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Exploring the online presence of food SMEs: a study on configurations and determinants in the north-east of Italy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates SMEs' online presence and sheds light on the different digital marketing approaches of firms in the food sector. An original analytic framework is developed to perform a fine-grained analysis of the various configurations of online presence in a sample of 520 SMEs in the north-east of Italy. A cluster analysis of the empirical data related to firms' online presence allowed the recognition of three configurations: pragmatists, laggards, and unfocused. The cluster analysis allows us to propose that the development of an online presence is far from being a unidirectional process that fits all organisations; it rather depends on a variety of organisational, strategic, and supply-chain related factors. To better illuminate these determinants and their influence on explaining the observed configurations, the study proposes the results of interviews with entrepreneurs and managers in a subset of firms from the sample. Qualitative evidence points to the importance of controlled and low-cost experiments, the integration of young talents in the marketing function of the firm, the existence of an explicit marketing strategy in the organisation, and the interaction between dedicated employees and external providers of digital services.

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Introduction

The debate on firm competitiveness highlights the significant role of information and communication technology (ICT). Analysts and scholars welcomed it as an enabler of effective, flexible, and light forms of networked organisations (Pankowska, 2019). Consumers' propensity to become informed and shop online offers firms the opportunity to serve them better through precise profiling (Li, 2016). Digital communication is relatively cost-effective, customised, and strengthens ties between firms and users (Finotto & Mauracher, 2020; Olson et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed these trends (Bivona & Cruz, 2021).

Developing informative websites, communicating on social media, and managing online spaces that favour interactions and transactions with consumers proved to benefit firms in numerous industries. Food is a relevant sector for online communication because its products appeal to consumers through their physical and symbolic characteristics (Russo & Simeone, 2017).

Previous research on online and digital marketing has examined consumer behaviour in digital spaces (Calderon-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2023; Kapoor et al., 2018). Research on firms' adoption and implementation of digital marketing tools and strategies is still fragmented and relatively underdeveloped (Canovi & Pucciarelli, 2019). It is only recently that the food sector has been considered in specialized journals (Jia et al., 2022; Tajvidi & Tajvidi, 2021). As noted by Fernández-Uclés et al. (2023), studies covering these topics seldom offer a systematic perspective to understand how companies use different tools and combine them. They often focus on single platforms and instruments (Chau et al., 2020) as standalone elements rather than as part of an integrated strategy.

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Research and industry experts agree that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are slow to adopt digital tools for marketing and strategy. Various analyses offer a fragmented picture of the determinants of SMEs' hesitation in digital marketing. Several mismatches have hampered the relationship between digital communication and small organisations. The clash between SMEs' operational logic and digital marketing strategies has been well-documented in research (Colapinto et al., 2021). The absence of necessary skills (Bowen & Morris, 2019) and insufficient human resources (Cassetta et al., 2020) contribute to delays in adopting digital tools for consumer outreach. Further investigations revealed that factors like limited technical or financial resources and a counterproductive organisational culture were impeding the digitalization of SMEs (Coco et al., 2024). The application of standardized, 'one size fits all' approaches in digital marketing might be another factor causing the divide between SMEs and up-to-date strategies (Setkute & Dibb, 2022).

This research contributes to the existing knowledge on digital and online marketing strategies for food SMEs in multiple ways. First, it offers a granular and articulated definition of online presence that might integrate the fragmented assortment of constructs in the current literature. By considering the multitude of tools and channels at firms' disposal, we expand the existing understanding of online presence. Instead of progressing through a fixed set of stages, online presence can differ among various groups of firms. By utilizing a distinct dataset and an innovative analytic framework, we distinguish between the various configurations of firms' digital presence. Moving from variables and models developed in extant literature and from our dataset, based on a sample of 520 agri-food SMEs, we present different digital presence configurations. Second, following the main prescriptions of the configuration approach (Harms et al., 2009) this study sheds light on the determinants of patterns revealed by a cluster analysis. Then, to understand the underlying factors influencing the observed setups, we rely on multiple interviews with managers and owners of food SMEs and develop propositions for future research efforts.

The following research questions are addressed. Which distinct configurations of firms' online presence in the food sector can be identified? Which organisational, human, and structural factors explain firms' online presence?

Literature review

Online presence

To interact with customers and sell, businesses need to establish a presence in online spaces. Despite many mentions in the literature (Checchinato & Zanichelli, 2016; Kromidha & Robson, 2020; Lányi et al., 2021), the 'concept of online presence is ill-defined' (Cioppi et al., 2019). One of the definitional issues is the ever-changing nature of the Internet. Definitions predating the so-called web 2.0 are no longer applicable since they refer to websites, intranets, and portals without considering social networks (Bush et al., 1998). The terminology used to denote online spaces is also different: terms such as marketplaces, hypermedia communication environments, or e-markets were used in the early 2000s (Ozuem et al., 2008). Currently, platforms, social networks, and social media dominate in terms of usage and academic research.

