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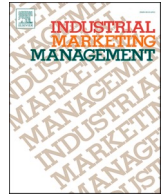
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## “Old boys' club”: Barriers to digital marketing in small B2B firms

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the widely acknowledged benefits of digital marketing, many B2B SMEs have been slow to adopt these practices. These firms' characteristics and ways of working mean that digital marketing as practiced in B2C or in larger firms may be unsuitable. This paper aims to increase understanding about digital marketing in B2B SMEs, by examining the barriers they face and the digital practices that work for them. A qualitative research methodology is used to focus on these previously unexplored practices in small B2B firms operating with the oil and gas industry. The study identifies the internal and external factors linked to this B2B SME context that both influence and act as barriers to digital marketing practice. The distinctive pattern of marketing practices arising from this combination of factors and the limited role of digital marketing within it, are revealed. These insights extend the debate about digital marketing's use by showing empirically that a “one size fits all” ways of thinking about digital marketing is not appropriate for B2B SMEs. The implications for researchers and practicing managers are considered.

### 1. Introduction

The benefits associated with digital marketing have been widely explored in B2C (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012), including its ability to increase sales, reduce costs, build customer insight, develop customer relationships, add value and strengthen the brand (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). Much less is known about digital marketing's use or benefits in B2B firms (Brink, 2017; Karjaluoto, Mustonen, & Ulkuniemi, 2015; Leek, Houghton, & Canning, 2019; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015) or in SMEs (Quinton, Canhoto, Molinillo, Pera, & Budhathoki, 2018; Quinton & Simkin, 2017); with significant gaps in knowledge about its application in B2B SMEs.

Digital marketing refers to a range of practices that include the use of digital communication channels, such as websites, search engine marketing, digital advertising, social media, e-mails and mobile; in order to acquire, retain and build relationships with customers (Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Mulhern, 2009; Wymbs, 2011).<sup>1</sup> The need to examine the role of digital in B2B marketing has recently been acknowledged (Kim & Moon, 2021), as the literature mainly concentrates on these firms' growing interest in social media (e.g., Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Siama-gka, 2019; Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2019; Juntunen, Ismagilova, & Oikarinen, 2020; LaPlaca & Lindgreen, 2016;

Leek et al., 2019; Pitt, Plangger, Botha, Kietzmann, & Pitt, 2019; Wang, Malthouse, Calder, & Uzunoglu, 2019). While the focus in B2Bs on relationship building suggests they ought to have much to gain from using digital marketing, even the adoption of social media by these firms remains limited (Juntunen et al., 2020; Leek et al., 2019). In SMEs, despite evidence that business performance can be enhanced through digital marketing (Cenamora, Parida, & Wincent, 2019), the adoption of these practices remains low level and the reasons why are poorly understood (Quinton et al., 2018; Quinton & Simkin, 2017).

Even less is known about how B2B SMEs practice digital marketing, with just a few studies that consider these firms' social media use (e.g., Brink, 2017; Drummond, McGrath, & O'Toole, 2018; Michaelidou, Siama-gka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016). These studies tend to highlight the barriers small B2Bs face in adopting social media practices, with much less consideration of their use of digital marketing more generally. Existing research implies that these firms are not accessing the benefits of digital marketing enjoyed by B2Cs or larger firms, which is potentially concerning, given that SMEs are major economic contributors (European Commission, 2019) that significantly impact other firms' performance through their roles as suppliers, distributors and consumers (LaPlaca, 2011; Ndubisi & Matanda, 2011).

The use of different marketing practices in small B2Bs than in larger

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<sup>1</sup> The terms ‘digital marketing’ and ‘digital marketing practices’ are used interchangeably in the paper.

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firms is partly explained by contextual issues relating to their B2B and SME settings (Coviello, Brodie, & Munro, 2000; Miller, McAdam, Spieth, & Brady, 2020). Taking SMEs as an example, the resources available to these firms are often limited, there is a focus on short-term goals and greater decision-making power is in the hands of owner-managers, leading to more informal marketing practices<sup>2</sup> than seen in larger firms (Cenamor et al., 2019; Hill, 2001a; Miller et al., 2020; O'Dwyer, Gilmore, & Carson, 2009). A result of these distinct characteristics and ways of working is that the manner digital marketing is practiced in B2Cs or in larger firms may not be suitable for these B2B SMEs. Taking these gaps into consideration, the paper aims to increase understanding of digital marketing in these firms and to reveal the barriers they face in doing so. The paper also investigates to what extent and in what ways these firms adopt digital marketing, and which contextual internal and external factors have an impact.

These research questions are addressed through a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews carried out within the heavy oil and gas industry, located in Aberdeen in Scotland (UK). The city is home to operations in the North Sea upstream oil and gas sector and plays a significant role within its supply chain. In this highly contracted industry, major operators and contractors are serviced by many SMEs operating in the knowledge-intensive and high-technology sectors connected to oil and gas (Crabtree, Bower, & Keogh, 1997; Keogh & Evans, 1998). By focusing on firms that combine B2B and SME characteristics, the paper contributes to knowledge about why they have been slow to adopt digital marketing and reveals how their marketing practices are impacted by internal and external factors linked to their contexts. The first contribution is to identify the internal and external factors linked to the B2B SME context, which both influence and act as barriers to digital marketing practice. The second contribution is to reveal the distinctive pattern of marketing practices arising from this combination of internal and external factors, and the limited role of digital marketing within it. The final contribution, which flows from the second, is to extend the debate about digital marketing's use by showing empirically that a "one size fits all" ways of thinking about digital marketing is not appropriate for B2B SMEs.

The paper is organized as follows: in section two, the existing literature is reviewed, and research propositions are presented. Section three describes the methodology and section four details the key findings. In section five, the contributions to knowledge and practical implications are discussed, then section six identifies limitations and proposes future research directions.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Setting the scene: Digital marketing in B2B and SME firms

The emergence of the internet and new technology have transformed the role of marketing and its practice (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Quinton & Simkin, 2017). Digital marketing harnesses the power of the internet through websites, search engine marketing, digital advertising, social media and networks, e-mails and mobile, e-relationship management, and is associated with various benefits (Keller, 2009; Wymbs, 2011). These channels can be used to create awareness, boost brand image, attract new customers, improve customer service, enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, increase sales, and reduce costs (Brennan & Croft, 2012; Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluo, & Jayawardhena, 2012; Karjaluo et al., 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). These benefits suggest that B2Bs and SMEs, which build deep relationships with their customers, could have much to gain from using digital marketing (Chaffey & Smith, 2017; Wymbs, 2011). For example, digital

<sup>2</sup> Marketing practices are defined here as specific marketing activities, tasks and processes that are produced by or involve marketing practitioners or those responsible for marketing within the firm (Dibb, Simões, & Wensley, 2014).

offers the functionality to develop integrated, targeted and measurable communications, to acquire, retain and develop deeper customer relationships (Karjaluo et al., 2015; Parsons, Zeisser, & Waitman, 1998; Winer, 2009; Wymbs, 2011); with digital platforms having the potential to support value creation and customer engagement, which are vital to SMEs (Matarazzo, Penco, Profumo, & Quaglia, 2021).

Despite this potential (Cenamor et al., 2019; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015), the adoption of digital marketing by B2B SMEs remains limited and these benefits are not being fully realized (Brink, 2017; Müller, Pommeranz, Weisser, & Voigt, 2018; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Although these firms' preferences for traditional face-to-face communication techniques is a key issue (Järvinen et al., 2012; Leek et al., 2019), other factors come into play, a point that can be illustrated by considering B2B SMEs' low usage of social media (Brink, 2017; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Shaltoni, 2017). Thus these firms often under-appreciate the value of social media and are uncertain about how it can support their brands (Michaelidou et al., 2011). They also often lack the required technical knowledge and resources, find it difficult to measure ROI and have problems adopting the newer business practices that social media requires (Järvinen et al., 2012; Jussila, Kärkkäinen, & Aramo-Immonen, 2014). Resistance from management and other key decision-makers can further inhibit digital marketing's use (Järvinen et al., 2012; Karjaluo et al., 2015; Quinton et al., 2018), contributing to low levels of adoption in both B2B (Müller et al., 2018; Shaltoni, 2017; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015) and SME settings (Camilleri, 2019; McCann & Barlow, 2015). SMEs and their managers have also been shown to display cognitive inertia – defined as difficulty in switching from one rule or approach to another (Messner & Vosgerau, 2010) – when adopting digital platforms (Cenamor et al., 2019).

