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THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION ON EXPORTING

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The impact of digitalization on exporting

International business and marketing researchers have a long history of exploring issues related to firm exporting. Exporting is the most popular form of international involvement in all countries around the world and is often encouraged by policymakers because it has a significant impact on domestic income and employment. Past research has explored issues like differences between exporters and non-exporters (Haddoud et al., 2021), barriers to exporting (Brouthers et al, 2009), how policymakers increase exporting through trade promotion activities (Wilkinson & Brouthers, 2006), country or market selection (Brouthers & Nakos, 2005), the choice of export channel (He, Brouthers & Filatotchev, 2013; Li, He & Sousa, 2017), and export performance (Chen, Sousa & He, 2016). These studies have provided valuable insights into how managers and policymakers can improve exporting. But recent changes in digital technology have introduced new types of competitors (digital businesses) and are changing the way businesses operate and internationalize (Katsikeas, Leonidou & Zeriti, 2020). In this special issue we explore how digitalization is impacting exporting.

Does digitalization encourage more firms to export? One critical issue that has just begun to be explored is whether digitalization will increase the number of firms exporting. Of course, policymakers hope this is the case since greater exports lead to improved balance of payments, greater domestic employment and increased tax revenue. But firm managers also like exporting because it is a relatively inexpensive way to expand sales, increase the customer base, and potentially improve profits. Recent digital research has begun exploring these issues with papers like Añón Higón and Bonvin (2024), Gong, He and Lengler (2024) and Quarato, Pini, and Positano (2020).

Does digitalization decrease barriers to exporting or increase them? While digitalization promises to open the world to all firms, the reality appears to be very different. Digitalization has decreased some barriers to exporting, reducing the costs and complexity of dealing in foreign markets by being a complementor on an established digital platform such as Amazon or Alibaba, making payments easier through online systems such as Paypal, and easing international communications and translations. Yet digitalization has also generated some additional barriers for firms wishing to internationalize (Meyer et al., 2023). For example, digitalization has generated increased competition as more firms enter foreign markets, barriers related to privacy of customer information, protection of customer rights and other societal differences (Demmers, Weihrauch & Mattison Thompson, 2022; Verbeke & Hutzschenreuter, 2021). How can firms deal with these changes in international barriers?

Does digitalization impact exporting of family firms differently than non-family firms? Family firm researchers have noted a number of differences between family and non-family firms related to international activities (Arregle, Chirico, Kano, Kundu, Majocchi & Schulze, 2021; Debellis, Rondi, Plakoyiannaki & De Massis, 2021). Family firms are often less international and participate less in international activities like joint ventures. But how does digitalization impact these family/non-family differences? Do new digital export channels increase the propensity of family firms to internationalize and protect their socio-emotional wealth?

Does digitalization provide new channels for exporting? Recent literature (Brouthers et al., 2022) suggests that digitalization has facilitated the creation of new international sales and distribution channels. A recent review study has shown that digital platforms help businesses go international, although the process is not a straightforward one (Gong, He & Lengler, 2024). These non-traditional channels may help improve export performance, but we know little about (1) how firms choose between these new digital channels, (2) how to make each channel work, and (3) performance differences between these channels.

Does digitalization of exporting make it easier for firms to exit and reenter foreign markets? Research on foreign market exits (Sandberg, Sui & Baum, 2019) and re-entry (Crick, Crick & Chaudhry, 2020; Sousa, He, Lengler & Tang, 2021) have brought to light important dynamics in exporting. Digitalization offers firms a chance to enter former export markets with a new channel that might be better at reaching potential customers. In addition, these new digital channels might replace existing traditional channels in export markets providing a more efficient way to serve these foreign markets.

How can firms use the unique features offered by digital technologies (like eWOM, clicking, sharing, trustmarks) to improve the performance of exporting operations? Recent scholarship (Dong, He, and Blut, 2024) reveals different effects of digital resources, capabilities and strategy on firm export performance. Besides offering new ways to enter foreign markets, digital technologies provide new opportunities for exporting firms to gather information about their customers, gain insights about potential changes in products/services offered, and customize customer communications. How can exporting firms use e-word of mouth, clicking and sharing behaviors to drive increase foreign sales and customer satisfaction? While these is a growing stream of research looking at digital customer engagement (Mattison Thompson & Brouthers, 2021), few studies directly address the issue of how these features can be used to improve exporting (Rialp, Rialp & López-Belbeze, 2024; Mattison Thompson, Tuzovic & Braun, 2019).

In this special issue, we welcome papers dealing with these and other issues at the intersection of digitalization and exporting. For example:

1. Do digital firms use different methods to export compared to traditional firms?
2. Does digitalization encourage more 'born exporting'?
3. How can policymakers use digital technology to encourage more firms to export?
4. How do digital technologies impact barriers to exporting and what can firms do about these barriers?
5. Does digitalization impact exporting of SMEs differently from large firms?
6. What changes to public policy can encourage more firms to export through digital channels?
7. Should firms combine traditional exporting channels with new digital channels?
8. What is the economic impact of digital channels of exporting versus traditional channels?
9. How can firms direct digital investment, i.e. in tangible and intangible assets, to drive export performance?
10. How does digitalization impact different aspects of export performance, such as export sales, export intensity, export profitability, and resilience?
11. How do exporting firms build up a digital orientation in guiding their digitalization process?
12. How can exporting firms use digital technologies to achieve CSR and/or sustainability goals?
13. How does digitalization help exporting firms to participate in global supply chains?
14. What is the influence of digital technologies on exporter-importer relations?
15. How does the use of digital technologies impact an exporting firm's consumer privacy considerations, i.e. how are these facilitated/hindered by technology?

Review process timeline

Paper submission due date July 1-31, 2025.

First decision on papers - desk rejects or send to reviewers - August 31, 2025.

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