The definition of online presence should acknowledge the options available to firms and how they are interconnected (Kim et al., 2013). In essence, not only one needs to ponder the multiplicity of channels but also how firms can dwell in online environments: they might gain space (earned), control it (owned), or pay for it (through banners or sponsored campaigns) (Colicev et al., 2018; Jayson et al., 2018). Feroz & Wood (2017) define online presence as 'a multidimensional construct encompassing search engine visibility, social media presence, the level of incoming Internet traffic to a retailer's website (in-links) and its diversity (domain names), and the number of mentions a retailer's name receives'. Thus, they mix owned and earned media. Smithson et al. (2011) classified presence into three dimensions: no website, website only, and website with e-commerce.

Studies of digital presence mainly considered owned media, detecting and measuring 1) websites, 2) social media pages on a single network, and 3) the co-existence of a website and a single social network page. Defining what is being measured is a critical question that must be addressed. If opening a social media page is relatively straightforward and inexpensive, consistently populating it is not (Valentini,

2015). Assessing presence while including consistency in content creation and engagement vis-à-vis the simple count of existing profiles challenges the existing knowledge base. Despite recognising the value of consumer engagement, brands often face challenges when it comes to investing in social media presence and maintaining consistent posting. Thus, the chances of nurturing a brand community diminish, eroding the number of returning customers (Sanders & Freberg, 2020).

Online presence as a process

Other viewpoints centre on the process that helps establish an online presence. It is framed as a stage-growth model, where businesses pass through different levels of digital proficiency to achieve superior marketing performances. Several studies have represented this journey by enumerating the online tools required to strengthen brand image and interact with consumers. One of the first models was developed by Burgess and Cooper (1998), a Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (MICA). It was revised a few years later into an extended eMICA (Daries et al., 2018) to fit the new digital environments. They postulated companies begin with a simple 'presence' on the web and build on functionalities over time, navigating through a learning process. Firms' online presence becomes more complex as it incorporates new processes and initiatives originating from their experience with, and knowledge about, ICT. As time passes, companies gain a better understanding of their customers through increased interaction and access to abundant information (Kraus et al., 2019). This knowledge can be harnessed to revamp their online presence and to select adequate digital platforms to reach a better alignment with target audiences. The model provides a roadmap showing where a business stands in the process of developing e-commerce applications, moving from a static internet presence to a more interactive one. It comprises three stages: (1) promotion, (2) provision of information and services, denoting the level of interactivity, and (3) transaction processes.

According to Shaltoni & West (2010), a firm's Internet marketing strategy can lead to the redefinition of its overall strategy through three stages: communication, transaction, and transformation. In their analysis of SMEs in the tourism sector, Nakara et al. (2012) find that introducing social media into their operations triggers a pattern where, at the beginning, firms improvise and later proceed with careful planning and integration with the general marketing strategy. Focusing on social media, Effing and Spil (2016) propose three maturity stages related to the adoption and use of key elements of social media strategies: initiation, diffusion, and maturity (see also Pascucci et al., 2017). In summary, considerable research has focused on analysing web presence or social media presence. The construct lacks an integrative and parsimonious definition, while its measures are heterogeneous, making it difficult to capitalise on the accumulation of studies.

Online digital presence: a conceptual framework

To analyse SMEs' digital presence in an integrated and parsimonious way, we need to define its constitutive elements. Shifting from the stages of growth of Burgess & Cooper (1998), we transition to the eMica framework. We analysed the online presence of agri-food SMEs, evaluating websites and social media, measuring the adoption of one or more owned media and also the consistency of firms' activities and contents. We posit that publishing content and creating a fan base can lead to a higher level of maturity.

The eMica model's reliance on quantifying spaces does not allow a fine-grained assessment of firms' online presence and the actual level of maturity: in fact, a profile (counted) might be empty or seldom populated, let alone visited and engaged with by users (Pascucci et al., 2017; Shaltoni, 2017). We maintain that creating a website or opening a social network profile are the first steps; populating them with contents or generating and retaining traffic require awareness and explicit strategies. Our aim is to improve the model by including data on content creation frequency and its influence on the user base. This will provide a more accurate depiction of the original model's second stage. Moreover, interactions are gained through the social media page, not a firm's website; thus, we collected data on the presence of websites or social networks to monitor the static presence, frequency of publication, and fanbase performance to assess the interaction.

As other authors stated, no universally accepted method for evaluating online presence is available (Daries et al., 2018). To define various online presence configurations and build upon prior research (Chung et al., 2017), we have identified five key areas. These areas encompass significant variables: website presence, social network presence, performance indicators (including editorial activities and engagement), international presence, and e-commerce. Descriptions of these five areas, of the variables, and of their roles in the framework are reported in the next paragraph.

