

Social media and international business: views and conceptual framing

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and
international
business

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Abstract

Purpose – The objective of this paper is to increase understanding of social media in international business context. To this end, the authors make an attempt to integrate the existing, still somewhat limited views in a framework that advances the knowledge of scholars and decision-makers on this topic.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conduct a conceptual study supported by use of a systematic literature review method.

Findings – This study shows marketing as a dominant area of discussion and reveals that many firm functions where social media plays a role have received relatively little attention. Furthermore, the study shows that the positive features of social media in international activity tend to be more widely acknowledged and better understood than the potentially problematic aspects.

Research limitations/implications – The number of articles analyzed in this study was relatively small, resonating with the nature of an emerging research area. Research on social media has only taken off over the last years, and it is understandable that there is limited research that connects it specifically to phenomena of international business.

Practical implications – This study reminds managers to be cautious when using social media in international markets. The relationship between social media and international business exhibits dynamism and is dependent on a variety of factors. Social media does not come without costs, nor is easily transferred from one market to another. Efficient use of this media in the international context may increase the need of specific and qualified human resources, and it may necessitate having the whole process from R&D to delivery, and beyond, ready for adaptation.

Originality/value – It can be argued that we know too little about the relevant factors and relationships between social media and international business. The authors hope that this study revealing the scarcely studied aspects and suggesting a tentative framework for capturing the dynamics of social media and international business can guide subsequent research and accelerate its emergence.

Keywords Social media, Social networking sites, International business, Internationalization, International marketing

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Social media, as a manifestation of digitization, is one of the current megatrends that impacts international business. Social media connects to firms' internationalization process and



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international business in terms of the timing, pace, and rhythm of internationalization, location and entry mode choices, foreign market learning and knowledge recombination (Glavas *et al.*, 2019; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020). Social media has become significant regarding the accessibility of resources and capabilities in home and host markets, and it affects companies' abilities to manage the liabilities of foreignness and outsidership (Coviello *et al.*, 2017).

Social media has attracted considerable attention and interest among organizations and academics. Mangold and Faulds (2009, p. 359) define social media as "*a hybrid, that springs from mixed technology and media origins that enable instantaneous, real-time communications, and uses multi-media and numerous delivery platforms with global reach capabilities*". The emergence of social media has remarkably changed the way people and organizations communicate and interact (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Ngai *et al.*, 2015; Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Social media channels, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and TikTok, provide virtual places for social communication and personal career building (Tang *et al.*, 2012). They include a tremendous amount of user-generated information, which may help organizations and academics to better understand the behavior of people (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014), Bouman *et al.* (2012). For different organizations, social media provides a way to create, share, and maintain communication and activities with their employees, peers, customers, partners and other stakeholders (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). These new communication media have opened a wide range of new opportunities and created new business models that challenge traditional ways of doing business (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Hanna *et al.*, 2011).

However, social media is a relatively new phenomenon, and its research still has some blind spots. Only recently, businesses and researchers have started to pay more attention to social media especially in the international business context, acknowledging the opportunities that social media provides for scaling up and expanding business operations globally (Glavas *et al.*, 2019; Rialp-Criado *et al.*, 2020; Almeida and Santos, 2020; Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021). However, the positive expectations may cause problems, as limited understanding of social media and its use exposes risks for firms in international markets (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020). Only few researchers have expressly studied the role of social media in internationalization (e.g. Maltby, 2012; Restrepo, 2013; Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014; Josee *et al.*, 2014; Tran *et al.*, 2016; Pogrebnyakov, 2017; Fleischmann and Fleischmann, 2019; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020), and the scarcity of research becomes even more pronounced when specific types of actors (e.g. small firms) or activities (e.g. marketing or R&D) are considered. The lack of comprehensive view makes it challenging to draw solid conclusions for managerial purposes or to develop strong theoretical frameworks. Companies that have international activities need to know how social media work in an international environment and how it can be exploited (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014; Singh *et al.*, 2012), and therefore, we argue that social media in the context of international business and internationalization process deserves further exploration.

The objective of our paper is to increase understanding of social media in international business context. To this end, we make an attempt to integrate the existing, still somewhat limited views in a framework that advances the knowledge of scholars and decision-makers on this topic. In doing this, we draw attention to the tendencies of existing literature to concentrate on the positive aspects of social media, focus on the context of a single country and discuss social media as communication, marketing and sales channel (e.g. Restrepo, 2013; Mills, 2012; Berthon *et al.*, 2012; Dateling and Bick, 2013; Jussila *et al.*, 2013).

Our study contributes to existing knowledge in the following ways. In addition to adding to the growing literature on social media by integrating the international business view to it, this study responds to the recent calls for broader investigation of diverse aspects of digitization as a new context of internationalization (e.g. Coviello *et al.*, 2017). Our study

describes how social media connects to the international activities of companies and in particular, it shows how companies use social media not only in communication (Seroka-Stolka and Tomski, 2015; Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013; Crowne *et al.*, 2015), customer and partner support (Maltby, 2012; Bochenek and Bili, 2014; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013), and marketing and sales (Zhang and Vos, 2014; Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2017; Restrepo, 2013), but also in research and development (Maltby, 2012), human resource management (Kazienko *et al.*, 2013; Crowne *et al.*, 2015) and market penetration in the international environment (Restrepo, 2013; Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2017; Pogrebnyakov, 2017). The study also shows how the impact of social media is not always positive, but it acknowledges how especially small and medium sized firms (SMEs) may experience the risks and downsides of social media in the international context (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020; Baccarella *et al.*, 2018). In doing this, our paper also indicates the dynamic nature of social media in international business; the implications of social media may vary depending on not only the phase of internationalization (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021), but also on the firm resources, the functions in which it is used and conditions under which it is used. The different elements are in constant interaction. The practical implications of the study help managers to understand and develop holistic social media management in an international environment and assist them to build cohesive international social media strategies linked to their companies' international strategies.

2. Views on social media in international business

Social media has been considered an interesting and effective instrument to base internationalization strategies (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014), to efficiently explore foreign market opportunities (Alarcón *et al.*, 2018) and to utilize scalability to grow in several geographical markets (Almeida and Santos, 2020). Likewise, literature suggests that the use of social media can accelerate internationalization (Arnore and Deprince, 2016; Fraccastoro and Gabrielsson, 2018) and improve the firms' performance at foreign markets (Mahmoud *et al.*, 2020). These kinds of notions in existing literature demonstrate the importance of social media in international business. However, they simultaneously invite questions, such as how these things really happen, and if the relationship really is as undoubtedly beneficial as literature seems to indicate.