Studies which examine digital marketing's use in B2Bs and SMEs, suggest it is influenced by firms' existing marketing practices, which in turn are shaped by internal and external factors relating to these firms' contexts (Chong, Shafaghi, & Tan, 2011; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Quinton et al., 2018; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Although these earlier studies do not focus specifically on firms that are both B2B and SME, they do provide useful insights into the factors that are likely to shape digital marketing use. They also suggest a better understanding is needed of how the internal and external factors that shape these firms' operating practices – what Quinton et al. (2018) refer to as push and pull factors – influence their adoption and use of digital marketing. This paper therefore considers those factors in relation to two contextual strands, one relating to the SME characteristics (small size) of the participating firms and the other to their B2B status.

When brought together, these two strands reveal a unique context for B2B SMEs, associated with two sets of internal and external factors that affect these firms' adoption and use of digital marketing. The first is their small size and the limits it places on their marketing and financial resources; while the second, is the emphasis these firms give to relationship building, due to operating within B2B (Brink, 2017). While several studies have investigated specific aspects of digital marketing, such as B2B SMEs' use of social media marketing (e.g., Brink, 2017; Drummond et al., 2018; Michaelidou et al., 2011); no study has systematically considered these factors, or how they influence or create barriers to digital marketing within these firms. In the following sections, research propositions linked to the combination of these contextual strands and the underpinning internal and external factors are presented.

### 2.2. B2B SME contextual strands and digital marketing

B2B firms' marketing practices have traditionally differed from those in B2C (LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009), with a greater reliance on sales and face-to-face relationship building. These firms' characteristics and traditional ways of working help to explain the reported low level and basic adoption of digital marketing (Järvinen et al., 2012; Karjaluo et al., 2015; Leek et al., 2019; Shaltoni, 2017). Thus, B2B customers are often highly knowledgeable, require detailed information, and the

products or services they purchase are typically more complex than in B2C settings. The purchasing process is often longer and more involved, with B2B firms typically having fewer and closer customer relationships (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Coviello & Brodie, 2001). As a result, these relationships are characterized by greater cooperation and more emphasis on physical performance and personal selling (Jussila et al., 2014).

In SMEs, marketing practices are also distinctive: the owner-manager has relatively more power than in larger firms, the organizational structure is less formal, there tend to be fewer resources, and a greater concentration on short-term goals (Centeno & Hart, 2011; Gilmore, Carson, & Grant, 2001). These practices are often constrained by limited cash flow and technical marketing knowledge. They are characterized by a sales-like focus on customers and their needs (O'Dwyer et al., 2009), such that these practices tend to be intuitive, network and competence-based (Gilmore, Gallagher, & Henry, 2007). Thus, SMEs are more likely to undertake informal, sporadic, reactive, unstructured marketing, focused on short-term tactics, rather than on long-term strategic planning (Reijonen, 2010).

Digital marketing's benefits for B2B SMEs are influenced by these traditional ways of working in each of the B2B and SME contextual strands. In the early days of the internet, it was assumed that B2B firms would benefit from greater access to global opportunities, increased communication opportunities, and better supported and more effective business relationships (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Honeycutt Jr., Flaherty, & Benassi, 1998). However, later studies have advocated instead for digital marketing to support traditional sales activities within B2B firms (Järvinen et al., 2012; Karjaluo et al., 2015), emphasizing the creation of brand awareness and enhancement of brand image to support sales and customer acquisition (Brennan & Croft, 2012).

While SMEs could improve their performance by adopting digital platforms (Cenamor et al., 2019), they face barriers to achieving these benefits (Matarazzo et al., 2021). For example, they may lack the specific capabilities needed to succeed with digital marketing (Quinton et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is a tendency for these firms to focus on digital marketing as a set of tools, rather than to guide strategy (Quinton & Simkin, 2017), with the use of social media and digital communication platforms remaining more tactical than strategic (Bocconcelli et al., 2018). Thus, McCann and Barlow (2015) find that social media use in these firms can be triggered by a desire to experiment, perhaps as a result of customers' social media use; by staff interest or knowledge; as a way to improve customer service, reduce costs, promote the brand or improve awareness; or to directly increase sales. These findings suggest that digital is being used to support more traditional business practices associated with these firms' emphasis on sales and tactical marketing goals.

Looking specifically at B2B SMEs, digital marketing benefits are also likely to arise from how digital can support traditional marketing practices. Rather than achieving sales directly from social media, increases in sales and profit will more likely result from the enhanced business communications that digital can bring (Brink, 2017). Reflecting the role of internal factors in B2B and SME digital marketing adoption, the following is proposed:

**Proposition 1.** B2B SMEs' digital marketing practices are influenced by contextual factors from these firms' settings.

In the following two sections, a more detailed review of the internal and external factors that influence the context of B2B SMEs and which shape digital marketing practices is developed.

### 2.3. Internal factors and B2B SMEs' digital marketing

Extant literature suggests that internal factors linked to the B2B and SME contexts of these firms, such as their resources and capabilities, business culture and organizational structure, influence the adoption of digital marketing and, in some cases, act as barriers to its use.

Capabilities that can be barriers include low awareness of digital marketing's potential advantages, fear of the technology and resistance to newer technology-enabled practices (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010). This unwillingness to change is often linked to a shortfall in digital marketing skills and knowledge (Matarazzo et al., 2021; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). In small firms, expert support from external providers may be needed to bridge this capability gap if progress is to be made with using digital (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010). However, resource-related factors can also play a role (Cenamor, Parida and Wincent, 2019; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010), with many small firms having insufficient financial means to buy in external expertise or to employ a marketing manager. The flat organizational structure in these firms means that marketing decisions are usually made by the main decision-maker, typically the owner-manager, who may lack the necessary marketing knowledge (Camilleri, 2019; Reijonen, 2010; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015) and need to balance these commitments alongside wide-ranging and demanding operational activities (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010).

These kinds of barriers illustrate the influence of internal factors linked to the B2B and SME contexts of these firms on their adoption of digital marketing practices. Business culture is another important factor. For B2B firms, compatibility with existing internal practices needs to be considered alongside the perceived advantage of using digital marketing practices (Shaltoni, 2017). In the same vein, Keinänen and Kuivalainen (2015) find that corporate culture and the support of colleagues are influential in the B2Bs' use of social media. Because the owner-manager is often the key decision-maker within SMEs (Camilleri, 2019; Centeno & Hart, 2011; Hill, 2001a; O'Dwyer et al., 2009), firm-specific and owner-manager factors overlap and work together to influence digital marketing adoption (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010). For example, these firms' strong sales orientation (Hill, 2001a, 2001b) leads them to rely heavily on the owner-managers' personal networks and on more traditional methods of building relationships. While SMEs rely on these networks to conduct business (Durkin, McGowan, & McKeown, 2013; Gilmore et al., 2001; Hill, 2001a, 2001b), B2B firms of all sizes also take a relationship perspective to their sales and business development (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009). Strong relationships and a clear focus on the specific needs of their customers within their marketing are crucial in both contexts (Gilliland & Johnston, 1997; O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Quinton et al., 2018; Shaltoni, 2017). Given the relevance of these internal factors in shaping digital marketing adoption and use in both B2Bs and SMEs, the following is proposed:

**Proposition 2.** B2B SMEs' digital marketing practices are influenced by internal factors relating to their context, such as business culture, resources and capabilities, and organizational structure.

### 2.4. External factors and B2B SMEs' digital marketing

External factors, linked to both the B2B and SME contexts, have been shown to shape digital marketing adoption and practices within these firms. These factors include the types and characteristics of customers, the nature of the competitive set, and various market and industry characteristics. In terms of customer factors, B2B sectors tend to include fewer and more knowledgeable customers (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Jussila et al., 2014), and involve longer, more complex buying processes (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Brink, 2017); while in SMEs, product ranges are often more limited, sometimes with more complex products serving niche segments (O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Reijonen, 2010). Taken together, these factors help explain the preference for traditional face-to-face sales and marketing practices in B2Bs and SMEs.