Methods

We adopted a mixed-method research design to understand how food firms configure their online presence and explain the observed configurations. We collected and analysed data from various sources. First, as in Gruner and Power (2018), we collected data from websites, social media pages, and profiles of a sample of Italian food SMEs. The dataset we analysed was built by coding the characteristics of the firms' websites and online spaces, as illustrated in the following description of the analytic framework. No permission is required to use such data for research purposes. Following a configuration approach (Harms et al., 2009), we treated these granular data to identify configurations of online presence in a cluster analysis that identified three clusters of firms. Applying a cluster analysis, the most suitable approach is to discriminate among sets of units. Cluster analysis sorts observations into similar groups and helps researchers create taxonomies that can validate new theories (Crum et al., 2022). Next, to triangulate data and get more insights, we chose a sub-group of respondents from firms' managers and representatives. We conducted interviews with them to gain a deeper understanding of the organisational and strategic factors influencing their choices. This added depth to the quantitative analysis and configurations. We selected the informants based on considerations of variety and heterogeneity of the cases, as illustrated in the remainder of the paper. Informed consent by interviewees was obtained when they were recruited for the interviews. Interviewees were first contacted via email: the research team presented the study, its objectives and its contribution to practice. Then, they were contacted via their publicly available corporate phone number or their private phone if they shared it in response to the original email. At the beginning of the call, the research team informed interviewees that the transcripts of their interviews would have been accessed and analysed only by the authors, and that excerpts of the interviews might be used only after being made anonymous. Confidentiality of the data was ensured to all the respondents in written and oral form. After their oral agreement, the research team and the interviewees proceeded with the conversation, informing the interviewees that they could withdraw from the study at any moment (as in Hasan et al., 2024). The questions formulated in the interview protocol aimed at collecting information on firms' strategies rather than about people or their thoughts regarding themselves; no question delved with sensitive information or identifiable personal information. Based on this, the author team ruled out ethical risks but nonetheless they ensured that the research was designed and executed according to ethical and regulatory guidelines governing research involving human participants, with a particular attention to adapting the WMA declaration of Helsinki (WMA, 2022) to a social investigation.

Online presence data collection and measures

We analysed a sample of Italian SMEs (10 to 250 employees) in the agri-food sector in the three regions of North-east of Italy (Veneto, Trentino - Alto Adige, and Friuli Venezia Giulia). A commercial database, the Bureau Van Dijk's repository Aida, allowed us to extract the statistical universe. We kept all firms whose data on turnover and employees were available and complete. This procedure stabilised the final sample at 520 food companies.

Regarding measures, what follows is a description of the indicators denoting the variables of our model (Table 1).

Website presence

To evaluate the basic level of online presence, we measured the existence of a company's website (dummy variable).

Table 1. The analytic framework.

Category	Variable	Type of variable	Use of the variable in the model
Website presence	Website presence	Dummy variable (1= presence; 0=not present)	Clustering variable
Social Network presence	Social media presence on Facebook (FB), Instagram (IG), LinkedIn (LINK), Twitter (TW), YouTube (YT), Pinterest (PIN).	Dummy variable for each social network (1= presence in the social network; 0=not present)	Clustering variable
Social Network presence	Number of social media (n_social)	Counting variable	Clustering variable
Social media performance	Firms' activity on social network based on frequency posting on Facebook (FB_post)	Counting variable	Clustering variable
Social media performance	Firms' activity on social network based on frequency posting on Instagram (IG_post)	Counting variable	Clustering variable
Social media performance	Popularity on Facebook as number of Facebook page likes (FB_likes)	Counting variable	Clustering variable
Social media performance	Popularity on Instagram as number of IG profile followers (IG_followers)	Counting variable	Clustering variable
International presence	Number of website languages (n_language)	Counting variable	Clustering variable
E-commerce	Proprietary e-commerce presence	Dummy variable (1= presence; 0=not present)	Clustering variable
Experience in social Networks usage	Numbers of years since the Facebook page or Instagram profile has open (FB_years; IG_years)	Counting variable	Descriptive variable
Firm size	Turnover	Counting variable	Descriptive variable
Firm size	Number of employees	Counting variable	Descriptive variable
Sector	Meat, Fish, Vegetables, Oil, Dairy products, Cereals, Baked/pastry, others	Dummy for each sector (1= sector, 0=otherwise)	Descriptive variable

Social network presence

We collected data on the presence of the company on the most used social networks: Facebook, Twitter (now renamed as X), Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and YouTube. For each, we created a dummy variable (1 when the firm had a profile or page on a specific social network, and 0 otherwise). We then created a variable to sum up these indicators of presence to provide information on the number of social networks a company adopted. Following the eMICA model, we used these variables as measures of the intention to increase interaction with consumers.

Social media performance

Since the simple presence or absence of a page or profile in social networks measures only partially a firm's presence, we added four more variables to measure SMEs' social performance: two related to Facebook and two related to Instagram.