Our study is motivated by the need to understand better how social media connects to the international business settings. Therefore, we began our study by searching for studies that specifically addressed them together. This initial search yielded notably low number of results. Intrigued by this, we utilized the means of a systematic literature review (see, e.g. Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) to gain better view of the current scholarly knowledge as well as the main concepts and constructs present in the discussions. In doing this (see Appendix), we did not limit our search on any specific field or discipline. We found only 36 studies that explicitly and concurrently considered both social media and firms' international business. These studies are distributed widely across 31 different journals [1], including eight articles in international marketing (IM) journals and six articles in international business (IB) journals. The focus and findings in IM and in IB studies do not differ significantly, yet IB research emphasizes slightly more social media's role in firms' internationalization process (e.g. Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021; Tran *et al.*, 2016). The limited number of articles dedicated to social media in international business was somewhat surprising. In the following, we tap into the topics and suggest a conceptual framing based on the found research.

2.1 Social media and firms' international operations

Articles that focus on social media in international business bring up some specific aspects that seem to be particularly pronounced for this combination. The first issue is that research

generally assumes that social media has implications on international expansion rather than vice versa – if and how the international expansion impacts the use of social media.

Second, there seems to be a tendency to focus on the positive aspects between social media and international activities rather than the (potentially) adverse elements. While all the examined articles bring up at least some positive issues (with 80% of all observations in Table 1 showing a positive sign), much smaller portion brings out negative aspects (and also then next to the positive ones).

Third, the focus of the research on social media is – quite naturally – biased on international marketing. As we show in Table 1, our search captured 24 papers (67%) that discuss the role of social media for firms’ marketing function in the context of firms’ international business, and 11 papers relate it with firms’ sales function. Out of the 36 studies,

Articles/authors	The effect of social media on international Expansion	Use of social media for international business across firm functions			
		Marketing	Sales	R&D	HRM
Hanna <i>et al.</i> (2011)		+/-			
Berthon <i>et al.</i> (2012)		+/-		+	-
Zhang and Vos (2014)		+/-			
Okazaki and Taylor (2013)	-	+			
Crowne <i>et al.</i> (2015)					+
Mollá-Descals <i>et al.</i> (2010)	+		+/-		
Singh <i>et al.</i> (2012)		+			
Maltby (2012)	+				
Bochenek and Blili (2014)		+			
Kazienko <i>et al.</i> (2013)	+/-				
Restrepo (2013)	+	+	+/-		
Sigfusson and Chetty (2013)	+				
Dervojeda <i>et al.</i> (2014)	+	+	+		+
Gong <i>et al.</i> (2014)	+/-	+			
Josee <i>et al.</i> (2014)	+				
Bianchi and Andrews (2015)		+			
Kiralova and Pavlicecka (2015)		+			
Seroka-Stolka and Tomski (2015)	+				
Arnone and DePrince (2016)	+	+		+	
Khan <i>et al.</i> (2016)	-	+			
Lacoste (2016)					+
Paniagua <i>et al.</i> (2016)	+				
Tran <i>et al.</i> (2016)	+	+	+		
Bocconcelli <i>et al.</i> (2017)	+	+	+		
Pogrebnyakov (2017)	+	+		+	
Vătămănescu <i>et al.</i> (2017)	+				
Rialp-Criado and Rialp-Criado (2018)	+	+	+	+	
Fraccastoro and Gabrielsson (2018)	+		-		
Glavas <i>et al.</i> (2019)	+	+		+	
Fleischmann and Fleischmann (2019)	+	+			
Hurmelinna-Laukkanen <i>et al.</i> (2020)	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-	
Almeida and Santos (2020)	+/-	+/-	+		+
Mahmoud <i>et al.</i> (2020)	+	+			
Rienda <i>et al.</i> (2021)	+	+			
Rialp-Criado <i>et al.</i> (2020)	+	+	+	+	
Fraccastoro <i>et al.</i> (2021)	+	+	+		
% +	68	68	31	19	11
% -	17	14	11	3	3

Table 1. Positive and negative views on the relationship between social media and international business – process and firm functions

only 7 articles discuss the relationship between social media and research and development (R&D), and 5 articles pay attention how social media and human resource management (HRM) interact in the international business context. Thus, individual firm functions are unevenly addressed. In the following, we take a closer look at these function-related discussions.

2.1.1 Marketing. Most of the literature on social media in the context of international business relates with international marketing. Since social media is relatively easy to adopt and does not require investments in marketing resources, it not surprising that this literature considers social media as an extended marketing resource (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020) with which firms can reach potential customers and generate vast global exposure with relatively low costs (Alarcón *et al.*, 2018; Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2017; Glavas *et al.*, 2019; Josee *et al.*, 2014; Kiralova and Pavlicecka, 2015). Social media has become a component of globally integrated marketing communications (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013; Rienda *et al.*, 2021) that lessens or removes physical distances and facilitates interaction with customers (Alarcón *et al.*, 2018; Bianchi and Andrews, 2015; Mahmoud *et al.*, 2020) by increasing awareness (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021; Kiralova and Pavlicecka, 2015) and facilitating of sharing news about the products (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020).

Some studies note that market awareness may create buzzes (Kiralova and Pavlicecka, 2015), enforce virtuous circles (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020) and increase speed as uploads can go viral overnight (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, with social media, firms can protect and communicate their brands (Almeida and Santos, 2020; Zhang and Vos, 2014; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). Firms may use social media to build and reinforce their brand images across the world (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013; Rienda *et al.*, 2021). Social media also provides international firms with a means to access networks (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021; Lacoste, 2016; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). It allows firms relatively easily to develop and manage large number of relationships (Arnone and Deprince, 2016; Fraccastoro and Gabrielsson, 2018; Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013; Singh *et al.*, 2012), to solidify existing relationships (Almeida and Santos, 2020), to maintain customer engagement (Bianchi and Andrews, 2015), and in doing this, develop mutual dependencies with customers and partners (Maltby, 2012). Literature suggests that closeness, listening, interaction and personal tones in conversations are such social media elements that support firms to create customer engagement and loyalty (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014; Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Zhang and Vos, 2014). Direct interaction with customers across the world offers the opportunity to establish a long-lasting, emotional bonds (Fleischmann and Fleischmann, 2019). Prior literature further shows that social media can be effectively used to gain market information, relevant for marketing endeavors (Almeida and Santos, 2020; Bianchi and Andrews, 2015; Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014; Singh *et al.*, 2012).

