumption that e-commerce adoption is the primary driver of SME global expansion. The superiority of social platforms likely reflects their capacity to bridge cultural distances, build relational trust, and enable bidirectional knowledge sharing with international customers, functions that purely transactional commercial platforms are less equipped to fulfill (Brandão et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2024). From an RBV perspective, social platforms generate intangible relational assets, including social capital, brand equity, and cross-cultural market knowledge, that are difficult to imitate and therefore contribute more durably to competitive international performance (Grginović, 2025).

The literature further supports the strategic advantages of hybrid digital models, in which SMEs combine proprietary digital assets such as company websites, CRM systems, and mobile applications with selective engagement on third-party partner platforms (Pires & Santos, 2025). This approach balances the scalability and global reach afforded by platforms like Alibaba and Amazon with the operational control and brand consistency enabled by owned digital infrastructure. A growing body of empirical evidence suggests that hybrid strategies are particularly effective in complex markets where regulatory requirements and cultural nuances demand localized adaptation alongside global platform presence (Batuparan et al., 2025; Jin & Hurd, 2018). These findings are consistent with dynamic capabilities theory, which emphasizes that superior international performance results not from static resource endowments but from the firm's ability to reconfigure and integrate diverse digital assets in response to market opportunities and constraints (Aghazadeh et al., 2024).

Collectively, these findings on platform typology and strategic functions directly address the first research objective of this SLR: to map the types of digital platforms used by SMEs for internationalization and the strategic approaches employed. The evidence clearly establishes that a diversified, hybrid platform portfolio anchored by strong social platform engagement represents the most effective strategic configuration for SME internationalization.

## Business Model Innovation, Digital Resilience, and Internationalization Performance

The reviewed literature consistently identifies business model innovation (BMI) as a critical mediating mechanism through which digital platform adoption translates into improved internationalization outcomes. SMEs that merely adopt digital platforms without corresponding adaptations to their value creation, delivery, and capture logic tend to achieve limited performance gains (Anwar et al., 2024; Dung & Dung, 2024). By contrast, firms that leverage digital platform capabilities to innovate their business models, for instance by transitioning from product-centric to service-oriented offerings, introducing subscription-based models, or developing platform-

mediated co-creation arrangements with international partners, demonstrate substantially stronger export performance and market penetration (Luu et al., 2026).

This finding extends the theoretical understanding of the digitalization-internationalization nexus in an important direction. Rather than treating digital platform adoption as a direct antecedent of international performance, the evidence positions BMI as an absorptive pathway that conditions the effectiveness with which digital resources are converted into international competitive advantage (Anwar et al., 2024; Luu et al., 2026). Complementary assets, including entrepreneurial orientation, innovation culture, and intellectual capital, further strengthen this mediation, suggesting that BMI does not operate in isolation but rather as part of a broader organisational capability ecosystem (Khattak, 2022; Li et al., 2025)

Digital resilience emerges as a related and equally important construct. Studies drawing on longitudinal panel data from Chinese SMEs demonstrate that digital platform capability and resilience fully mediate the relationship between digital resource endowments and firm growth (Aghazadeh et al., 2024). During economic disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs with higher levels of digital resilience, characterized by the ability to rapidly reconfigure digital assets, maintain customer relationships through virtual channels, and adapt logistics through platform-based supply chain tools, demonstrated markedly greater survival and recovery rates (Su et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the argument, grounded in dynamic capabilities theory, that digital resilience represents a higher-order organizational capability rather than a static technical attribute (Omri, 2026; Wang et al., 2024).

However, the relationship between internal digitalization and commercial platform performance is not uniformly positive. A counterintuitive yet empirically robust finding from panel studies of Chinese SMEs (2009–2023) is that strong internal digitalization can, in certain circumstances, constrain the benefits of commercial platforms by generating competing organizational priorities and resource tensions (Zhang et al., 2025). This finding highlights the importance of strategic alignment between internal digital capabilities and external platform engagement, cautioning against assuming that greater digitalization uniformly yields better platform-mediated internationalization outcomes. Firms must therefore not only invest in digital capabilities but actively manage the interface between internal systems and external platform ecosystems to avoid capability conflicts that diminish returns.