The nature of the competitive set is also influential in the use of digital marketing practices within these firms (Cenamor et al., 2019; O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Shaltoni, 2017). For SMEs facing pressure to remain competitive (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010), the actions of

competitors that have engaged with digital marketing can encourage them to do the same (Gilmore et al., 2007; Wagner, Fillis, & Johansson, 2003). However, in industries and settings where the use of digital marketing is not yet the norm, those pressures are less likely to apply. As such, the way these small firms practice marketing can be profoundly affected both by their operating context (O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Quinton et al., 2018), as well as by their more limited impact in the marketplace (Gilmore et al., 2001; Miller et al., 2020).

Market and industry characteristics also affect the marketing practices used. SMEs typically have limited opportunities to achieve economies of scale (Miller et al., 2020), so the scalability benefits offered by digital marketing may be needed less than in larger firms. Their small size can also impact these firms' resilience, such that they can be profoundly affected by wider macro environment factors, like economic cycles (Wagner et al., 2003). Investment in digital, offers these firms the potential to extend their marketing reach and help mitigate these negative factors. In B2B, industry characteristics are also seen to influence the use of digital marketing practices. For example, these firms' customer relationships are more likely to be covered by legal contracts to ensure confidentiality and information security (Jussila et al., 2014; Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Shaltoni, 2017), which may result in an unwillingness to engage in open, online discussions and conversations that could negatively affect customer perceptions. Reflecting the role of external factors in shaping the adoption and use of digital marketing practices, B2B and SME, the following is proposed:

**Proposition 3.** B2B SMEs' digital marketing practices are influenced by external factors relating to their context, such as customer characteristics, competitive set and the specific industry.

Drawing on the extant literature, Table 1 summarizes the key internal and external factors that have the potential to influence or act as barriers to B2B SMEs' adoption and use of digital marketing.

Through these three propositions, the paper investigates more deeply how digital marketing practices among B2B SMEs are influenced by internal and external contextual factors linked to two contextual strands, their small size and their B2B status, and identifies the barriers they face. When combined, these contextual strands reveal a very specific context that both challenges and influences digital marketing practices in small B2Bs. Some of these internal and external factors arising from B2B and SME contexts overlap, and others are specifically associated with either the B2B or SME strands. Internally, both types of firms primarily focus on sales and relationship building and usually lack specialist knowledge related to marketing and digital marketing. Externally, these firms are influenced by the types of products they sell, their customer characteristics, existing competition, and wider industry factors. At the same time, B2B SMEs are also influenced and shaped by specific factors arising from SME strand, such as their focus on operational activities, their limited resources, the informal and flat organizational structure and the owner-manager's importance; while the B2B strand is associated with a particular corporate culture, the complexity of professional purchasing, legal contracts and confidentiality issues. The gathered empirical data scrutinizes how the factors within this context influence the adoption and practice of digital marketing within B2B SMEs in the oil and gas industry.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design

This study employs a qualitative research approach, which is favored for studying contemporary phenomenon, when the influencing variables are poorly understood (Creswell, 2014) and when investigating complex business-related phenomenon in specific contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). An exploratory research approach is advocated in the following conditions: when emerging questions and procedures are involved; if data collection is undertaken in the participant's setting;

**Table 1**

Internal and external factors' influence on digital marketing in SME and B2B firms.

Factors	Small firms	B2B firms	Implications
Internal factors			
Business culture	Sales orientation (Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Reijonen, 2010)	Focus on personal relationships and personal selling (Brink, 2017; Järvinen et al., 2012; Jussila et al., 2014; Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019) Focus on relationship perspective with more complex, balanced and longer duration relationships (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Järvinen et al., 2012; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009) Importance of buyer-seller relationships (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; Jussila et al., 2014; Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Kärkkäinen, Jussila, & Väisänen, 2010; Obal & Lancioni, 2013) Corporate culture (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015) Culture driven by manufacturing/technology (Lilien, 2016)	To diminish the perceived applicability and need for digital marketing
Capabilities	Reliance on personal contact networks (Cenamor et al., 2019; Durkin et al., 2013; Gilmore et al., 2001; Hill, 2001a, 2001b) Focus on operational activities with little formal/strategic planning (Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010; Reijonen, 2010) Lack of specialist digital knowledge and	Lack of specialist digital knowledge and know-how	To create uncertainty about how and why <i>(continued on next page)</i>

Table 1 (continued)

Factors	Small firms	B2B firms	Implications
	know-how among employees ( Gilmore et al., 2007; Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010; Quinton et al., 2018) Lack of relevant digital competencies and capabilities ( Cenamor et al., 2019; Durkin et al., 2013; Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Matarazzo et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020; Quinton et al., 2018) External/outside support requirements to bolster capabilities ( Durkin et al., 2013; Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010)	among employees (Järvinen et al., 2012; Jussila et al., 2014; Karjaluoto et al., 2015) Perception that digital marketing does not support business objectives and is not compatible with internal practices ( Järvinen et al., 2012; Jussila et al., 2014; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Shaltoni, 2017)	digital marketing should be used
Resources	Small firm size, restricting available resources (Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Miller et al., 2020; Reijonen, 2010; Wagner et al., 2003) Limited resources to devote to digital marketing (Brink, 2017; Cenamor et al., 2019; Durkin et al., 2013; Gilmore et al., 2001; Gilmore et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2020; O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Quinton et al., 2018; Reijonen, 2010; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015)	Preference to allocate resources to other more traditional marketing activities ( Järvinen et al., 2012; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Wang et al., 2019)	May restrict digital marketing's adoption and use
Organizational structure	Informal and flat organizational structure (Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Miller et al., 2020; Quinton et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2003) Importance of owner-managers and their characteristics ( Brink, 2017; Gilmore et al., 2001; Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Karjaluoto &	Misalignment of professional purchasing with digital marketing approach ( Coviello & Brodie, 2001; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009; Lilien, 2016) Organizational complexity ( Karjaluoto et al., 2015)	Can create barriers for integrating digital marketing throughout the firm

Table 1 (continued)

Factors	Small firms	B2B firms	Implications
Product	Huhtamäki, 2010; Quinton et al., 2018; Reijonen, 2010; Wagner et al., 2003) Product types and characteristics ( Durkin et al., 2013; Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010) Small product ranges (Miller et al., 2020)	Product types and characteristics ( Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Jussila et al., 2014; Kärkkäinen et al., 2010) Complex products (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Jussila et al., 2014)	To diminish the perceived applicability of digital marketing
External factors Customers	Customer characteristics ( Durkin et al., 2013; O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Reijonen, 2010; Wagner et al., 2003) Focus on niche markets (Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Miller et al., 2020) Customer preference for/ against use of digital (Durkin et al., 2013; Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010)	Customer characteristics (value chain intermediaries vs individual customers) ( Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Gilliland & Johnston, 1997; Järvinen et al., 2012; Jussila et al., 2014; Kärkkäinen et al., 2010; Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009; Lilien, 2016; Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf, & Donthu, 2017) Customers do not support the use of digital ( Karjaluoto et al., 2015) Long, complex buying process ( Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Brink, 2017; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Lilien, 2016) Highly knowledgeable customers ( Jussila et al., 2014) Fewer, more economically significant customers ( Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Järvinen et al., 2012; Lilien, 2016)	May challenge digital marketing's use in customer communications and interactions
Competition	Competitive pressure (Durkin et al., 2013; Karjaluoto &	Competitive pressure ( Shaltoni, 2017)	Can encourage or discourage the use of digital marketing

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Factors	Small firms	B2B firms	Implications
Operating environment	Huhtamäki, 2010; O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Quinton et al., 2018) Market characteristics ( Durkin et al., 2013; Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010; O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Quinton et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2003) Industry/sector characteristics ( Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010; Wagner et al., 2003) Limited opportunities for economies of scale (Miller et al., 2020) Limited impact on surroundings/ environmental forces/markets ( Gilmore et al., 2001; Hill, 2001a, 2001b)	Market characteristics ( Brink, 2017; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Jussila et al., 2014) Industry/sector characteristics ( Brink, 2017) Significant economic impact (LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009) Varying and fragmented market structure ( Coviello & Brodie, 2001)	May negate and challenge the applicability of digital marketing
Wider trading environment	Macro factors ( Wagner et al., 2003)  Wider environment ( Durkin et al., 2013) Environmental factors ( Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010)	Legal contracts and information security (Jussila et al., 2014; Shaltoni, 2017) Confidentiality ( Karjaluoto et al., 2015)	Can discourage the use of digital marketing

when data analysis involves moving from details to broader general themes; and in instances where the researcher is involved in interpreting data meaning (Creswell, 2014). In this study, this approach enabled rich insights to be gained into the uses and practices of digital marketing within B2B SMEs, an area in which the relationships between constructs have been relatively unexplored.