While scholars commonly agree that social media reduces marketing costs (Alarcón *et al.*, 2018; Almeida and Santos, 2020; Arnone and Deprince, 2016; Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2017; Kiralova and Pavlicecka, 2015; Pogrebnyakov, 2017; Restrepo, 2013) and suggest that setting up social media is usually free of charge and with reasonable media spends (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014; Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Tran *et al.*, 2016), literature also shows the opposite. Digital content must be highly appealing, and the constantly growing number of followers requires qualified resources to react to their posts (Almeida and Santos, 2020; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020). Social media calls for instantaneous feedback, that is, speedy actions (Almeida and Santos, 2020). Bad news travel faster than the good ones, and firms are not able to control all the social media contents. Users can generate, edit and disseminate information themselves (Zhang and Vos, 2014), and they may rather trust the opinions of their peers than the firm (Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Hence, social media means a shift in the relative locus of power from the firm to the consumer (Berthon *et al.*, 2012).

Even though launching social media activity is inexpensive, firms still need employees with IT and communication skills (Almeida and Santos, 2020; Berthon *et al.*, 2012; Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Each social media is somewhat different, comes with time-consuming following and posting, yielding increases in content management costs (Almeida and Santos, 2020). Zhang and Vos (2014) note that return on investments on social media is unclear. User experiences are difficult to manage (Khan *et al.*, 2016; Zhang and Vos, 2014) and especially young and small firms relying heavily on social media cannot be certain which contacts and ambassadors are appropriate (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020). Cultural differences mean challenges (Gong *et al.*, 2014; Singh *et al.*, 2012) and localization using different local languages is demanding (Singh *et al.*, 2012; Zhang and Vos, 2014). Accordingly, current research suggests that social media cannot completely replace traditional media (Hanna *et al.*, 2011).

2.1.2 Sales. Besides marketing, social media is closely related to several sales related aspects. Studies acknowledge that social media is a truly contemporary sales channel (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014). It enables contacting salespersons in foreign markets (Restrepo, 2013), supports customer segmentation and targeting of the sales (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014), and can be used in different stages of the sales process (Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2017). Similarly to marketing, the use of social media typically reduces the need of human sales resources as firms can contact potential clients or distributors through the social media channels (Restrepo, 2013). Hence, social media provides low-cost support to sales (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021; Tran *et al.*, 2016), helps to gain more leads (Alarcón *et al.*, 2018) and reduces logistics costs (Almeida and Santos, 2020). Strong brand loyalty built on social media use promotes more frequent purchases and higher volumes (Rialp-Criado *et al.*, 2020), that is, increased demand and sales (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020), which then improve firm's overall performance (Mollá-Descals *et al.*, 2010).

Yet, increased demand may lead to resource shortages (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020), and the challenges of using social media become concrete in the realized sales. Because of uncontrollability of social media, demand may climb to a level where the company cannot respond it (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020). Not being able to meet the demand may mean decline in subsequent sales if customers start to avert the firm. Moreover, a firm's online contacts need to be frequent and effective, or they might result in negative experiences (Restrepo, 2013). Relatedly, Fraccastoro and Gabrielsson (2018) point out that in the context of internationalization, the need for direct sales personnel and personal relationships increases along with foreign expansion. Furthermore, such elements as vague privacy and security, poor logistics, or lack of experience with Internet may reduce sales (Mollá-Descals *et al.*, 2010). Literature suggests that besides online channels, firms should maintain additional traditional delivery support as social media contact are not always frequent or effective (Restrepo, 2013).

2.1.3 R&D. Prior literature on social media and international business focuses strongly on international marketing and sales but discusses less the connection of social media and R&D in the international context. This is quite surprising keeping in mind the vast literature on the strong relationship between marketing and R&D.

Considering the international business context, contemporary literature acknowledges that social media may provide firms' R&D function with worldwide market information and customer feedback that can be used in designing new, tailoring and improving existing products (Arnone and Deprince, 2016; Glavas *et al.*, 2019; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020; Pogrebnyakov, 2017; Restrepo, 2013). Social media opens new opportunities and offers new ways of doing business (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014; Almeida and Santos, 2020; Arnone and Deprince, 2016; Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013). With such interpretation, R&D is, at least in some extent, shifting from product centered paradigm to an experience-centered paradigm (Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014). Firms can convert market knowledge into products and services for which customers are willing to pay (Maltby, 2012). Social media means direct communication

with customers, and for this reason, firm use it as a tool for integrating customers into the product development (Pogrebnyakov, 2017). Social media can promote customer-driven co-creation and innovations in the international context (Alarcón *et al.*, 2018; Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014; Restrepo, 2013). Firms may enable customers to design their own unique products, or they can manufacture and deliver products on demand, which in turn, leads to cost savings in terms of warehousing (Rialp-Criado *et al.*, 2020).

Yet, social media can become a trap for innovating firms as it may lead R&D and production to such directions where the firm does not have adequate capabilities (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020). Focusing too much on customers' wishes is risky, but this may happen if social media gains too notable role as a source of ideas. Considering further that users' behavior is out of firms' control, social media may lead to situations where firms' R&D activities are harmed. For example, creative consumers might tamper with proprietary products and produce something which is unwanted by the firm (Berthon *et al.*, 2012).

2.1.4 Human resource management. Social media research that relates to firms' international operations pays some attention to human resource management issues. This literature suggests that social media connects to engaging in job search (Singh *et al.*, 2012; Kazienko *et al.*, 2013); firms may use it to attract highly qualified and specialized human resources (HR) (Almeida and Santos, 2020). Social media provides firms with an easy access to talent database, and hence, may facilitate talent acquisition (Lacoste, 2016). When using social media in recruiting, costs typically remain relatively low (Almeida and Santos, 2020).