### **Managerial Digital Competencies and Organizational Culture**

Consistent with the RBV framework, the reviewed literature identifies managerial digital competencies as a foundational requirement for successful digital platform-based internationalization. Digital synchronization, the ability to align digital tools and strategies with broader business objectives, virtual networking capabilities, and agile leadership styles, is consistently identified as the most critical managerial attribute in this context (Boateng & Olexová, 2024; Grginović, 2025) Firms led by managers with higher levels of digital literacy and entrepreneurial orientation demonstrate faster adoption of platform-based internationalization strategies, more effective management of cross-cultural digital engagements, and greater capacity for real-time strategic adaptation in response to market signals (Aliu et al., 2025; Hervé et al., 2020).

Organizational culture partially mediates the relationship between managerial digital competencies and digital transformation outcomes. A supportive organizational culture, characterized by leadership commitment to digital change, openness to experimentation, innovation orientation, and customer-centricity, creates the internal conditions necessary for digital platform strategies to generate competitive international advantages (Baojing et al., 2024; Espina-Romero et al., 2025). Importantly, the literature identifies a feedback dynamic between digital transformation and organizational culture: as SMEs deepen their engagement with digital platforms, organizational norms and routines are progressively reconfigured, thereby facilitating more

ambitious and sustained digital internationalization strategies. This virtuous cycle is consistent with the evolutionary perspective on dynamic capabilities, in which organizational learning continuously reshapes the firm's capacity for strategic adaptation (Cyfert et al., 2025).

Human resource digitalization, encompassing digital training programs, recruitment of digitally literate talent, and performance management systems oriented toward digital outcomes, plays an important mediating role between managerial competencies and organizational culture (Espina-Romero et al., 2025). This finding has significant implications for SME capacity building, as it suggests that investments in human capital development, rather than technology infrastructure alone, are likely to yield the most durable returns in terms of digital platform-based internationalization performance. The literature also highlights the role of digital leadership in mitigating technostress, an often-overlooked barrier to digital adoption, particularly salient in resource-constrained SME environments (Prihanto & Gunawan, 2025).

These findings speak directly to the SLR's objective of mapping the factors that moderate the effectiveness of digital platform strategies. Managerial digital competencies and organizational culture are not secondary concerns but foundational prerequisites; investing in platforms without corresponding leadership capability and cultural readiness substantially limits the returns on digital internationalization.

### **Regional, Sectoral, and Institutional Moderators**

One of the most consistently documented findings across the reviewed literature is that digital platform strategies for SME internationalization do not operate uniformly across contexts. Regional infrastructure endowments, institutional environments, and sector-specific characteristics all significantly moderate the relationship between platform adoption and internationalization outcomes, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive strategic frameworks (Edeh et al., 2025; Nahar & Alam, 2026).

At the regional level, studies from East Asia, particularly China and Vietnam, reveal that SMEs in more digitally developed eastern regions derive substantially greater benefits from e-commerce platform adoption than their counterparts in western regions, where digital infrastructure gaps and institutional uncertainty constrain platform effectiveness (Shang & Li, 2025). In Southeast Asian contexts, including Indonesia and Malaysia, government digital literacy programs and supportive policy frameworks have been shown to significantly moderate platform adoption rates and internationalization outcomes (Batuparan et al., 2025). In Oceanic contexts such as New Zealand and Australia, institutional and infrastructure challenges are more acute, leading successful SMEs to adopt hybrid strategies that combine global platform engagement with investment in local staff capable of navigating regulatory and cultural complexities (Jin & Hurd, 2018).

Institutional theory provides a compelling explanatory framework for these regional variations. In environments characterized by strong regulative, normative, and cognitive institutional pillars, digital platforms function primarily as efficiency-enhancing tools that support incremental international expansion. In weaker institutional environments, by contrast, digital platforms assume a compensatory role, enabling SMEs to bypass market-entry barriers, build credibility with international partners, and access global value chains that would otherwise remain inaccessible (Joseph et al., 2025; Nahar & Alam, 2026). This dual institutional role of digital platforms represents an important contribution to the internationalization theory literature, extending the Uppsala model's incremental internationalization logic to digitally mediated pathways.