Firms' activity on social networks

Activity metrics measure social media outputs in publishing content (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Creating a company account on a social network does not denote an active posture by the company: it might, in fact, remain silent. To measure social network activity, we gathered data on posting frequency on two main social networks: Facebook and Instagram. We developed two strategies for data collection because of the differences in the algorithms and data availability. For the former, we collected data on the number of posts published in a six-month period (July-December). For Instagram, we created an index by dividing the total number of posts by the number of years since the first post was published.

Popularity on social networks

In line with previous studies (e.g. Baghirov et al., 2019; Kromidha & Robson, 2020), we use the number of page/profile likes/fans to measure a firm's ability to attract and engage users.

International presence

We measured the number of languages used on firms' websites; the higher the number of languages, the higher the hypothetical interactions with consumers (Tang-Taye & Standing, 2016). Translating the site also implies investing additional resources to reach a wider audience.

E-commerce

This is a dummy variable that measures the presence (or absence) of an e-commerce website in an owned space.

Then, we collected data to describe clusters in terms of size, subsectors, and experience in social network management.

Firm size and Sub-sector

We measured firm size in terms of turnover and employees. Average firm size, especially in a sector like agri-food, might differ because of the specificities of the value chain. Thus, operational and marketing logics can differ.

Experience in social network use

Firms' digital maturity can increase as their digital seniority on social networks increases. Based on this assumption, we considered the number of years of presence in a social network as a proxy for this experience and accumulated learning. As suggested by Michaelidou et al. (2011), the timing of social media introduction may affect how companies use them. Baghirova et al. (2019) used a similar measure: Facebook fan page-opening time. We wanted to understand whether maturity is a matter of time and experience or if companies can begin their journey with a more mature configuration.

Interviews

As far as the interviews are concerned, to add depth to the different clusters and to uncover potential causal relationships, we interviewed 18 marketing and sales managers in a sub-sample of firms.

We interviewed informants using questions that focused on the decision-making processes behind the observed configurations of food SMEs' online presence. We used a semi-structured script. Based on an analysis of the literature (Effing & Spil, 2016; Li et al., 2021; Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013), we outlined an interview guide focusing on the following macro-themes: the objectives set for the online presence, the amount of dedicated resources, the methods used to manage and assess the results of digital presence, the actors involved in publishing and interacting online (e.g. internal teams vis-à-vis external agencies and consultants), and the factors behind top management decisions related to digital marketing strategies.

We proceeded as follows. First, the selection of informants aimed at sectoral diversity. Firms and respondents, in fact, were selected across the sub-sectors represented in the sample. Second, the research team ensured that firms with a noticeable online presence and organisations with a modest or limited presence were considered. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were transcribed and coded by the authors and a team of research assistants to validate the interpretation of the paragraphs (Gioia et al., 2013). The authors then went iteratively through the codes and literature on digital marketing presence to create overarching categories and formulate research propositions.

Results

Sample description

In our sample, websites are quite common (87% of the firms have at least one webpage). Facebook was the most popular social network (61%), followed by Instagram (40%), LinkedIn (28%), and YouTube (28%). Only 15% of the companies operate owned e-commerce websites.

Forty-one per cent of web contents are written in Italian. Eighteen per cent of the websites used two languages. The average number of languages used for the site is equal to 1.6 and 1.9 for social networks, with a range between 1 to 6. On Facebook, the average number of likes is approximately 5 thousand, while 20 is the mean value of published posts in the six months considered (Table 2). The results show a high standard deviation in likes on Facebook page because of the high heterogeneity among the companies. This value is lower for Instagram: it is less used, and we assume firms might use it in a more focused manner, thus resulting in more uniform behaviour.

Cluster analysis

We analysed the data to cluster firms into sets that discriminated their online presence by performing a hierarchical cluster analysis. We used the R statistical package. The clustering variables are listed in Table 1. These variables substantiate our definition of online presence.

We used the function Daisy: it provides a solution for computing the distance matrix when the data contains non-numeric columns (mixed data: the variables are quantitative continuous and dichotomous). Among the different clustering criteria, we adopted agglomerative clustering, the most common type of hierarchical clustering used to group objects into clusters based on their similarity, known as Agglomerative Nesting (AGNES). The algorithm initially treated each object as a singleton cluster. Next, it merges pairs of clusters until all of them converge into a large cluster containing all objects, resulting in a tree-shaped representation (a dendrogram, Figure 1).

Table 2. Clustering variables: descriptive statistics for each cluster (bold values are the highest for each row, the most significant).