Social media is not only useable in recruitment situations but may have also wider applications. In internationally operating firms, social media can play an important role in supporting expatriates' well-being, knowledge transfer, adjustment and job performance (Crowne *et al.*, 2015). That is, Networks operating on social media may be a source of concrete work-related assistance, which aids the assignee in achieving higher levels of performance even when the work is done from the distance. As an important feature, online social networks nurture the social aspects of collaboration, cooperation and sharing, which may prevent frustration and enhance understanding (Crowne *et al.*, 2015).

However, cultural differences may still hamper the positive interplay and attention needs to be paid in how social media is used. A challenge is, if the resources and capabilities within the firm are not up to this task. For example, apparently digital natives (Prensky, 2001) can be much more familiar with social media compared to senior managers. Paradoxically, senior management may consider social media as the wasteful pastime of teenagers, and hence, may even prohibit their own employees from using social networking tools at work (Berthon *et al.*, 2012). The attitude of the senior management toward social media is quite crucial (Bochenek and Blili, 2014), and it should be considered as a strategic tool (Almeida and Santos, 2020; Bochenek and Blili, 2014; Paniagua *et al.*, 2016). In fact, Alarcón *et al.* (2018) find that higher is the level of managerial involvement with social media, the better is the firm performance.

3. Tentative conceptual framing – combining the emerging views

The above discussion suggests that there likely are specific aspects that are particularly pronounced in the interplay of social media and international business. We used existing literature to identify those factors and mechanisms that elaborate the social media's role in the international business. Table 2 organizes and summarizes our findings. It first shows illustrative extracts from the existing literature, and in doing this, pinpoints how social media may come with both positive and negative impacts. We then categorize these extracts and collect them under aggregated factors to gain better understanding of the relevant elements and their connections. The discussion below addresses these issues and shows how the different factors seem to generate dynamism in the interplay between social media and international business.

Illustrative extracts from the papers	Aggregated factors	Main categories
<p><i>Benefits</i> Highly valuable source of foreign market information (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen <i>et al.</i>, 2020) Provides the market insight (Josee <i>et al.</i>, 2014) Social media as a market-research function (Dervojeda <i>et al.</i>, 2014) Social media as a market thermometer (Bianchi and Andrews, 2015)</p>	Market intelligence	Social media features
<p><i>Benefits</i> Enables global reach (Glavas <i>et al.</i>, 2019) Build awareness in foreign markets (Fraccastoro <i>et al.</i>, 2021) The grapevine effect - market awareness (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen <i>et al.</i>, 2020) Communications across boundaries that are faster and more frequent than ever before (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013)</p>	Communication towards customers	
<p><i>Disadvantages</i> Not all people are active on social media (Dervojeda <i>et al.</i>, 2014) Internet-based media does not replace traditional media (Hanna <i>et al.</i>, 2011)</p>		
<p><i>Benefits</i> Solidify existing relationships and to break the barrier of physical distance (Almeida and Santos, 2020) To develop mutual dependencies with customers and partners (Maltby, 2012) To become insiders in the relevant network in foreign markets (Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013)</p>	Connectedness	
<p><i>Disadvantages</i> Firms cannot standardize social media usage across borders (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013)</p>		
<p><i>Benefits</i> Low-cost marketing tools (Alarcón, Rialp and Rialp, 2018) Cost-cutting in advertising and competitor analysis (Restrepo, 2013) Reduction in internationalization costs (Almeida and Santos, 2020) Reduces logistics costs (Almeida and Santos, 2020) Costs associated with recruitment processes can be lower (Almeida and Santos, 2020)</p>	Costs	
<p><i>Disadvantages</i> Increase in content management costs, each social network has its specific cost (Almeida and Santos, 2020)</p>		
<p><i>Benefits</i> In the introductory phase, increases the speed of international growth (Fraccastoro and Gabrielsson, 2018) Accelerate the internationalization of small businesses (Arnone and Deprince, 2016) Rapid internationalization requires that interactions with foreign organizations via social media networks become available at a very early stage (Maltby, 2012) Start-up's rapid internationalization (Dervojeda <i>et al.</i>, 2014) Uploads can go viral (spread like a virus) and make or break a brand overnight (Dervojeda <i>et al.</i>, 2014)</p>	Speed	
<p><i>Disadvantages</i> The grapevine effect – market awareness may enforce vicious circle (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen <i>et al.</i>, 2020)</p>		

Table 2. Internationalization related social media extracts, aggregated factors and resulting three main categories

(continued)

Illustrative extracts from the papers	Aggregated factors	Main categories
<p><i>Benefits</i> SMEs can control the contents they share (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen <i>et al.</i>, 2020)</p> <p><i>Disadvantages</i> Spread of the information is beyond firm's influence (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen <i>et al.</i>, 2020) Allows power to shift from firms to customers (Almeida and Santos, 2020) Local almost inevitably becomes global, whether the firm wishes it to or not (Berthon <i>et al.</i>, 2012) Consumers are intelligent, organizing, and more trusting of their own opinions and the opinions of their peers (Hanna <i>et al.</i>, 2011) Users can generate, edit, and disseminate information themselves - companies face challenges in their monitoring and tracking activities (Zhang and Vos, 2014) Consumers are intelligent, organizing, and more trusting of their own opinions and the opinions of their peers (Hanna <i>et al.</i>, 2011) Users can generate, edit and disseminate information themselves - companies face challenges in their monitoring and tracking activities (Zhang and Vos, 2014)</p>	Controllability	
<p><i>Benefits</i> Immediate access to a large international community of potential customers, partners, employees and competitors (Maltby, 2012) Support marketing strategies of international partners like franchisees (Restrepo, 2013) Support communication with distributors in foreign markets (Restrepo, 2013) Information for decision-making regarding international suppliers, distributors, distribution channels, competitors, current and potential customers (Glavas <i>et al.</i>, 2019) Understanding key institutions and regulatory frameworks in potential international markets (Glavas <i>et al.</i>, 2019)</p> <p><i>Disadvantages</i> Not always for sure which contacts and ambassadors are appropriate (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen <i>et al.</i>, 2020)</p>	International operations	International expansion
<p><i>Benefits</i> Positive relationship between "cluster" of exporting firms and performance (Alarcón, Rialp and Rialp, 2018) Export performance (Mahmoud <i>et al.</i>, 2020) Potential to benefit from international market growth (Mahmoud <i>et al.</i>, 2020) More frequent purchases and higher volumes (Rialp-Criado <i>et al.</i>, 2020) Facilitates foreign sales (Fraccastoro <i>et al.</i>, 2021) Improves the buying intent (Rienda <i>et al.</i>, 2021) Establish credibility (Maltby, 2012)</p> <p><i>Disadvantages</i> Social media usage driven by national and cultural factors (Singh <i>et al.</i>, 2012) International communities are constrained by geographic and linguistic boundaries in terms of their social media content (Singh <i>et al.</i>, 2012) The impact and intensity of determinants vary across different cultures/foreign markets (Khan <i>et al.</i>, 2016) Inclusion of different local languages is demanding (Zhang and Vos, 2014) Ethical constraints (Zhang and Vos, 2014)</p>	Increased performance	Cultural aspects