To gain a full understanding of the phenomenon, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with two groups of practitioners to elucidate the underlying the issues affecting the adoption and use of digital marketing. Reflecting the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, interviews were conducted first, with expert local marketing agencies that service the industry to provide an external professional practitioner viewpoint on digital marketing practices within the sector (Cepeda & Martin, 2005; Perry, 2000); and second, with key decision makers from B2B SMEs that supply the oil and gas sector.

### 3.2. Industry context and sampling

Focusing on how digital marketing is practiced by B2B SMEs from a single industry, allows deep insights to be gained into the research phenomenon. Using a single industry setting to examine digital marketing has been a commonly adopted approach, with previous studies focusing on artisan food and the craft brewery sector (Drummond et al.,

2018), healthcare (Leek et al., 2019), aerospace (Chirumalla, Oghazi, & Parida, 2018) and fashion (Gaudenzi, Mola, & Rossignoli, 2021). To fully comprehend how incumbent firms use digital, understanding the context in which it is used is important (Morgan-Thomas, 2016), particularly so given this specific focus of this study is on how context influences the variables affecting digital marketing practices (Sobh & Perry, 2006).

The oil and gas sector is a significant contributor to the UK economy. The industry hub for upstream operational activities in Aberdeen (Scotland) has been described as an “industrial village” (Keogh & Bower, 1997), with both large and small firms located there and much of the local economy connected with oil and gas. Due to the specific industry and regional focus, Aberdeen is described as “a highly localized ‘cluster’ of oil-related activities”, where the importance of personal contacts and networks is significant (MacKinnon, Chapman, & Cumbers, 2004, p.103). Business opportunities tend to arise through localized networks in this relatively small city, where the key decision-makers tend to know one another (MacKinnon et al., 2004). In acutely combining B2B and SME characteristics, the oil and gas B2B SMEs enable a sharp focus on the nature of digital marketing practices in firms which rely strongly on traditional business practices.

The upstream oil and gas industry consists of three types of companies: several operators, major contractors, and many SMEs that provide specialized products and services to the knowledge and technology-intensive sectors connected with oil and gas (Crabtree et al., 1997; Green & Keogh, 2000). The industry is characterized by high levels of sub-contracting. Consequently, as in many areas of the economy, SMEs contribute significantly to the effectiveness and efficiency of the industry through the products and services they supply (Ndubisi & Matanda, 2011). Understanding and acknowledging the specific context of these small B2B firms – sometimes referred to as small, technology-based, oil-related companies [STBORs] (Keogh & Bower, 1997) – is therefore important.

Non-probability convenience sampling was used to identify and select the interview participants from both small B2B firms and local marketing agencies. Existing networks and connections between the university and the industry were used to approach the participants. The lead researcher was also able to use personal industry networks gained from previous professional experience working as a marketing manager. However, gaining access to participants proved to be a difficult task. When the interviews were conducted, a major downturn in oil and gas was impacting the industry, with many companies facing financial difficulties and some being affected by bankruptcy. This situation was also negatively affecting investment in marketing. Consequently, many of the SMEs were unwilling to participate, explaining that they did not “do digital marketing” or much other marketing either. Major changes were also taking place among agencies, with two agencies (A and B) going into administration shortly after the interviews, while another agency (C) entered a merger to counter the effects of the recession.

After intense negotiations, 16 participants from 14 different companies agreed to be interviewed. Details of the research participants are provided in Table 2. As this was a qualitative study driven by analytical rather than statistical generalization and given the relatively small number of firms operating within the industry in this location, this number of participants was deemed to be suitably representative of the firms operating and providing marketing services within it (Riege, 2003; Sobh & Perry, 2006).

The marketing agencies included in the expert interviews were all providing digital and B2B marketing services to the oil and gas industry. Six participants were from key marketing agencies serving the local oil and gas industry, including one managing director, one director, two marketing directors, one creative studio manager and one digital marketing strategist. Each agency was positioned distinctively, with Agency A specifically focused on digital marketing, while the others presented themselves as more traditional marketing agencies. These agencies were selected because of their familiarity with the oil and gas industry within

**Table 2**  
Research participants.

Company type	Case company	Company details	Key informant	Key informant role	Interview length
Marketing Agency	Agency A	Growth agency	Manager A1 and Manager A2	Managing Director and Marketing Director	01:04:30
Marketing Agency	Agency B	Media and communications agency	Manager B	Creative Studio Manager	44:52
Marketing Agency	Agency C	Integrated communications agency	Manager C	Marketing Director	43:24
Marketing Agency	Agency D	B2B marketing communications agency	Manager D	Digital Marketing Strategist	58:36
Marketing Agency	Agency E	Brand agency	Manager E	Director	46:53
B2B SME Firm	Firm F	Provider of subsea services personnel and training	Manager F	Business Development Manager	45:48
B2B SME Firm	Firm G	Provider of management consultancy services to oil and gas industry	Manager G	Director	30:29
B2B SME Firm	Firm H	Provider of expandable technology for oil and gas exploration and production	Manager H	Operations Manager	25:21
B2B SME Firm	Firm L	Provider of expandable solutions for the energy industry	Manager L	Sales Engineer	43:17
B2B SME Firm	Firm M	Provider of expansion joints, passive fire protection and heat resistant fabric solutions	Manager M	Director	59:04
B2B SME Firm	Firm N1 and Firm N2	Provider of isolation solutions and Provider of solutions for well intervention data profiling	Manager N	Business Development Manager and Customer Solutions & Support Director	38:16
B2B SME Firm	Firm O	Provider of primary casing centralizers and float equipment	Manager O1 and Manager O2	Sales Engineer and Managing Director	01:10:37
B2B SME Firm	Firm P	Provider of subsea inspection and verification services	Manager P	Operations Manager	26:39
B2B SME Firm	Firm Q	Provider of competence solutions for energy industry	Manager Q	Director	01:17:16

the Aberdeen area, rather than because they had direct relationships with the B2B SMEs that subsequently provided interviews. All those interviewed had a good understanding of the resource and other challenges facing small B2B SMEs supplying the industry and of the marketing practices they were using.

All selected SMEs were undertaking digital marketing in at least a limited sense, with the minimum criteria set at having a company website and using one or more social media channels. These firms were typical Aberdeen upstream oil and gas industry players, as they provided highly specific products or services either directly to operators or to contractors serving the operators. Typically, these SMEs were established by owner-managers, who had previously been working in the largest industry companies, such as operators and contractors, for many years and had established working connections with the key industry players and decision makers before setting up their own small firms. Thus, the participating firms could be described as “traditional” oil and gas SMEs. The ten interviewees were all in functional roles typically found in B2B SMEs serving the industry, including business development managers, directors, operations managers, and sales engineers. In each case, the manager interviewed, irrespective of their main functional role, was the individual who was mainly responsible for making marketing decisions within the B2B SME. As none of the participating firms had a marketing manager, this profile of SME interviewees reflected the spread of the marketing role among various employees. The fact that over half of the respondents were firm directors or owner-managers, highlights that most marketing decisions are in the hands of the most senior managers.

### 3.3. Data collection and analysis

A semi-structured interview format comprising pre-determined themes was used to allow flexibility across different interviews (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). This approach enabled interviews to be both systematic and comprehensive, while simultaneously conversational and informal (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The first phase comprised the interviews with the marketing agencies. Because these firms were local experts in providing marketing services to local oil and gas firms, they were ideally placed to comment on their use of digital marketing. The interview guide for the agencies focused on four broad

themes: digital marketing in general, digital marketing within the oil and gas industry, digital marketing before and during the recession, digital marketing and the future. The second data gathering phase involved the interviews with key decision makers in B2B SMEs and focused on similar broad themes to those used the agencies: digital marketing within the industry, marketing practices and the firm, digital marketing practices and the firm, digital marketing in the future.