	C1	C2	C3	sample average
	n = 121 (23%)	n = 349 (67%)	n = 50 (10%)	n = 520
	Pragmatists	Laggards	Unfocused	
website	1	0.8	1	0.9
n_languages	2.2	1.4	1.7	1.6
FB	1	0.4	1	0.6
IG	1	0.2	0.7	0.4
TW	0.3	0	0.7	0.1
PIN	0.2	0	0.4	0.1
LINK	0.7	0.1	0.4	0.3
YT	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.3
n_social	3.9	0.9	3.6	1.9
e-commerce	0.5	0	0	0.1
IG_post	67.6	7.3	39.3	24.4
IG_followers	2,106	96	720	642
FB_post	51	8	27	20
FB_like	17,156	748	8,015	5,265

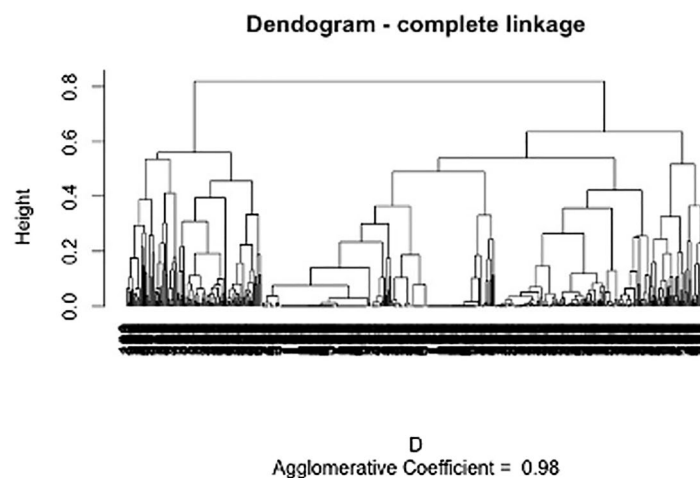


Figure 1. Results of hierarchical cluster analysis.

Table 3. Clusters description.

	Pragmatists	Laggards	Unfocused	Average
FB_years	6.4	5.4	6.5	5.9
IG_years	3.5	2.3	3.7	3.2
turnover (000 euros)	28,398	13,857	11,681	17,031
employees	48	33	34	36
Meat	0.16	0.25	0.1	0.21
Fish	0.01	0.05	0.1	0.04
Vegetables	0.12	0.08	0.06	0.09
Oil	0.02	0.01	0	0.03
Dairy	0.08	0.11	0.18	0.1
Cereals	0.12	0.04	0.06	0.09
Baked/pastry	0.27	0.34	0.34	0.3
Others	0.22	0.13	0.16	0.14

The statistical and conceptual criteria were used to select the most appropriate number of clusters. We iterated the analysis using different clustering procedures, algorithms, and distance measures, as well as changing the ordering of objects in the dataset to assess the stability of the solution. Using the average silhouette index, we identified three clusters (Table 2).

The first cluster (C1) comprises 121 companies (23% of the sample). We named the group ‘pragmatists’, since the cluster shows a pondered selection of tools, suggesting an alignment between marketing objectives and digital marketing choices pertaining to online presence. This group is characterised by a higher use of specific social networks, such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, compared to other clusters and to the sample mean. Two other variables, international presence and e-shop obtained a higher score than the sample mean. Looking at social media activity, the first cluster is characterised by the highest number of posts on Facebook and Instagram.

In total, 349 companies (67% of the sample) populate the second cluster (C2). The cluster of ‘laggards’ comprises firms whose general approach to online presence seems to be one of scarce interest and delay in considering the potential of digital tools. Here, both websites and social media scored lower values compared to the other two clusters and to the sample average. Some of these companies do not have corporate or e-commerce websites. The number of social media platforms used was the lowest among the three clusters.

Cluster 3 (C3) comprises 50 companies (10% of the sample). We named them ‘unfocused’ because their will to test instruments is clear but they seem to lack an organic structure. While pragmatists place their resources on the most used networks and tools, unfocused SMEs show a higher propensity to use ‘alternative’ social networks, such as Twitter and Pinterest. For these companies, all other values are higher than the sample mean but lower than those of the first cluster. They use several social networks and have a website, but they seem unable to exploit them, showing a mediocre performance in terms of both activities and engagement results.

Turning to the data reported in Table 3, it is possible to state that companies in the first cluster (C1) are larger in the sample as they exhibit the highest average number of fixed employees (48) and the highest average turnover (€28.3 million). The second cluster (C2) includes medium-sized companies, in terms of both average turnover (€13.8 million) and employees (33). This cluster showed a relative delay in adopting the two main social networks compared to the other two. Facebook was open for an average of five years, one year later than other companies in the sample. This group used Instagram for just over two years (2.3 years, while other companies have been using this social network for longer (3.5 and 3.7 years).

As far as the sub-sectors are concerned, C1 comprises firms in the cereals and ‘other’ categories; C2 shows a higher density of firms in the meat sector and C3 of dairy companies.

Interviews

After the clusters were identified, we aimed to cast light on the organisational decision-making processes and factors underpinning them through interviews with managers and representatives of firms. What follows is a synthesis of the main categories coded in the analysis of interview transcripts.