(continued)

Table 2.

Illustrative extracts from the papers	Aggregated factors	Main categories
<p><i>Benefits</i> A gold mine of ideas and business prospects, to identify opportunities (Berthon <i>et al.</i>, 2012) Amplify their tacit knowledge and quickly convert it into products and services for which customers are willing to pay (Maltby, 2012) Co-creation and opportunity exploitation (Almeida and Santos, 2020) Assists to develop/tailor products and services to the local market (Pogrebnyakov, 2017) Shift from a product centered paradigm to an experience-centered paradigm (Dervojeda <i>et al.</i>, 2014) Extensive opportunities to customize user engagement (Hanna <i>et al.</i>, 2011)</p>	Opportunities and innovations	Firm-specific features
<p><i>Benefits</i> To overcome resource limitations, e.g. with regard liabilities of foreignness, newness, and outsidership (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen <i>et al.</i>, 2020) International relationships and growth despite an initial lack of resources and a dearth of established network relationships (Fraccastoro and Gabriellson, 2018) Acquire critical resources such as skills and knowledge through bridging social capital (Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013) Effective means to contact salespersons in foreign markets (Restrepo, 2013) Valuable resource allowing small firms to increase their visibility and enter into new markets (Bocconcelli <i>et al.</i>, 2017) Extends networking capability (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013)</p>	Resources	
<p><i>Disadvantages</i> Requires qualified and specialized human resources (Almeida and Santos, 2020)</p>		
<p><i>Benefits</i> A positive impact on an expatriate's well-being, knowledge transfer, adjustment and job performance (Crowne <i>et al.</i>, 2015) Effective instrument to base internationalization strategies (Dervojeda <i>et al.</i>, 2014) Effects on FDI for less experienced firms in an international context (Paniagua <i>et al.</i>, 2016) Easy access to talent database – facilitate talent acquisition (Lacoste, 2016) Engage in job search (Singh <i>et al.</i>, 2012)</p>	Managerial aspects	
<p><i>Disadvantages</i> Negative attitude of the senior management toward social media (Bochenek and Bliili, 2014)</p>		

Table 2.

3.1 Social media key features – advantages and challenges for activities in international markets

While social media can be considered to support different functions, thereby serving different purposes in the context of international business, specific social media features deserve more close attention. Importantly, the use of social media comes with both advantages and downsides.

Social media is all about connectedness, listening and interacting, and the literature suggests that it has a special meaning in international business (Kiralova and Pavlicecka, 2015; Zhang and Vos, 2014). Social media is an inexpensive platform providing firms with an immediate access to a large international community of potential customers, partners, employees and competitors (Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Maltby, 2012). Firms can replicate contents in

different social media channels even with limited resources (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020), thereby allowing firms to overcome resource and knowledge deficits (Maltby, 2012). Since social media is highly accessible, firms typically use it to reach large numbers of customers (Berthon *et al.*, 2012), build relationships and connect with foreign distributors (Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021).

Outbound knowledge transfer is promoted, as the firm can communicate with its customers regardless of the location (e.g. Alarcón *et al.*, 2018). Social media enhances interactivity and allows developing and maintaining relationships across the international market (e.g. Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021; Lacoste, 2016), often in a cost-efficient (e.g. Almeida and Santos, 2020) and fast way (e.g. Maltby, 2012). Likewise, market intelligence is a relevant element that social media makes more accessible (e.g. Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014). Social media can greatly advance inbound flows of relevant knowledge for the needs of organizations operating in international environments. However, this is not without limits, because the contents are eventually generated by users of social media, and because the firm therefore cannot well validate the knowledge and information (e.g. Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020).

In fact, social media has considerable limitations in the international context. As Dervojeda *et al.* (2014) point out, not all people are active in social media. Furthermore, as the spread of social media discussions is beyond firm's influence (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.*, 2020), any local aspect becomes inevitably global (Berthon *et al.*, 2012). Such uncontrollability means that power shifts from firms to customers in any part of the world (Almeida and Santos, 2020; Bianchi and Andrews, 2015; Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Based on these observations, we expect the following:

Proposition 1. The use of social media and firms' international performance are related through outbound and inbound information transfer for different purposes; the nature of this relationship depends on the extent to which control over social media shifts from a firm to other actors.

3.2 International expansion and social media

Research generally accepts that the use of social media may accelerate, support and promote firms' international expansion and improve their international performance (e.g. Mollá-Descals *et al.*, 2010). However, it has also been noted that the value of social media depends on phase and extent of the international expansion. Social media can be used more efficiently in promoting international expansion especially in the early phases of internationalization (e.g. Fraccastoro and Gabrielsson, 2018; Glavas *et al.*, 2019; Mahmoud *et al.*, 2020; Rialp-Criado *et al.*, 2020). Yet, there is less evidence that social media would be a highly relevant part after a firm has gained foothold at international markets (Almeida and Santos, 2020).