During the interviews, there was some hesitancy from managers from both the agencies and B2B SMEs to discuss certain digital marketing topics. Due to the subject matter, some of those interviewed in the B2B SMEs were unfamiliar with certain marketing and digital marketing concepts and terminology. Some of the agency interviewees were also slightly uncomfortable when questioned about some aspects of digital marketing, perhaps because they too lacked the necessary in-depth knowledge. This uncertainty was reflected in very brief responses to some questions, whereas responses to other questions were often more detailed. To maintain goodwill and participation during the interviews (Saunders et al., 2009), the researcher observed interviewees carefully, allowing them to focus and elaborate most on the topics about which they felt comfortable. Although this resulted in some interviews being less structured, the process enabled deeper insights and understanding to be gained into the focal areas.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Each lasted between 25 min to 77 min, resulting in 180 pages of data. The transcribed interviews were then uploaded and analyzed using NVivo 11 software. For thematic interview analysis, which aims to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data, the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. The process was recursive, rather than linear, with movement back and forth between the phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saunders et al., 2009). The transcribed interviews were read several times by the lead researcher to familiarize themselves with the data and to note initial ideas. This kind of inductive approach can be used to identify themes that are strongly linked to the data (Patton, 1990, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). After initial codes were generated, they were grouped into potential themes. A number of iterations followed, which resulted in five themes being identified that underpin and explain digital marketing practices within small B2Bs, as discussed in the following section.

To safeguard the quality of the qualitative study, the suggested



research principles of prior theory use, triangulation and replication logic were followed (Sobh & Perry, 2006). Thus, before collecting empirical data, the existing literature on B2B and SMEs' marketing and digital marketing was explored. Triangulation was achieved by conducting the interviews with both marketing agencies and B2B SMEs, allowing a fuller understanding of the phenomenon under investigation to be gained. Replication logic was followed during the empirical data collection to support non-statistical generalizations. Validity and reliability were further ensured by adopting the four qualitative research design tests of confirmability, credibility, transferability, and dependability (Riege, 2003). To ensure confirmability, the research strategy and methodology have been explicitly explained and theory was reviewed prior to the empirical data collection. For credibility, rich and meaningful descriptions of the data have been provided, with interview excerpts used to illustrate the rich and meaningful data collected. Furthermore, the findings from both the agencies and the B2B SME firms demonstrate internal coherence. Transferability is demonstrated through the empirical data from firm and agency managers, which shows similar findings in relation to the research phenomenon of digital

marketing practices. To ensure dependability, the study was guided by clear research aim and research questions.

#### 4. Findings

The findings demonstrate the simplistic and somewhat limited application of digital marketing by B2B SMEs from the oil and gas industry and identify some of the challenges faced. Insights are provided from the two sets of interviewees. The marketing agency managers describe the potential benefits of digital marketing and offer an expert view of what good practice could look like for firms that embrace it. The managers from the small B2Bs provide a different perspective, explaining how digital marketing should fit within their broader business practices and how it can be used to support these existing ways of doing business. Rather than extolling digital marketing's benefits, these managers were quick to identify the challenges they faced in its adoption. At the same time, the findings indicate an alignment in how these two interviewee groups explain the business practices within these B2B SMEs: *generational differences, focus on relationships, limited resources,*

**Table 3**  
The relationship between themes and internal factors, external factors, and implications for contextual strands.

Theme	Sample quotations	Internal factor	External factor	Interplay between contextual strands, factors and context
Generational differences	<p>“People with that suspicion and lack of understanding, because they have gone 30 years through their career without needing to bother about social media or online PR, or anything like that, so why should they suddenly change now?” (Manager D)</p> <p>“There's an awful lot of people in Aberdeen, who are at a stage in their life, who don't spend time in front of a computer, because that's not what they're good at. I can think of a lot of guys who probably are in senior, if not owners of small businesses, sell equipment or they rent equipment, they're not digitally focused.” (Manager Q)</p>	Business culture Capabilities Organizational structure	Customers Operating environment	This factor is distinctive to the oil and gas industry setting. Internally, business culture is influenced by older key decision managers; externally, this industry is dominated by older key decision makers, including customers themselves, who have limited knowledge about marketing and its potential/benefits.
Focus on relationships	<p>“Generally, they all still see marketing as a role down, that the right one-to-one business development is how they still see it.” (Manager E)</p> <p>“My role has always been about building relationships. If you meet someone who worked for a company, who moved on to another company, who you don't have as a client, and that person is a decision-maker, then there is every chance that that person could bring more company on board, based on his or her personal experience.” (Manager F)</p>	Business culture Organizational structure Product	Customers Operating environment	Internal factors are linked to how B2Bs and SMEs operate, with complex products driving a strong focus on relationship building. Industry norms and customer preferences within oil and gas operating environment reinforce this traditional way of operating.
Limited resources	<p>“We would tell them that they need people internally to help manage digital marketing and push that, but whether they attribute somebody to, or not, sometimes they just build it and then left it like that, there was no continuous effort to maintain that and push that”. (Manager B)</p> <p>“We don't have a marketing company to constantly update it or a marketing person working for the company, so it would be done by myself or my brother. Again, we're too small.” (Manager M)</p>	Capabilities Resources		Internally, the limited capabilities and resources (financial, expertise and time) combine with the perception that digital marketing is incompatible with existing business practices in this B2B setting.
Limited marketing role	<p>“If you are a technology company that offers drillers some technical widget that allows them to see what's going on down the hole, you will know the 20 people who you need to talk to. You will know them face-to-face, so they are not finding you through the website, they are not doing a search; for example, downhole widgets, you know who they are already.” (Manager B)</p> <p>“Go back 20 years, it was all word-of-mouth, marketing wasn't a big thing back then, because everyone knew each other and that's how they got their business.” (Manager N)</p>	Business culture Capabilities Resources Organizational structure		Internally, a culture of not valuing marketing, which was seen as less important than business development and sales. Limited understanding of marketing by key decision makers who questioned its relevance and applicability. Other players within oil and gas (customers and competitors) hold similar views, reducing the pressure to change practices.
Supporting digital marketing role	<p>“They [oil and gas companies] see their website and digital marketing as backing-up. It is ensuring that if people, who know them, are interested in what they do, everything is there, and that they are kept up to the forefront of people's minds.” (Manager E)</p> <p>“I'd like to think digital media could be better for our business, but at the moment I've got nothing concrete to say it has been. The Google AdWords hasn't given us any extra sales and the website hasn't given us extra sales.” (Manager M)</p>		Operating environment Wider trading environment	Very specific factor to the oil and gas setting. External factors, such as the recession are beginning to influence a shift towards more digital marketing, yet concerns remain about confidentiality and the risks of digitally sharing sensitive information.

limited marketing role and supporting digital marketing role in business practice.

Rather than emphasizing the individual internal and external factors that influence digital marketing's use, it is the interplay between these factors within this B2B SME context that is important to explain how digital marketing is practiced here. Table 3 provides illustrative interview quotes that relate to these five themes. In each instance, the first comes from an agency manager, while the second is from a B2B SME manager. The table also demonstrates the relationships between the themes and the internal and external factors, showing the interplay between the contextual strands in this specific context. Bringing these strands together to reveal the combination of internal and external factors at play, sheds light on the marketing practices in these firms and the reasons for them. As will be shown, these identified factors typically acted as barriers to more developed digital marketing use, with small B2Bs adopting a more limited form that best supported their traditional marketing practices.

Overall, the findings indicate rather limited digital marketing use among these B2B SMEs specifically, and across the oil and gas industry more generally. Significant challenges to digital marketing's use arise from the relatively low importance assigned to marketing within these firms and the limited resources available to support its application. The managers from these small firms tend to be from an older generation, with a preference for traditional sales activities and face-to-face interaction, such that digital marketing provides only a supporting role within their operating practices.

#### 4.1. Generational differences

Generational differences or the “*generation thing*” played a significant role in B2B SMEs' marketing practices and acted as a barrier to digital marketing. Typically, the key SME decision-maker is the owner-manager, who has significant influence on the firm's practices and performance. Some B2B SME interviewees referred to themselves as if they were the business, rather than to the business as a separate entity. Thus, the fact these firms were run by older managers from was a significant internal factor influencing digital marketing practice. Overall, these managers had strong views regarding marketing and digital marketing practices. They generally argued that marketing had little to offer their sales-focused industry, suggesting that they chose to run the business “*how I've done it for the last 15 years*” (Manager G).

Due to their age profile, the technology skills of these managers tended to be limited, and they were strongly averse to digital marketing. Marketing agency managers were quick to confirm that the limited digital knowledge of the “*elderly gentleman at the top*” was a barrier to digital marketing. The B2B SME managers often recognized their technology-related limitations, with the following expressions being used to describe themselves: “*I haven't quite made it into the 21st century yet on a lot of the technology side*”, “*my generation*”, “*old-fashioned*”, “*too much old-school*”, “*old boy like me*”, “*shows you my IT skills*” and “*shows you how much I know*”. They considered modern technology to be a challenge and recognized their lack of technical knowledge and skills as a significant barrier.