Sectoral differences are equally pronounced. Creative industry SMEs, particularly in Indonesia, demonstrate early and intensive adoption of digital platforms, leveraging them to compensate for weak domestic institutional support and to rapidly access international creative markets (Astuti, 2025). Manufacturing SMEs, by contrast, tend to prioritize front-end digital tools such as e-commerce and social media for export market development. In contrast, back-end digital

integration of production and logistics systems lags considerably. Food and beverage SMEs increasingly leverage co-creation platforms and digital facilitators to differentiate products in international markets, while B2B-oriented SMEs in technology-intensive sectors rely more heavily on specialized procurement platforms and digital supply chain integration tools (Mohamad et al., 2022).

The moderating role of intellectual capital in the platform-internationalization relationship adds a further layer of complexity to this contextual picture. Human capital, relational capital, and innovation capital each mediate the conversion of digital platform capabilities into internationalization outcomes, but their effectiveness is sensitive to environmental dynamism (Ahmed et al., 2022; Le et al., 2024). In highly turbulent environments, the rapid pace of market change can erode intellectual capital faster than SMEs can accumulate it through engagement with digital platforms, creating a capability treadmill that constrains sustained international growth. These findings call for more nuanced theoretical models that account for the dynamic interplay between platform capabilities, intellectual capital formation, and environmental conditions.

These contextual findings directly address the SLR's objective of identifying emerging trends reshaping the digital internationalization landscape. The evidence establishes that no single platform strategy is universally effective; regional infrastructure, institutional environment, and sector type all shape what works, and future research and policy must account for this contextual variation.

### **Emerging Technologies and the Next Frontier of SME Digital Internationalization**

The reviewed literature identifies the integration of Industry 4.0 and emerging digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, the Internet of Things (IoT), and big data analytics, as an increasingly important frontier in SME digital internationalization strategies. These technologies are not merely incremental extensions of existing platform capabilities but represent qualitatively different enablers of international competitiveness, offering SMEs the potential to achieve levels of operational agility, market intelligence, and supply chain transparency previously available only to large multinational corporations (Ciasullo et al., 2022; Ragazou et al., 2022).

AI-driven marketing tools enable SMEs to personalize international customer interactions at scale, optimize pricing strategies across multiple markets in real time, and generate predictive insights about demand patterns in target markets (Enshassi et al., 2024). Blockchain technology offers particularly promising applications for SME internationalization in contexts where institutional trust deficits create barriers to cross-border transactions, by providing transparent, tamper-proof records of supply chain provenance, compliance documentation, and financial settlements (Rakshit et al., 2022). FinTech platforms further extend financial inclusion to resource-constrained SMEs by enabling access to cross-border payment infrastructure, trade finance, and working capital solutions that previously required costly banking intermediaries (Gopalan et al., 2022).

Despite the considerable promise of these technologies, the literature consistently documents significant barriers to adoption, particularly for SMEs in developing and emerging markets. Financial constraints, technical skill gaps, absence of SME-specific implementation frameworks, and the complexity of integrating advanced technologies with existing operational systems all substantially impede adoption (Cottrino et al., 2020; Shinde et al., 2025). The "lean first, then digitalize" principle advocated by Powell et al. (2021) suggests that SMEs are likely to achieve the greatest sustainable returns from adopting advanced technology when foundational process optimization precedes investments in digital transformation. Maturity models that integrate human-centered and sustainability dimensions are therefore needed to guide SMEs through sequenced, context-appropriate digitalization pathways (Hein-Pensel et al., 2023).

The omnichannel integration of digital platforms, particularly the convergence of AI, social commerce, and e-commerce functionalities within unified customer engagement architectures, represents a particularly significant emerging trend (Ciasullo et al., 2022). SMEs that achieve

omnichannel integration are better positioned to deliver consistent brand experiences across international markets, reduce customer acquisition costs, and continuously build the data assets needed to improve international marketing strategies. However, the organizational capabilities required for effective omnichannel management, including cross-functional digital coordination, real-time analytics interpretation, and agile content production, remain out of reach for many SMEs without targeted capacity-building support (Febriani et al., 2025).