One recurring theme is the experimental approach adopted by firms that show more mature and aware use of digital tools in marketing initiatives. The paucity of resources does not hinder understanding the potential benefits of digital marketing. Some companies, thus, pursued ‘controlled experiments’ whose logic might resemble an effectual one (Sarasvathy, 2001): allocating small budgets to small experiments. One interviewee in the cereal sector stated:

It felt natural to experiment with digital technologies for marketing because you never know.

In the specific case, the company started experimenting with websites in the second half of the ‘90s with rudimentary web pages and, later, in the early 2000s, with an e-commerce platform. Both remained unused for several years and did not generate measurable returns, at least economically. However, they were used by the firm as an occasion to test new technologies, to envisage their uses, and to get acquainted with their basic technicalities. Similar results were observed in the meat sector. Two firms started their early experimentations with no clear aim, if not the necessity to imitate large players. According to our interviews, they believed that evidence of large firms investing in digital technologies signalled potential transformations in the industry. Thus, they followed suit, investing small amounts, but using these technologies as testbeds for strategies and to learn from their use.

The fact that large companies were exploring these technologies triggered our curiosity, and we invested in them to make sense of their potential and their logics.

one informant stated.

Openness to experimentation was absent among the less digitised firms in the ‘laggards’ cluster (C2). Perhaps their resistance to adopting novel technologies was based on experiments that had gone bad, but the contrary seems to be true. Interviews with firms in this cluster converged towards one pattern: since measuring the return on investment was perceived as impossible or vague, and given their limited availability of resources (people and financial assets), interviewees resisted every stimulus (coming from employees or consultants and vendors) towards adopting digital technologies. When asked about the measurement results, one informant declared:

We don’t measure our website’s return; we don’t even implement Google Analytics.

Companies in this cluster did not see opportunities in digital marketing. They did not seem to perceive the usefulness of such tools. One firm operating in the dairy sector stated:

We have a static website because there is nothing to tell, we just explain our quality, production capacity and our factory. There is no brand storytelling.

A first proposition is formulated (P1): small and controlled experiments requiring negligible investments might be linked to the build-up of the capabilities required to recognise the opportunities associated with digital marketing. The readiness built through these experiments might play a role in the speed with which firms adopt technologies once their uses and benefits become clear or once their adoption becomes widespread in an industry or market.

A second theme emerged: the role of generational shift and younger human resources. We observed that in the two most ‘advanced’ clusters, hiring young profiles, both in the company’s leadership and influential positions, played a role in accelerating the adoption of technologies. This realisation is not new (Fosso Wamba & Carter, 2016). Nonetheless, our interviews suggest that there may be a nuanced type of causation. According to our analysis of the qualitative evidence, in this type of SMEs, the consideration of digital marketing tools and strategies seems to occur whenever older leaders assign genuine autonomy to younger individuals and when they signal their adherence to the proposals of young profiles.

I started working here two years ago and digital channels were immediately assigned to me because I have some competences and because I am young. It’s easier for me to understand these tools (interview with a marketing manager in the meat sector).

Younger and new hires, when assigned responsibility and backed by leadership, implant novelty in the ways the firm interacts with consumers. One informant highlighted the importance of CEO support.

We suggested defining a clear marketing strategy. He supported me and financed our project. He doesn't have any knowledge about digital marketing, thus he delegated everything to me. He is 'the speck (a type of meat man)' and he managed the production part.

Thus, we proffer a second proposition. (P2) The literature has often pointed to human capital and the age of managers as explanatory variables for the digital readiness and maturity of firms. We extend these considerations as follows. We propose that the effect of human capital combined with age is positive if the company's leadership recognises the agency and autonomy of younger employees and if leaders signal their endorsement of what is proposed by younger employees.

A third set of considerations points to the reasons behind the gap separating the two most 'advanced' clusters. An explicit and formalised marketing strategy, coupled with the presence of a marketing unit, relates to more mature approaches to digital marketing. Firms in our overall sample are small, often operating in the business-to-business market or, when they address end consumers, they do so via retail chains or specialised shops. The ever-returning question of the limited availability of resources (financial and human) also plays a role in this point: firms might decide to focus investments and efforts on the sales function vis-à-vis marketing. One informant from the baked products industry highlighted the following.

The marketing unit is basic, three people. Two of them manage all the marketing operations, [the design of] packaging in particular. [...] We sell to other companies, and they frequently ask for packaging changes. [...] We also organise some communication activities on the points of sale; they are not frequent and depend on our clients' requests: it's our sales department that solicits such activities.

Proposition 3 (P3) is thus advanced: an explicit and formalised marketing orientation might be conducive to a more mature and selective approach to digital technologies. These might integrate or corroborate sales and operations efforts.