Many older generation managers were reticent to use newer marketing practices and were unfamiliar with the use of digital communications. As Manager M stated, “*the company has been going for some 26 years without any website or anything, so the only dialogue was face-to-face or on the phone*”. As a result of such thinking, despite the view that “*the web is great for some industries*” (Manager N), these firms were minimally involved in digital marketing. Overall, due to this internal factor but also reflecting the industry's broader external characteristics, the whole oil and gas industry was perceived to be “*well behind*”, “*far behind the curve*” and “*way behind in terms of digital marketing*” (Manager D), compared with other sectors. This highly specific oil and gas industry context presented a major challenge for digital marketing.

#### 4.2. Focus on relationships

The importance of relationships was strongly in evidence. This factor was related to both internal and external influences. Internally, these B2B SME managers emphasized that building relationships was the way to conduct their business due to their organizational structure and highly complex niche products. Several interviewees used the term the “*old boys' club*” to refer to how business was conducted, and to highlight the heavy reliance on existing networks. There was a strong dependence on traditional sales techniques, such as sales calls and visits, trade shows, and client entertainment with lunch-and-learn sessions. It was common practice to use business development managers to support this networking activity:

“*We employ them, because they've got a network of people and they know people in the industry. So, like X has worked for years in it and so he knows people and he can go in and say 'I know the drilling engineer, I'll phone him up and say look I've moved companies, but this is what I do. Can I come in and speak to you?' and make a lunch-and-learn and chat to them. And that's how it all seems to work.*” (Manager L).

The business development role was therefore crucial, with Manager F explaining: “*my role has always been about building relationships*”. Business development managers had often been working in the industry for a long time, with strong and established networks, that enabled them to readily win business by speaking to existing connections. However, when these managers left a company, they took these connections with them.

Building relationships and using established networks were extremely important, with word-of-mouth considered the best means of gaining new business. Interviewees argued that “*face-to-face*” and “*word-of-mouth*” were key to acquiring new business. As Manager O2 explained, “*a lot of the customers are ex-customers or people that we've dealt with over the years, they just know we are here*”, while Manager L concluded that, “*90%, probably 95%, of our business is through word-of-mouth*”. Manager H added that the approach of doing business in the industry was, “*who the managing director knows*”, with Manager O1 offering this insight into how these relationships were built: “*you just went around all the different offices, putting your head in the door and that's how we built up a relationship*”. Given that this focus on relationships extended across the oil and gas setting, it was an important external factor influencing the practices used by these firms and the industry as a whole. The agencies also recognized the importance of these networks and relationships, as Manager E explained:

“*We are working with a decommissioning company ... and those five guys, who started two years ago, all worked at the same company three years ago, and now they are starting to work together. And then, two months ago, they set up a sister company, and the three people in the sister company, they all worked together before. And they got another joint venture with a technology company and it's the guy that worked with them two companies ago.*”

One element of traditional sales techniques involved managers in lunch-and-learn sessions and providing client entertainment: in particular, “*a game of golf*”. A common approach to making contact involved simply “*phoning them up*”. Thus, customers were also used to these traditional sales techniques. Showing the importance of context, the specific nature of the oil and gas industry emerged as a significant factor influencing marketing practices. As agency Manager E explained, the especially strong focus on relationships in this industry meant that, “*their marketing isn't the same as in other industries would be, because they know each other, they got that network*”. The industry itself was even described as “*a small village*” (Manager N).

The type of products and services these B2B companies provided was also important. The complexity of products in this industry was considered to reduce the applicability of digital marketing and reinforce

the importance of traditional face-to-face, personal relationships; “*there aren't a lot of different product lines, so therefore you're not chasing an awful lot of different customers, you're chasing a particular customer doing a particular type of job*” (Manager H). This had implications for marketing practice, as another concluded, “*we are probably more a traditional oil and gas company [and] don't have very many competitors*” due to being “*such a small niche market*” (Manager M). One agency manager (Manager A1) used the example of “*a rotating circuit for a horizontal drilling sub*” to explain that because only a very few companies needed this product, it made more sense to use face-to-face interaction than to sell online.

#### 4.3. Limited resources

Company size seemed to directly affect how firms approached their marketing activities, with both small size and limited resources frequently mentioned as key barriers to digital marketing. The limited resources were a significant internal factor relating specifically to the SME characteristics of these firms. They included limited financial resources, a shortfall in the necessary marketing-related skills and knowledge, and a lack of time to devote to marketing activities. Reflecting this issues of size, the firms' managers used phrases such as: “*because of the size of the company*”, “*within the size of the company I work for*”, “*I have to emphasize in the position I was and the size of the company*”, “*for the type of business I work for*”, “*we're just a little small family service company*”, to explain and sometimes to justify why their firm operated in a specific way.

Small size also meant there were limited available resources, as Manager O2 explained, “*Because right now we probably couldn't afford to have many full-time members of a separate marketing department*”. In the same vein, another noted, “*We don't have a marketing company to constantly update it or a marketing person working for the company, so it would be done by myself or my brother. Again, we're too small*” (Manager M). As a result of these resource constraints, digital marketing tended to be managed either by family members, by students/interns or simply by themselves. For example, Manager M's wife helped with the company's LinkedIn page, while he used a student for website redesign, explaining that “*ultimately he doesn't charge much for it, so it would save us some money*”. At the same time, these decision makers' digital marketing knowledge was quite limited, which could act as a barrier. For example, Agency Manager D described the suspicion and lack of understanding he encountered during discussions with clients about pay-per-click advertising: “*How do you know that somebody is a real person, it might just be a robot. I read something that Google has these robots that just knock up clicks automatically*”.

The lack of time for marketing to new customers was a further barrier, primarily because of the perception that, “*on the top of the list is the existing clients*”, who drive the business and bring money to the firm. The time constraints meant that any digital activities, “*need to be fairly maintenance free*”. Manager Q explained that his firm's small size and limited resources meant he always had to focus on operational delivery. He further suggested that this limited operational capacity meant he did not need any marketing to promote his company, arguing that “*at the minute I'm quite happy being under the radar*”.

#### 4.4. Limited marketing role

The findings show that marketing was not considered as important as other operational functions within small B2B firms. The limited emphasis on marketing internally within all of these firms across the sector, was therefore a major barrier within this specific industry. Agency managers were particularly frustrated about this issue. Even when the B2B SMEs had a marketing manager, they tended to lack power, with marketing “*never taken as in-depth as some operational stuff and the production issues*” (Manager B). Agency Manager E described marketing as being seen “*as a tier below in business development*”, and felt that it was regarded as a low-key role: “*I always feel that some companies*

*treated you [marketing manager] like you are ordering mugs, or you are buying cutlery for the kitchen; it is like it's something they have to do, but they don't really put any value in it*”. Several of those interviewed from the small firms – including those that did not have anyone working in marketing – used the expression “*marketing girl*”, in what seemed to be a disparaging way to define a low-key role. These managers were also quite skeptical about spend on marketing communications, seeing it as expenditure with no immediate connection to revenue, which seemed to reinforce the issues raised by the agency managers. Therefore, there was a significant lack of capabilities related to marketing knowledge and a very strong perception that marketing practices were simply not compatible with existing business practices and the products offered.

“*Bottom line for me is the balance sheet; the customers, how much money has come in from them. Never mind all the marketing and all that stuff, bottom line is how much revenue, because people need revenue to come into the company. You can be super marketers, but it's not producing anything at the end of it.*” (Manager O2).

Furthermore, the marketing agency managers also recognized the challenges with marketing in the oil and gas sector. Manager B further acknowledged the differences between B2B and B2C, “*with retail or consumer, you can say, we did x and y happened; with B2B it can be slightly different*”. These interviewees suggested that lead generation needed to be a main focus within these firms but felt that this kind of marketing could help with, “*enhanced visibility which then leads to maybe increased sales*” (Manager E), and with brand building and awareness goals to support this outcome. Thus, the sales-orientation and lack of respect for the role of marketing within these firms, were major barriers for wider digital marketing use, with one-to-one business development activity considered far more important as, “*in Aberdeen oil and gas market is very localized*”, because people tended to know each other for a long time (Manager A1).