The international environment where firms move has an impact on social media. For example, the intensity of social media usage is not the same across all geographic areas. Obviously, high rates of usage smoothen firms' internationalization endeavors with social media (Gong *et al.*, 2014; Khan *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, technological and institutional settings vary between target countries (Berthon *et al.*, 2012), and cultural differences fundamentally challenge relying on social media and capitalizing benefits from it (e.g. Okazaki and Taylor, 2013; Gong *et al.*, 2014). The international environment influences especially the contents of the social media in terms cultural suitability. Cultures, the diversity of languages, linguistic boundaries, national norms, regulations and distinct ethical issues make appropriate and genuinely efficient social media content localization difficult (Singh *et al.*, 2012; Zhang and Vos, 2014; Gong *et al.*, 2014; Dervojeda *et al.*, 2014). As a result, as Okazaki and Taylor (2013) point out, firms cannot standardize social media usage across borders. Following from these considerations, we formulate the following proposition:

Proposition 2. The use of social media and firms' international performance are related through social media's applicability across international markets; the nature of this relationship depends on the firm's internationalization phase and the extent of cultural differences.

3.3 Social media and firm-specific features

The literature connecting social media and international business brings forward factors that firms need to consider regarding their own resources and managerial capabilities. The use of social media seems often to relax demand for resources in different firm functions and release them to other use. For example, prior research acknowledges that social media may allow firms to efficiently tap into international opportunities and innovations (Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013; Pogrebnjakov, 2017). As Berthon *et al.* (2012) note, social media is a gold mine of ideas and business prospects that can be capitalized in the R&D functions. Not all development work needs to be done by the firm itself to respond to the potentially varying demand in different locations.

However, at the same time, promoting international activity, increasing communication and producing relevant social media contents to different markets may require new, specific marketing resources that a firm does not already possess (Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Almeida and Santos, 2020). Furthermore, Hurmelinna-Laukkanen *et al.* (2020) point out that due to uncontrolled spread, use of social media may lead to excess demand, which in turn, requires more resources in manufacturing and production. Literature also points out that negative managerial attitudes towards social media erode its potential to influence international activities (e.g. Bochenek and Blihi, 2014), meaning that if right kind of resource and capabilities, and managerial support are needed. In the light of these considerations, we propose the following:

Proposition 3. The use of social media and firms' international performance are related through resource endowments; the nature of this relationship depends on the existing resources and capabilities and managerial support.

The above notions can be combined into a tentative conceptual framing on the dynamics of social media and internationalization. Figure 1 below illustrates how social media,

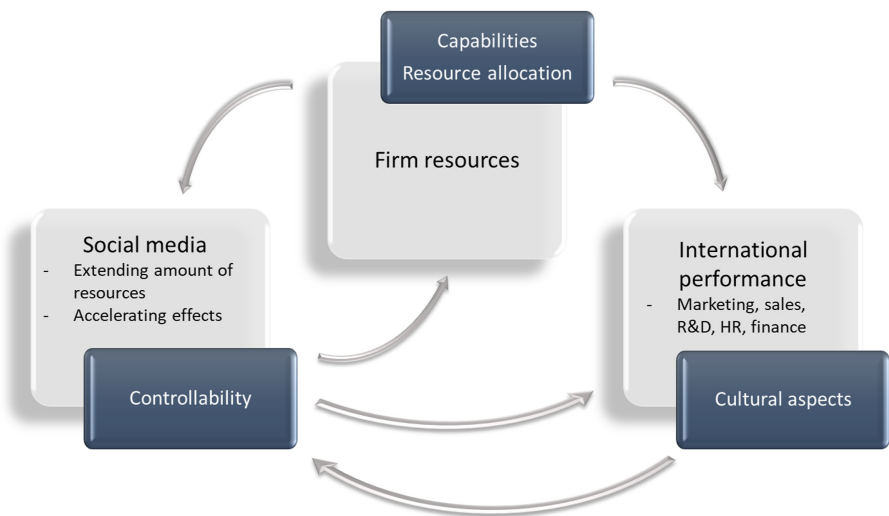


Figure 1. Framing the interplay of social media and internationalization

international business and organizational features can be seen to connect based on the existing literature.

In sum, it can be considered that the relationship between the use of social media and firms' international expansion depends concurrently on the available relevant resources, managerial resources and capabilities, and the extent of cultural differences at target markets. Likewise, the relationship between social media and firm resources can be argued to be dependent concurrently on the phase of the firm's international expansion, firm's capabilities to control social media communities, and the firm's capabilities to balance between the increasing sales and production. These interrelations generate continuous dynamism, with changes in either social media or international business resonating to the other.

We suggest that social media enables augmenting the resource base of a firm operating in international markets by improving the use and easing the allocation of sometimes scarce resources (especially in small firms at early stages of internationalization) and by expanding the capabilities of the firm through connectedness and interaction with foreign customers and other stakeholders. Through learning, the firm can use the acquired capabilities to feed back to more efficient use of social media.

Social media also directly relates to international performance through accelerating and strengthening international activities across firm functions. However, the outcomes from this relationship are conditioned by the controllability of social media. Especially under resource constraints and with cultural aspects complicating the situation, control may be easily lost, in which case expected positive results may not realize, or may turn into new challenges. Product development for new markets may become distorted, reputational issues may harm international performance, cultural aspects, such as language differences, variation in forms of social media used in different markets, or other needs for localization, may start to exhaust resources in surprising ways.

This tentative framework acknowledges that the relationship between social media and internationalization is dynamic and two-directional, and that it can become positive or negative depending on various contingency factors and their intricate connections, as well as depending on which firm functions are taken under scrutiny; aspects that may be useful for marketing may not produce similar benefit for R&D. Considering that it seems that literature addressing these issues is still quite scant, and that more information is needed, we encourage further research in many areas.

4. Agenda for future research

Our tentative conceptual framing and the general insight on the state of research provide useful direction for future research. First, as we note earlier, prior research identifies both positive and negative relationships among those constructs that we incorporate in the suggested framing. We argue that more versatile research designs are therefore needed: It appears that for the relationship between social media and international expansion, the impact of various external factors (such as firm size, international experience, marketing, sales, R&D, and financial resources, managerial resources and capabilities, industry-specifics, and the cultural and regulatory distance between home and target countries) matters. Against this background, social media research would benefit from more multifaceted qualitative and quantitative studies. Furthermore, more studies discussing the benefits and challenges of using social media in international business is warranted. It could also potentially turn more attention to the impact of international business on social media, which is another aspect waiting to be addressed more explicitly.