Interviews put forward another theme: the interaction between firms and third-party providers of digital services, such as consultancies and agencies. The oft-recalled dimensional and pecuniary limitations of small firms make these players crucial in the development of a solid online presence. Most firms we interviewed do not manage all digital marketing activities autonomously. They rely on the support of external agencies. They point out a general lack of 'vertical' knowledge of the industry by these agencies. Among the firms belonging to the most advanced cluster, we saw that relying on the support of external agencies does not exclude designating dedicated human resources within the organisation. We advance the proposition that the technical expertise and efficiency brought about by the competences of external professionals is amplified by the active role played by internal personnel of the organisation, which might contribute to authenticity and distinctiveness to the messages and strategies elaborated by agencies.

Thus, proposition 4 (P4) can be stated as follows: The explicit allocation of internal employees to maintain a relationship with external agencies may increase the effectiveness of digital marketing initiatives.

Discussion and conclusion

This study advances the literature on digital marketing by investigating how (RQ1) and why (RQ2) companies adopt a specific configuration of online presence from a firm-level perspective (Olson et al., 2021). It aims to balance the focus on consumers of much of the extant literature (Calderon-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2023) on consumer behaviour in digital spaces (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). It also addresses the fragmentation of research on digital marketing strategies, shedding light on the combined use of different tools, rather than focusing on a few (Twitter and Facebook in Hays et al., 2013 or Twitter in Kromidha & Robson, 2020) as in the contingency approach research. Thus, we provide a more extensive picture of firms' online presence, focusing on SMEs instead of large companies and delving into a traditional, medium-tech sector such as food (Cannas, 2021). We define online presence as a multidimensional construct that denotes the online representation of the company. It refers to owned media and considers all the different channels (websites, social networks), how they are managed (continuity), and the size of the audience they engage. Based on this definition, we found three different online presence configurations (Figure 2).

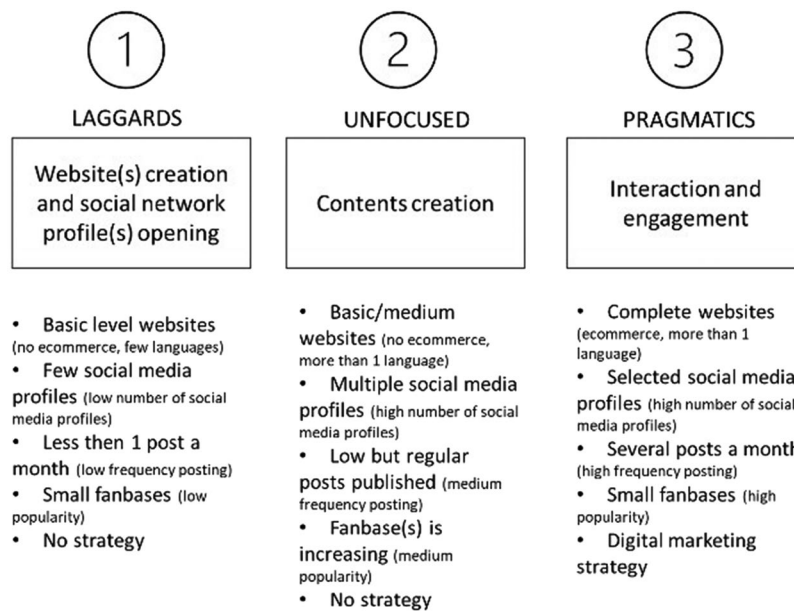


Figure 2. Online presence configurations.

Our results suggest that different online presence configurations may coexist in a market. We found three main clusters, laggards, unfocused, and pragmatists: they confirm the findings of the eMICA model that pointed to heterogeneous configurations. However, we add nuances to the results of previous investigations. First, a firm's online presence does not depend on its experience in terms of digital seniority. Pragmatists opened their presence a year before the laggards, but unfocused companies were not in the same situation: even if they outperformed the laggards, they still exhibited a fragmented presence. Second, the maturity level shows that the quantity and quality of presence increase together (from C2 to C3 to C1). Firms that own multiple spaces (websites, social networks, e-commerce) invest more effort (firms' activities on social networks and multiple languages) and have higher figures in terms of followers on social networks. The descriptive variables used in the cluster analysis confirmed the role of firm size as a determinant of maturity. The largest companies showed more structured forms of presence. This finding confirms that financial and human resources are pivotal in deploying an effective and articulated online presence.

Combining the findings from the cluster analysis with the evidence gathered in the interviews, we could answer RQ2. Online presence and maturity seem to be connected to management's and employees' willingness to experiment (P1) and to the commitment and sharing of responsibilities in the organisation (P2) more than to the cumulative effects of a longer experience in digital spaces. This is consistent with Hays et al. (2013), who find that managing an account for a longer period does not affect performance in terms of the number of followers. Because of the technology leapfrogging phenomenon, adopting technology later than competitors might turn into an advantage (Goldenberg & Oreg, 2007). Consistent with the results of Cannas (2021), we find that sharing responsibility among actors in the agri-food sector is a critical success factor in traditional business.