Typically, the owner-manager had the major decision-making role within the firm, including overseeing its marketing strategy, even though their marketing knowledge was limited, and they relied heavily on traditional sales techniques. As agency Manager D explained, “*the decision makers in the oil industry tend to be older people, who haven't embraced that, and don't get that, and are a bit suspicious of it [digital marketing]*”, with the consequence that marketing activity tended to be simplistic and there was resistance to extending it. Overall, there was evidence that the specific internal characteristics of these firms within this industry, meant that marketing was not valued.

#### 4.5. Supporting digital marketing role

Despite the limited use of marketing generally and digital marketing specifically, there was evidence that the recent industry changes, some linked to recessionary pressures, was bringing a change in thinking among the B2B SMEs. Due to external changes in competition and shifting customer expectations, there was growing pressure for firms to adopt digital marketing practices. In terms of the industry recession, there was the view that, “*that [the] old B2B way of working is dying*”, with this issue acting as a potential enabler for digital marketing practices:

“*Up until recently nobody needed to know much about digital, because they [oil and gas firms] were just carrying on doing what they always have done, and nobody was asking any questions. Especially at the moment, we are seeing a lot of changes in marketing in companies*” (Manager B).

Before the recession, agency managers suggested that digital marketing was purely a “*box-ticking exercise*”. Although the agencies reported that interest in digital was now growing, as the B2B SMEs adjusted to smaller marketing budgets and the need for greater accountability, the pace of change was slow. While agencies promoted the strategic use of websites as the main digital channel, views about

their value were among the B2B SME managers were mixed:

*“The website is like your front shop window in a big wide world, so you need to be able to have a website that appeals that gets a good hit rate and gets a lot of interest for people looking for your services. The website is a key factor in getting your product or your company recognition to a wider audience.”* (Manager F).

Others were much more skeptical, seeing the website as necessary but not particularly productive: *“I don't expect it really to give us sales; I just see it being there as something nowadays in the 21st century you need a website; people won't take you seriously if you don't have a website”* (Manager G). These comments reinforce the expectations that to be useful, digital needs to drive direct sales. Despite recognizing the importance of having a website, most were “brochure-type” and used to promote information in one direction, rather than as two-way communication channels geared to manage customer relationships in their own right. While admitting they were dubious about what digital marketing might offer, some managers acknowledged that these feelings were partly driven by their lack of knowledge or direct experience of the benefits:

*“The problem is that so far, I have seen no benefit of it, so we've tried Google AdWords, we've tried our website, these are all new formats which we have never had. The business has been going for 27 years and the old-fashioned sales techniques of phoning someone up or getting someone's name, phoning them up, going to see them, take them out for lunch or a game of golf. The old-fashioned way still seems to work, and nothing has made me change my mind from that.”* (Manager M).

Although the B2B SMEs acknowledged that digital could have role in extending traditional businesses practices, their limited digital marketing knowledge acted as a major barrier. To be convinced of digital marketing's value, many felt they would need to see direct sales emerging from its use; and yet as this interviewee explained, *“the Google AdWords hasn't given us any extra sales and the website hasn't given us extra sales”*. Thus, they failed to understand the role that setting strategic marketing goals and using digital marketing could play in building the awareness and maintaining the relationships needed to support future sales and business acquisition. The misplaced expectations of B2B SME interviewees that new sales could be achieved directly via digital channels, seems to be a key limiting factor in digital marketing's adoption and use in this sector. While they acknowledged that it was important to be seen to be online, none of the interviewed managers believed that digital marketing could be used to facilitate relationships with existing or potential customers, which they considered should happen offline.

The B2B SME interviewees were generally dubious about the application of social media to the oil and gas industry. A particular worry was the compatibility of social media with commercially sensitive information. Manager Q shared his concerns: *“there are people who have just been made redundant, who think I can do what he's done and people who will take your creativity and try and progress themselves from that”*. Managers O1 and O2 were also worried about revealing too much sensitive information on LinkedIn: *“I thought very, very carefully about what text I put up there next to the picture and it was minimal... I had to even be careful about the background”*. However, other than this specific concern, the managers were less suspicious of LinkedIn than other social media, viewing it as *“a database of people”*, which was especially useful for identifying potential leads in specific companies. Overall, the managers saw LinkedIn as a tool that could assist their businesses, providing a route through which they could transfer their offline traditional ways of doing business to an online environment. For example, they used this platform to support the sales function within their firms, helping to identify sales leads and establish working relationships with specific individuals within potential customer companies.

## 5. Discussion

The oil and gas SMEs are a particularly interesting case because they acutely combine B2B and SME characteristics, enabling a sharp focus on the implications for digital marketing practices. The findings contribute to knowledge about how digital marketing is used by small B2B firms, showing how the internal and external factors associated with the B2B and SME strands combine to create a specific context that shape these practices. Rather than emphasizing the individual internal and external factors that influence digital marketing's use, it is the interplay between these factors that explains the practices seen.

Such factors lead to the prevalence of traditional sales techniques and the view that digital marketing has limited applicability in this context (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). The findings demonstrate that this sector's traditional sales orientation means the industry itself attaches relatively little value to digital marketing. Furthermore, the barriers these B2B SMEs face in using digital marketing help to explain their low but distinctive utilization of digital marketing. While previous studies have argued that B2Bs and SMEs are missing out on the benefits of digital marketing (Brink, 2017; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015), these findings suggest a more nuanced picture, in which digital marketing is practiced in ways that align with the specific context and challenges these firms face. Consequently, these B2B SMEs perceive their use of digital to be beneficial, even though it might not reflect the best-practice norms used in other firms or sectors.

In line with Proposition 1, the internal and external factors linked to the combined B2B and SME strands, highlight a distinctive pattern of marketing practice with specific digital marketing elements, that is markedly different from B2C and larger B2B firms (LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009). Despite the external drivers to embrace more digital practices, low levels of digital marketing use were found (Järvinen et al., 2012; Karjaluo et al., 2015; Leek et al., 2019; Shaltoni, 2017), with strong preferences for traditional business practices. Specific contextual factors were driving these firms' marketing practices, such as the generational profile of owner managers, the strong focus on relationships and networks (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Gilmore et al., 2001), the lack of value attributed to marketing (Järvinen et al., 2012; Jussila et al., 2014; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Shaltoni, 2017) and the limited available resources (Brink, 2017; Gilmore et al., 2001; Miller et al., 2020; Quinton et al., 2018; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Therefore, these oil and gas SMEs were being influenced by the interplay of internal and external factors with the sector characteristics, resulting in highly context-specific digital marketing practice.

As expected in propositions 2 and 3, a number of internal and external factors (see Table 1) were involved in shaping digital marketing practices. Internal factors acting as major barriers to these practices included those related to business culture (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Reijonen, 2010) and to the importance of owner-managers (Brink, 2017; Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Reijonen, 2010), who had limited digital marketing skills and knowledge (Karjaluo et al., 2015; Matarazzo et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020; Quinton et al., 2018). As previous studies have identified (Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Gilmore et al., 2001; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009), the strong relationship emphasis when conducting business was also a factor. These small B2Bs were strongly influenced by the industry itself (Brink, 2017; Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Durkin et al., 2013; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Quinton et al., 2018), which in this case was a further barrier to digital marketing use. As a result, customer characteristics (Järvinen et al., 2012; O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Reijonen, 2010) and the preferences of these customers for traditional marketing practices (Durkin et al., 2013; Karjaluo et al., 2015; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010), were influential external factors. Unlike in other studies (Durkin et al., 2013; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; O'Dwyer et al., 2009; Quinton et al., 2018), the B2B SMEs did not appear to be pressured by competitors to use digital because their direct competitors were not

using digital either. In line with existing literature on the influence of macro factors (Durkin et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2003), the economic recession was identified as an enabler for digital marketing adoption among these B2B SMEs.

### 5.1. Theoretical contributions

The first contribution is the identification of internal and external factors linked to the B2B SME context, which acted as barriers to digital marketing practice and shaped its use. Consistent with previous studies of marketing in SMEs (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Quinton et al., 2018; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015), the findings showed that limited resources and marketing-related skills acted as constraints. This reinforces the influence of resource-related factors in digital marketing adoption (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Reijonen, 2010). Leaving marketing decisions in the hands of busy key decision makers, who lack the necessary time (Gilmore et al., 2007; Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010) or skills (Camilleri, 2019; Reijonen, 2010; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015), made it difficult for these firms to benefit from digital marketing. The age profile of these individuals appeared to exacerbate the problem, as they preferred traditional ways of doing business, seemed unwilling to change their practices (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010) and were not positively predisposed to digital marketing (Shaltoni, 2017).