Second, and relatedly, only few articles explicitly acknowledge that the use of social media may be limited, or even turn out to be harmful in the context of international expansion. This may take place especially in cases where the power shifts from firms to customers (see [Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2020](#)) and other stakeholders. In this regard, further studies

could explore the role of social media in firms' opportunity exploitation (see [Restrepo, 2013](#)), and how this influences firms' resource endowments. As we suggest above, explicit consideration of external factors is needed. When scholars understand the conditions better, diffusion of issues in social media (see [Zhang and Vos, 2014](#)) can be better understood. Fake news, trolling and other such aspects can harm firms' competitiveness and relationships with customers and other stakeholders. Thus, it would be important to also study the dark side of social media to shed light on how firms can avoid undesirable outcomes.

Third, the role of social media in different dimensions of firms' international operations warrants examination. This resonates with the observation that international marketing tends to dominate the discussion, leaving other functions with less attention. So far, literature lightly touches R&D, HR and finance. Future studies should delve deeper into these functions, and their interconnectedness, scrutinizing the relevant dynamics and microfoundations. Based on the insight from this study, we encourage exploring how cross-functional use of social media impacts the international expansion – and vice versa. In conducting these studies, it is possible to consider the fact that new technologies are emerging and taking foothold; these technologies may influence the use of social media. For example, the use of big data is already being exploited in many large firms' R&D, sales and marketing. The role of big data in the social media and international expansion will likely grow. In a similar manner, artificial intelligence (AI) applications are spreading, which has opened up new possibilities for the use of social media – especially in the international context – and respectively, calls for further research.

Fourth, as a relatively typical aspect when calling for future research, new methodological and theoretical perspectives are asked for ([Fleischmann and Fleischmann, 2019](#); [Fraccastoro et al., 2021](#); [Mahmoud et al., 2020](#); [Pogrebnyakov, 2017](#); [Rienda et al., 2021](#)). Considering the relatively limited research where the dynamics of social media and international business are purposefully taken under simultaneous examination, we agree that employing a variety of methodological approaches will be valuable. Diverse research methods may be useful to uncover more and different empirical evidence with respect to the firm's use of social media as means to operate in international markets. Our framework indicates that a wide view is warranted, as complex mediating, moderating, and more and less linear connections may be present. Some of these may be captured with qualitative, and others with quantitative approaches.

Finally, while this aspect is not as strongly visible in existing literature or the suggested tentative framing, we argue that future research should allocate effort to identifying and carefully defining the constructs and the key factors of international social media strategy. In doing this, it would be important to be able to analytically separate generally applicable features of social media and those that are integrally connected to its international application. In a relatively new field, there is a lot of potential in careful conceptual treatment and development, which assists later work and enables avoiding fragmentation that hinders research. We hope that this review can provide tools and starting points for such development work.

5. Conclusions

Our study was motivated by the need to understand the relationship between social media and international business. Partly due to the novelty of the research field, existing research has focused on the use of social media in general or has placed it in very specific contexts (e.g. [Kietzmann et al., 2011](#); [Erdogmus and Cicek, 2012](#); [Mangold and Faulds, 2009](#)). Insight into its international and strategic use seems to be more limited. In addition, most of the previous studies have discussed social media as a communication, marketing or sales channel (e.g. [Mills, 2012](#); [Berthon et al., 2012](#); [Dateling and Bick, 2013](#); [Jussila et al., 2013](#)), and paid attention to the possibilities and opportunities provided by social media (e.g. [Seroka-Stolka and Tomski, 2015](#)). Less attention has been devoted to discussing the adverse effects or functions such as R&D and human resource management.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Our study adds to existing knowledge on social media use, thereby providing insight into the wider discussion on digitalization. More specifically, we highlight that nowadays various firm functions may benefit from the use of social media, especially when firms are engaged in international business. The results indicate that in addition to promoting international marketing and sales operations, social media can be used in innovation (Berthon *et al.*, 2012), research and product development activities (Maltby, 2012), and in human resource management (Kazienko *et al.*, 2013; Crowne *et al.*, 2015) – perhaps even financing. Although social media research explicitly connected with firms' international operations largely omits firm finance related aspects, from a managerial perspective, social media may stimulate foreign capital expenditure, for example (see Paniagua *et al.*, 2016). New, skilled employees can be found, and ideas captured from platforms across countries, and country or market-specific insights can be harnessed for product and service development. These are only a few examples how companies may utilize social media in their international business.

However, we also argue that using social media necessitates awareness of the related risks, and readiness to address the opportunities and threats. This need for alert approach is particularly pronounced in the international business context, and with this notion, we also add insight into the IB literature. The need for less resources or easy application of social media is a risky assumption for firms engaging or already engaged in international operations. Our study indicates that internationalization and international performance can be influenced by phenomena brought by digitalization, but reminds further that the reverse is relevant, too. It also extends the understanding of the role of resources in international business by paying attention to the complexities related to this, as revealed by issues in social media use.

5.2 Managerial implications

Our study reminds managers to be cautious when using social media in international markets. The relationship between social media and international business exhibits dynamism and is dependent on a variety of factors. Social media does not come without costs, nor is easily transferred from one market to another. Efficient use of this media in the international context may increase the need of specific and qualified human resources, and it may necessitate having the whole process from R&D to delivery, and beyond, ready for adaptation.

This is not to say that social media in the international context is too risky or demanding. On the contrary, managers could well benefit from searching even more widely for possible uses. Not only marketing and sales, but also other firm functions may benefit from a wise use of social media in the context of international business. Use of social media platforms may have a positive impact on expatriates' wellbeing, knowledge transfer, and job performance, and allow finding new employees. Social media may also help in designing and exploitation of internationalization strategies, including finance. In any case, without management, also senior management, having a positive attitude towards social media, social media will not have a chance to show its potential as relevant part of international business.

5.3 Limitations

Although we believe that our study provides much needed insight into social media in international business, it has limitations. Research on social media has only taken off over the last years, and it is understandable that there is limited research that connects it specifically to phenomena of international business. The number of articles identified for closer examination in this study is small, resonating the nature of an emerging research area. However, based on our observations, it can be argued that we still know little about the relevant factors and relationships between them. We believe that on the way towards a more

comprehensive view on the relationship between social media and international business, those studies that explicitly and directly address these constructs and their interaction are the most valuable ones as a starting point.