Second, we confirm the importance of an explicit marketing strategy to reach high levels of maturity. Implementing an effective strategy is related to both the firm's marketing orientation (P3) and the technical competencies required to succeed (Saura et al., 2021). We also find that effective strategies are related to collaboration with external agencies. The role of actors in the ecosystem as a driver of success is also highlighted in the digital entrepreneurship literature (Berman et al., 2023). Based on the scope of digitalisation, new actors could arise and play a pivotal role in the company. In small businesses, owners and managers can perceive that services and solutions available on the market are not adequate for their needs; thus, they resort to do-it-yourself behaviour, as in Ritz et al. (2019). Social media and website management agencies play a pivotal role that has been overlooked in the literature thus far (Aswani et al., 2018; Ceccotti & Vernuccio, 2021). Our research sheds light on the following issue: the relationship between the agencies and the firm should be investigated as a predictive factor (P4).

Third, our results support the idea that SMEs face distinct challenges compared to larger companies. This is consistent with previous research showing that some organisations join social media spaces but do not manage them because of the lack of knowledge, interest, and support (Hays et al., 2013).

Managerial implications

The results of our analysis and the framework we used might allow practitioners to assess their firms in terms of current and prospective online presence. The propositions we advanced could direct managers' and practitioners' attention when deciding marketing strategies and when pondering the organisational determinants of their success.

First and foremost, managers and entrepreneurs should couple the intention to develop or consolidate an online presence with efforts to formalise a marketing strategy and to make it explicit and shared with all employees. Thus, SMEs are required to intervene on their cultures. Often, in fact, they privilege operations and sales and thus adopt a posture that emphasises inside-out flows of communication from the firm to customers in the attempt to increase transactions. An effective online presence requires engaging in the collection of data on clients via digital tools and, more generally, to listen actively to consumers. Second, our results suggest that small and controlled experiments could help SMEs to become acquainted with the specificities of technologies and their marketing uses, to test their limitations and their potential applications. Given the paucity of resources in SMEs, an approach following an 'affordable loss' logic (Sarasvathy, 2001), one wherein firms bet on small experiments allocating few resources but the commitment to learn, could accelerate their path to digital maturity.

Human capital, then, is key in explaining the predisposition of firms to adopt and effectively deploy digital technologies in their marketing efforts. Our study corroborates the importance of younger employees in injecting existing organisations with specialised skills and, more importantly, with the culture of digital marketing. Age is not necessarily enough to trigger successful digital marketing strategies: leaders should legitimise these young hires to the rest of the organisation by assigning them autonomy, visibility, and consideration.

Human resources are crucial, then, also in explaining the effectiveness of the investment on specialised agencies' services and support: the relationship with consultancies, web agencies, partners and professionals needs to be conceived as one of co-creation rather than one of externalisation. Thus, partner selection should emphasise, beyond costs, the proficiency of agencies in the inner workings of the food sector. Collaborating with external agencies does not mean 'outsourcing': collaboration by the employees of the firm will always be required.

Limitations and further research

This study has limitations. First, our systematic collection of data on the online presence of firms considered only three regions in Italy, thus it has a local character. Additional studies could replicate the analysis in other Italian regions and across different countries, to better understand the dynamics underlying the development of mature online marketing strategies and the potential emergence of additional clusters.

Second, our selection of segments of the food industry could limit the representativeness of the results. While it ensures that wine and spirits—more advanced in terms of digital marketing and covered extensively by existing research—do not bias the results, it also represents a limitation given the complexity of the agri-food industry. Further research should analyse and compare results also including wine and spirits, to discover whether the characteristics of the products, and the structure of their markets, play a role in explaining different outcomes and different typologies of configurations.

Authors' contributions

We hereby declare that all the authors meet the authorship criteria of ICMJE.

In particular:

- Checchinato, Finotto and Mauracher equally contributed to the research project and the research design; Checchinato, Finotto and Mauracher developed collaboratively the structure of the submitted article.
- Checchinato, Finotto and Mauracher equally contributed to the drafting of the original article, to the amendments required by the reviewers. The contribution to the final version of the paper was equally distributed among the authors.
- Checchinato, Finotto and Mauracher shared the decision to approve the final version of the paper that is being submitted.
- Checchinato, Finotto and Mauracher agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that the questions related to the accuracy or integrity of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Data collected during the research project will be made available upon explicit request to the corresponding author. Data will be provided in an anonymized form not to disclose the identity of respondents, compliant with our university provisions on privacy and data treatment.

Summary statement of contribution

On the basis of data collected from a representative sample of 520 food SMEs and interviews with 17 managers, we investigate digital marketing presence configurations and the reasons behind the observed heterogeneity. This study contributes to the digital marketing literature at the firm level by focusing on SMEs rather than large companies. This article avoids the fragmentation of studies on social media marketing that often focus on a single platform. We discuss managerial implications for advancing SMEs' digital presence.

Disclosure statement

Authors do not have interests to declare.

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