The firms were also strongly influenced by the nature of the industry itself (Quinton et al., 2018). Oil and gas is contract-based, has complex product and services and long sales cycles, small customer numbers and high barriers to entry for suppliers; with these small B2B firms occupying an important position within the supply chain (Ndubisi & Mataka, 2011). To maintain this position, as has been suggested in previous studies, they focused strongly on building relationships and networking (Avlonitis & Karayanni, 2000; LaPlaca & Katrichis, 2009). In operating “well behind” or “behind the curve” of digital marketing practices, the oil and gas industry itself also tended to reinforce the barriers to digital use and to mitigate the applicability of digital marketing (Karjaluo & Huhtamäki, 2010; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). This situation contrasts with the position in some other B2B sectors, such as health care (Leek et al., 2019), which have been more forthright in introducing innovative digital marketing.

The second contribution is specific to B2B SME marketing. The findings reveal that the combination of internal and external factors associated with the combined B2B and SME strands yield a distinctive pattern of marketing practice and preferred digital elements. Reflecting the importance of relationships in how B2B SMEs conduct business (Coviello & Brodie, 2001; Gilmore et al., 2001), these firms generated business opportunities through existing contacts and networks (Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Gilmore et al., 2001; MacKinnon et al., 2004). Furthermore, the relatively low customer numbers of these small B2Bs, meant they were able to deal with each customer individually. Their digital marketing use followed a similar pattern, supporting and extending their traditional ways of conducting business, e.g., by using LinkedIn to support their relationship building. While digital marketing is often used to acquire new customers (Wymbbs, 2011), for these small firms the emphasis was heavily on retaining existing customers, as the route to driving sales. This priority was also partly because their limited operational capacity, meant these B2B SMEs only had the capacity to serve a limited number of customers in a given period of time.

Contrary to Karjaluo et al.'s (2015) study of digital in B2B, these small B2B firms did not use digital marketing for sales support, brand building or for customer communication. Instead, they used it in simple ways to assist in generating sales, and to align with their sales-orientation and sales acquisition targets. Sales were therefore perceived as the key success measure (Gilmore et al., 2007; Reijonen, 2010; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015), with digital marketing communications consisting primarily of traditional marketing communication actions relocated to the digital environment (Karjaluo et al., 2015).

This limited digital marketing use aligns with findings from other B2B studies (Leek et al., 2019), reinforcing the fundamental differences in social media utilization by B2B and B2C firms (Iankova et al., 2019).

The study's third contribution is to extend the debate about digital marketing use by showing empirically that a “one size fits all” approach to digital marketing is not appropriate in different contexts. This fits with calls for a more nuanced understanding of a firm's context in determining the effective use of digital (Reijonen, 2010). While the internal and external factors underpinning the B2B SME context help explain why digital marketing practices have developed as they have, the study indicates that what constitutes “good” digital marketing practice for one firm in one setting, will not necessarily apply beyond that context. Thus, there will also be variations in the use across B2B SMEs due to their context-laden internal business process, availability of resources and capabilities (Brink, 2017). For example, social media use in different B2B SMEs will vary (Brink, 2017), as will their adoption of digital platforms (Miller et al., 2020; Quinton et al., 2018).

This point can be well illustrated by focusing on the digital marketing practices of SMEs serving the different oil and gas sub-sectors. The study findings suggest that variations in digital adoption and use would be expected across different firms supplying the oil and gas industry, based on the distinct pattern of internal and external factors these firms face. While this paper has focused on “traditional” oil and gas SMEs that serve only B2B customers, with relatively low customer and competitor numbers and high entry barriers (e.g., subsea engineering and expansion joint providers); other SMEs servicing the oil and gas industry (e.g., training providers and IT service suppliers), which routinely compete with firms supplying B2C, would be more likely to adopt digital marketing practices seen in B2C settings.

### 5.2. Practical implications

The study provides insights to help B2B SME practitioners reconsider their digital marketing use, suggesting they adopt practices that complement their traditional ways of conducting business. Objectives for digital marketing need to be set accordingly, such as by using digital channels to support sales through building awareness or developing business networks. The internal and external barriers, arising from the SME and B2B strands that shape these firms' use of digital marketing, need to be fully understood and reflected in the adopted practices. A key tension is between the resource constraints that B2B SMEs often face and the managers' understanding of how digital can support their business. In navigating this tension, small firms need to be realistic about the potential for digital platforms and technologies to directly generate positive performance impacts. They should recognize that establishing a digital presence is unlikely to directly increase sales on its own (Cenamor et al., 2019) and should regard digital marketing channels as active business tools that require ongoing resourcing and management.

Furthermore, as many firms need additional support to utilize digital marketing resources successfully, they may need to access external services to help them. Yet, B2B SMEs have criticized digital and marketing agencies for offering “one size fits all” services that often do not meet their needs. During the economic downturn, some of the marketing agencies servicing the oil and gas industry went bankrupt, raising questions about their business resilience and the extent to which they were able to satisfy their customers' needs. When designing their service offerings, the agencies remaining should reflect carefully on the business practices and needs of key decision makers within these firms (Durkin et al., 2013). Nuanced offers are needed for B2B SMEs that build from these firms' distinctive needs and recognize that relatively simplistic digital marketing may initially be all that is needed and can be afforded. The provision of such entry-point digital marketing services could help establish goodwill and lay strong foundations on which to build more sophisticated future provision.

Given the importance of SMEs to the world economy, the findings also have wider implications for policy in terms of support and training

needs. Regional and national government schemes to support these firms' business growth need to be specifically tailored to reflect the distinctive context that shapes their business practices. As small business owners typically lack formal marketing training or education, they are often in need of external advice and support (Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010). However, the specific characteristics and challenges faced by these small firms (Hill, 2001a, 2001b; Miller et al., 2020) must be reflected and designed into such support initiatives. For example, programs to support digital skills in these firms, should show how technology can support traditional marketing practices, rather than aiming to enforce entirely new ways of working.

A realistic view is also needed of these firms' technology resource limitations, perhaps through schemes which help them to build this resource base. As has been seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, disruptive external factors have the power to challenge the traditional reliance of these firms on face-to-face communication and relationship building, even for those that previously have shied away from digital technology use. Even so, the findings presented here suggest it would be wrong to assume that a rise in the future use of digital marketing by B2B SMEs will necessarily follow the patterns seen in B2C or for larger firms.

## 6. Limitations and future research

This empirical paper has provided a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of digital marketing practices in an industry that relies on traditional business development and relationship building. Specifically, it has revealed the need for simple digital marketing that supports traditional business practices. Several limitations apply to this study, which also offer opportunities for future research. The qualitative and exploratory nature of the study means that the findings cannot be generalized to other industries, sectors or geographical regions. As the study took place during an economic downturn, data gathered at other points in the economic cycle might also yield different results, suggesting these firms should also be studied at other points in the economic cycle. Similarly, investigating the impact of disruptive environmental challenges on B2B SMEs' digital marketing use, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, might yield interesting results.

The participating firms in the study were “traditional” oil and gas SMEs, many of which were established by former employees from large operators or contractors' employees, who preferred traditional ways of working. Following recessionary changes and with the greening of the energy economy, new SME entrants are part of a transition towards renewables and decommissioning within the sector. Future research could consider how these newer entrants, which might have different views towards digitalization, adopt and use digital marketing practices, especially those whose practices are impacted by also serving B2C customers. Furthermore, while this study has focused attention on barriers to digital marketing use among B2B SMEs, other studies could investigate the factors which enable these practices in both small and large B2B firms. Such research could further elevate digital marketing thinking beyond the ‘one size fits all’ approach that has motivated this study.

Greater understanding is required of similar heavy industry sectors, such as mining, quarrying, or the manufacture of chemicals, to further understand the tensions between traditional and digital marketing practices. Insights are also needed into differences in digital marketing practice across other B2B industries, which due to their different contexts will be influenced by distinctive sets of internal and external factors. Given their diverse roles in the supply chain, studies are also needed which deepen knowledge about the differences in digital use between small and large B2B firms. Finally, revisiting the oil and gas industry and the B2B firms operating within it both during and subsequent to the global pandemic, would yield interesting insights into how these firms have adapted their digital practices to reflect new ways of conducting business.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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