These findings address the SLR's objective of mapping emerging trends reshaping digital internationalization. AI, blockchain, and FinTech represent the next frontier of SME platform capabilities, but realizing their potential requires sequenced capacity-building, SME-specific implementation frameworks, and targeted policy support to bridge the adoption gap that currently separates leading-edge firms from the broader SME population.

**Table 4.** Summary of key themes, findings, and theoretical implications

Theme	Key Finding	Theoretical Implication
Platform Typology	Social platforms outperform commercial platforms; hybrid models optimize scalability and control.	Extends RBV by positioning relational digital assets as superior sources of international competitive advantage
BMI & Digital Resilience	BMI mediates the platform-performance link; internal digitalization can constrain commercial platform benefits	Advances dynamic capabilities theory by framing BMI as an absorptive pathway for digital resource conversion
Managerial Competencies & Culture	Digital synchronization and agile leadership are foundational; organizational culture partially mediates transformation	Supports RBV emphasis on human capital as a non-imitable source of sustained competitive advantage
Contextual Moderators	Regional infrastructure, institutional environment, and sector shape platform effectiveness; platforms compensate for institutional voids	Extends institutional theory by documenting dual compensatory and efficiency-enhancing platform roles across institutional contexts
Emerging Technologies	AI, blockchain, and FinTech expand platform capabilities but face significant barriers to SME adoption.	Calls for SME-specific Industry 4.0 maturity models integrating human-centered and sustainability dimensions

Source: Developed by the authors based on thematic synthesis (2026)

## CONCLUSION

### Conclusion

This study reviewed 59 peer-reviewed open-access articles (2015–2025) to examine digital platform strategies for SME internationalization. Five key findings emerged. First, social platforms consistently outperform commercial platforms in driving internationalization outcomes, while hybrid strategies combining owned assets with third-party platforms offer the most effective balance of reach and control. Second, business model innovation is the critical mechanism through which platform capabilities translate into sustained international performance; platform adoption without organizational reconfiguration yields limited returns. Third, managerial digital competencies and a supportive organizational culture are foundational prerequisites, not secondary considerations. Fourth, regional infrastructure, institutional context, and sector type significantly moderate platform effectiveness, with platforms serving a compensatory function in weak institutional environments. Fifth, AI, blockchain, and FinTech extend SME capabilities considerably

but remain constrained by resource and skill gaps. These findings extend dynamic capabilities and institutional theory while offering actionable guidance for SME managers, policymakers, and platform providers seeking to strengthen digital pathways to international markets.

### Limitations

The review is limited to a single database (Scopus), English-language publications, and open-access articles in the final publication stage, potentially excluding relevant studies. The predominance of manufacturing- and technology-intensive SME contexts in the reviewed literature limits the generalizability to service-oriented and informal-economy SMEs. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies; adaptive digital maturity models that integrate ecosystem dynamics; mixed-methods investigations of platform trust-building mechanisms in weak institutional environments; and SME-specific Industry 4.0 implementation frameworks.

### Research Implications

#### Practical Implications

For SME practitioners, the findings recommend prioritizing investment in social platforms, pairing platform adoption with deliberate business model reconfiguration, and adopting hybrid digital strategies. For policymakers, developing an integrated digital ecosystem that addresses connectivity infrastructure, digital literacy, and gender equity is essential. Platform providers should co-design SME-friendly solutions that address skill, financial, and integration barriers.

#### Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study advances dynamic capabilities and institutional theories in several ways. Repositioning business model innovation as an absorptive pathway reframes how digital resources are converted into an international competitive advantage. The documentation of the dual compensatory-efficiency role of platforms across institutional contexts extends the Uppsala model's incremental internationalization logic to digitally mediated pathways. The establishment of social platform superiority over commercial platforms challenges prevailing assumptions in the digitalization-internationalization literature and opens new avenues for RBV-grounded research on intangible relational assets.

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