Notes

1. Aslib *Journal of Information Management*, *Business Horizons*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *Electron Markets*, *Escenarios: Empresas y Territorio*, *European Commission*, *European Journal of Business and Management*, *European Management Journal*, *Global Journal of Business Research*, *Book chapter in Understanding Social Media and Entrepreneurship Springer*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Information Systems Management*, *International Business Review*, *International Marketing Review*, *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *Journal of Business Case Studies*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, *Journal of Global Information Management*, *Journal of Global Mobility*, *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, *Journal of World Business*, *Management and Marketing*, *Management International Review*, *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *Proceedings of the 51st Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, *Book chapter in Social Media in Strategic Management Emerald Group Publishing*, *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, *Technology Innovation Management Review*, *The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings*, *Thunderbird International Business Review*

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Appendix

Systematic search process

In our comprehensive synthesis of academic literature on social media and international business we followed [Tranfield et al.'s \(2003\)](#) systematic review approach to find out what is the current state of research on social media and international business, what are the core themes and insights emerging from the literature, and what are the implications for future research. This review proceeded through searching, screening, and extraction/synthesis stages. While [Figure A1](#) illustrates the steps taken, [Tables A1–A3](#) provide information on the search string and criteria, and quality assessment that we used to identify those studies where social media and international business are explicitly connected to each other.

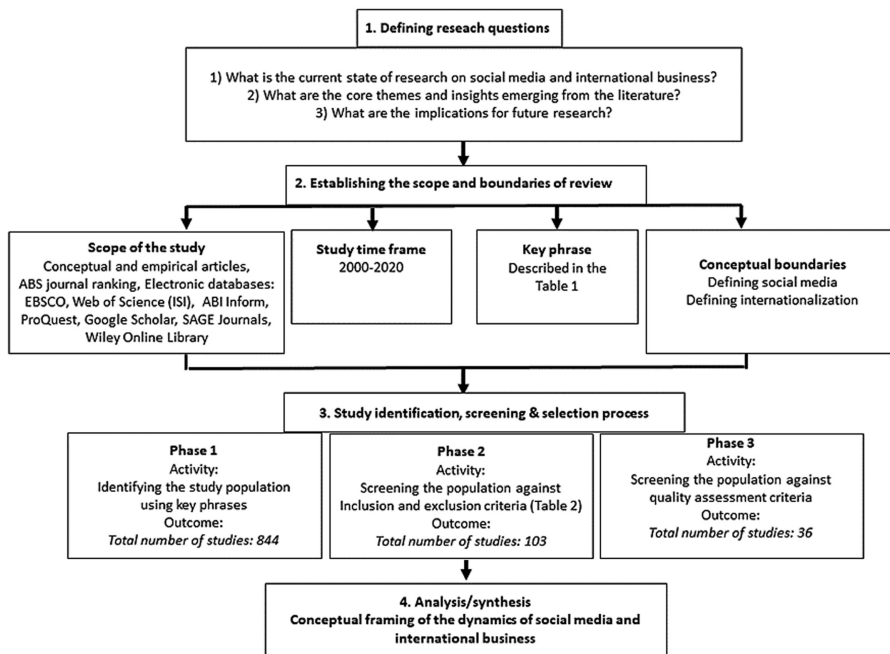


Figure A1.
Systematic search process

Source(s): Adapted from Tranfield et al. (2003)

<p>“Social media and internationalization” “Social media and international business” “Social media” and “global” “Social media” and “multinational*” “Social media” and “born globals” “Social media” and “international new ventures” “Social media” and “international*” “Social media” and “international marketing” “Online media” and “internationalization” “Digital strategy” and “internationalization” “Social networking sites” and “internationalization” “Social networking sites” and “international business” “Online media” and “international business” “Digital strategy” and “international business”</p>	<p>“Online media” and “international marketing” “Digital strategy” and “international marketing” “Social networking sites” and “international marketing” “International marketing” and (“facebook” or “twitter” or “youtube” or “web 2.0” or “user-generated content”) “International business” and (“facebook” or “twitter” or “youtube” or “web 2.0” or “user-generated content”) “Global” and (“facebook” or “twitter” or “youtube” or “web 2.0” or “user-generated content”) “Multinational*” and (“facebook” or “twitter” or “youtube” or “web 2.0” or “user-generated content”) “International*” and (“facebook” or “twitter” or “youtube” or “web 2.0” or “user-generated content”)</p>
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Table A1.
Key phrases used to search for relevant articles

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Study Type	Theoretical and empirical and studies, peer reviewed; working/conference articles included if high quality	
Language	English	Any other language
Date	2000 to 2020	Any study published before 2000
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Clear connection between social media and international business * Focus on the role of social media in international business * Focus on the role and impact of social media in internationalization process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Not directly relevant to the research question (e.g. social media in local use) * No clear connection between social media and international business * Focus not on the role of social media in international business * Focus not on the role and impact of social media in the internationalization process

Table A2.
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Element	Level				
	0 - Absence	1- Low	2 - medium	3 - high	Not applicable
1. Theory robustness	The article does not provide enough information to assess this criterion	Poor awareness of existing literature and debates. Under or over referenced Low validity of theory	Basic understanding of the issues around the topic being discussed. The theory weakly is related to data	Deep and broad knowledge of relevant literature and theory relevant for addressing the research. Good relation theory-data	This element is not applicable to the document or study
2. Implication for practise	As above	Very difficult to implement the concepts and ideas presented. Not relevant for practitioners or professionals	There is a potential for implementing the proposed ideas, with minor revisions or adjustments	Significant benefit may be obtained if the ideas being discussed are put into practice	As above
3. Methodology Data supporting arguments	As above	Data inaccuracy and not related to theory. Flawed research design	Data is related to the arguments, though there are some gaps. Research design may be improved	Data strongly supports arguments. Besides, the research design is robust: sampling, data gathering, data analyses is rigorous	As above
4. Generalizability	As above	Only to the population studied	Generalizable to organizations of similar characteristics	High level of generalizability	As above
5. Contribution plus a short statement summarizing the article's contribution	As above	Does not make an important contribution. It is not clear the advances it makes	Although using other's ideas, builds upon the existing theory	Further develops existing knowledge, expanding the way the issue was explained so far	As above

Table A3.
Quality assessment
criteria

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