

# Guest editorial: International marketing perspectives on digital platforms and their ecosystems

## The rise of digital platforms

Digitalization has led to the emergence of platform businesses that have disrupted many industries and continue to transform the global economy (Nambisan *et al.*, 2019; Rangaswamy *et al.*, 2020; Wirtz *et al.*, 2019). Digital platforms are Internet-based socio-technical systems that mediate interactions between different groups of users through an interface (e.g. a website or an app), and they come in various shapes and sizes. Examples include *social media platforms* that provide billions of users opportunities to interact with each other (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn and Weibo) (Sheth, 2020), *online marketplaces* that connect buyers and sellers of products and services across the globe (e.g. Alibaba, Etsy and Booking.com) (Bei and Gielens, 2020) and *sharing economy platforms* that enable shared access to underutilized assets, such as space, vehicles and skills (e.g. Airbnb, Didi and Fiverr) (Yuan *et al.*, 2024).

Due to their modular architecture and scalability, digital platforms can grow into large ecosystems incorporating diverse sets of actors who contribute different resources and capabilities to the process of value co-creation (Tiwana, 2014). As a result, the locus of value creation does not lie within the firm (i.e. the platform) but in the complex, multilateral interactions taking place within the larger ecosystem that it orchestrates and governs (Li *et al.*, 2019). Due to this complexity, paired with an enormous economic footprint, digital platforms have sparked much interest across a number of disciplines, including marketing (e.g. Rangaswamy *et al.*, 2020), international business (e.g. Brouthers *et al.*, 2016), management (e.g. McIntyre and Srinivasan, 2016), information systems (e.g. Constantinides *et al.*, 2018) and economics (Hagiu and Wright, 2015).

## International marketing perspectives on digital platforms

Marketing is critical for digital platforms to succeed. It plays a key role in (1) attracting users to a platform to boost critical network effects, (2) elevating the quantity and quality of interactions to increase revenue and (3) reducing users' transaction costs as well as a platform's production costs (Rangaswamy *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, marketing scholars have shed light on various phenomena related to digital platforms, such as platform adoption (e.g. Kumar *et al.*, 2021), platform governance (e.g. Bajde *et al.*, 2023), platform exploitation

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(e.g. Zhou *et al.*, 2022), network effects (e.g. Chu and Manchanda, 2016), user-generated content (e.g. Hochstein *et al.*, 2023), firm-generated content (e.g. Liadeli *et al.*, 2023), online brand communities (e.g. Wong, 2021) and brand platformization (Wichmann *et al.*, 2022).

However, few marketing studies on digital platforms have adopted an international perspective. The narrow focus on single (often developed) country markets is surprising. This is especially true given the enormous economic potential of digital platforms is rooted in the very fact that most of them are designed to scale and rapidly expand beyond the borders of their home country shortly after their inception (Monaghan *et al.*, 2020; Nambisan *et al.*, 2019). For example, Uber started expanding internationally just two years after it was founded in 2009 and managed to enter almost 70 countries within six years (Ghemawat, 2016).

Yet, the internationalization of digital platforms is far from trivial and presents substantial challenges. By 2016, Uber had sunk over \$2 billion before giving up on its conquest of the Chinese ride-sharing market (Salomon, 2016) – a failure that was attributed to Uber’s inability to navigate China’s cultural, political and economic complexities (Kozlenkova *et al.*, 2021; Wirtz and Tang, 2016). Similarly, e-commerce giant Groupon withdrew from the South Korean market after a three-year struggle against local competitors who were more attuned to the unique characteristics of Korean consumers (Choi, 2014). By contrast, the streaming platform Spotify succeeded in firmly establishing itself in India, despite intense competition from local (e.g. JioSaavn and Gaana) and international players (e.g. Apple Music and YouTube Music) (Sekhose, 2022). When entering India in 2019, Spotify adapted its marketing program to accommodate the market’s cultural, economic and technological complexities. The app is available in 12 Indian languages (including Hindi, Punjabi and Tamil) and features algorithmic “city playlists” based on location (e.g. Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai), with playlists curated by Indian music experts as well as music from popular Bollywood movies (Spotify, 2019). In addition, Spotify launched a minimalist version of its application to improve accessibility for low-end smartphones with limited storage and poor Internet connections (Sekhose, 2022). This strategy helped Spotify achieve a market share of 26% in 2023 (Statista, 2024) and turned the Indian market into a key driver of Spotify’s global growth (Gurbaxani, 2023).

These examples underscore international marketing’s *raison d’être*: Context matters, also in the digital economy. Like every firm that operates internationally, digital platforms are confronted with international markets that can significantly differ in various regards, such as regulatory, infrastructural, socio-cultural and economic conditions (i.e. the RISE framework; Mandler and Wichmann, 2025). These contextual factors can pose critical contingencies for digital platforms’ strategy and architecture, business operations and performance.

### Overview of the special issue

Our call for papers highlighted a “blue ocean” of research opportunities related to digital platforms and ecosystems from an international perspective. This special issue of the *International Marketing Review* sets sail to explore some of these uncharted waters and hopefully inspires more research at the interface of digital and international marketing. It includes conceptual and empirical contributions by 40 scholars from 10 countries across the globe. Their work can be divided into three distinct groups, i.e. (1) studies examining the internationalization of digital platforms, (2) studies exploring how firms that transact on digital platforms can use them to internationalize and (3) studies focusing on questions related to international e-commerce. Table 1 provides a summary of all contributions to this special issue.

Authors	Title	Main focus	Method	Key finding(s)
<i>Internationalization of digital platforms</i>				
• Weng, Liu, Ye, Liu and Huang	Platform success in the international marketplace: Reconfiguring digital resources for marketing agility	Role of versatile digital resource-enabled reconfiguration activities in marketing agility building	Qualitative research (case study)	Digital platforms build marketing agility and success through three versatile digital resource-based reconfiguration mechanisms: Recombination of digital artifacts, repurposing human capital and cross-pollination of markets
• Nim, Pedada and Hewett	Digital marketing ecosystems and global market expansion: Current state and future research agenda	Clarification of the conceptualization and role of digital marketing ecosystems for the global expansion of multinational enterprises	Conceptual work	Digital marketing ecosystems enable firms from developed markets (DM) and emerging markets (EM) to expand globally with greater flexibility. They can help firms overcome infrastructural disparity, reputation gaps (EM firms expanding to DM) and institutional voids (DM firms expanding to EM)
• Surana, Chavan, Kumar, and Chirico	Understanding the internationalization of digital platform firms: Developing the platform-OLI (P-OLI) framework	Investigation of the advantages that help digital platform firms to succeed during their internationalization	Qualitative research (case study)	Digital platform firms access various types of open resources (O), rely on linkages (L) and extract varied information and knowledge (I) to gain advantages that ease the internationalization process.
• Amissah, Sarpong, Boakye and Carrington	A meaning-making perspective on digital ridesharing platforms in underdeveloped markets	Collective contest of interpretations of digital platform business models in the context of underdeveloped markets	Conceptual work	A framework is proposed that is anchored in six propositions. It offers insights into how digital platform businesses can adapt to address and align with the idiosyncrasies of underdeveloped markets with weak institutions

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Authors	Title	Main focus	Method	Key finding(s)
<i>Firms using digital platforms to internationalize</i>				
• Gong, He and Lengler	Internationalization through digital platforms: A systematic review and future research agenda	Review and synthesis of extant research on how traditional firms enter foreign markets using digital platforms	Literature review	The developed framework of antecedents, mediators, moderators and outcomes of digital platform use in firm internationalization provides a comprehensive overview of the status quo and highlights avenues for future research
• Da Rocha, Neves da Fonseca and Kogut	Small firm internationalization using digital platform ecosystems: An assessment and future research directions	Review and synthesis of existing studies on the internationalization of small firms via digital platforms	Literature review	The proposed framework links small firms' resources, capabilities and environmental factors to their adoption of digital platforms for internationalization and related outcomes. The authors present research questions related to different framework elements
• Jean, Kim and Cadogan	Antecedents and performance outcomes of exporters' use of Internet B2B platforms	Antecedents and outcomes of exporters' use of different services offered by Internet-based business-to-business (I-B2B) platforms	Quantitative research (survey)	Exporters' use of I-B2B platform services is positively associated with cost advantages, export diversity strategies, psychic distance and domestic regulatory uncertainty. The performance consequences depend on the service type and the exporter's transparency strategy
• Hu, Filipescu and Pergelova	Understanding SMEs' internationalization through digital platforms: The role of knowledge sharing and consumer education	Consumer education and knowledge sharing during the internationalization of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) via digital platforms	Qualitative research (case study)	During SMEs' platform-based internationalization, learning processes take place in a bidirectional way due to interactions among multiple stakeholders, activating consumer education and knowledge sharing

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Authors	Title	Main focus	Method	Key finding(s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Olivieri and Testa</li> </ul>	Social media platforms use in startups' international marketing strategies: A multiple case study	Role of social media in supporting startups' entrance to foreign markets	Qualitative research (case study)	Social media helps startups develop relationships with stakeholders abroad, penetrate local business networks, build general brand awareness and convey their offering's positioning
<i>Digital platform-enabled e-commerce</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lee, Yalcinkaya and Griffith</li> </ul>	Examining the relationship of country-level digital ad spend and cross-border e-commerce buyers under cultural and political globalization	Moderating role of formal and informal institutional globalization regarding the effect of digital ad spend on cross-border commerce	Quantitative research (secondary data)	Digital ad spend (at the country level) is positively related to the share of cross-border e-commerce buyers in a country. Political globalization strengthens the impact of digital ad spend on consumers' participation in cross-border e-commerce, whereas cultural globalization weakens it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jürgensmeier, Bischoff and Skiera</li> </ul>	Opportunities for self-preferencing in international online marketplaces	International prevalence of vertically integrated offers in online marketplaces	Quantitative research (secondary data)	Most online marketplaces tend to be vertically integrated, offering them opportunities for self-preferencing (i.e. platform providers favor their own offers over those of competitors). The analysis reveals significant cross-national differences in self-preferencing, potentially due to regulatory differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kim, Ryoo, Zdravkovic and Yoon</li> </ul>	Consumer resistance to price transparency in high-end digital retail from high-equity countries: A should-want conflict perspective	Price transparency in high-end digital retail and the moderating role of country equity	Quantitative research (experiments)	Price transparency might benefit regular-priced products but backfires for premium-priced products. Country equity is an important boundary condition for this backfiring effect in that it is more pronounced for products from high-equity countries than low-equity ones

**Source(s):** Created by authors

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