

SMEs' internationalization during crisis period: An international dynamic marketing capabilities perspective

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Abstract

Internationalization needs a series of capabilities which scholars have labeled as international dynamic marketing capabilities. However, compared to the past, the changing contextual conditions require to rethinking the way companies approach international markets. Under a marketing point of view, this is even more relevant for SMEs, which have limited resources available compared to big ones.

This study is with the aim to address scant research on how small and medium enterprises (SMEs) develop their international dynamic marketing capabilities under conditions of uncertainty. In this regard, we conducted sixteen interviews and three focus groups with company representatives and chamber of commerce staff who are responsible for internationalization development of Italian SMEs that are actively responding to external crisis. We identify fourteen effective items they take into action. Then four principle international dynamic marketing capabilities, namely: scrutinizing capability, adaptability, digital capability and ecosystem view that can help companies manage to cope with crisis, create and deliver value, at the end enhance SMEs' internationalization process are emerged.

Keywords: International Dynamic Marketing Capabilities; Crisis; SMEs; Internationalization.

1. Introduction

External crises and market dynamics kink together to stimulate severe disruptions and hidden opportunities (Evans and Bahrami, 2020). Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are predicted to be vulnerable in the hyper-competitive business environments (Troise et al., 2022) because in nowadays challenging situation, they have to confront new problems, characterized by accumulating uncertainty in intentional markets (OECD, 2009; European Commission, 2014) plus the aftermath of supply chain disruption and worldwide pandemic (Corsaro and D'Amico, 2022).

VUCA is an acronym in the business lexicon. They refer to volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. In a “*VUCA* world”, previous essential factors to change organizational performance such as project planning, might be considered a futile

exercise. Because *VUCA* conditions could make attempts to understand business ecosystem in vain (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

Capabilities is helpful for firms to handle environmental changes (Teece, 2007). But research how to deal with this *VUCA* environments, is still nascent (Troise et al., 2022). Previous research has found that SMEs are more capable to develop more deft innovation strategies during recessions than larger firms (Alcalde-Heras et al., 2018), which provides a good preliminary proof for the foothold of this study. But they focused on other perspectives such as managerial external capabilities and there is a lack of internal point of view. The literature has evident deficiency especially in the context of SMEs. It has been stressed out that SMEs face increased difficulty in internationalization process due to the fragility caused by resources shortage and weakness of technology (Giotopoulos, Kontolaimou, Korra, & Tsakanikas, 2017). Overcoming these difficulties will require SMEs to build various capabilities. The needs of capabilities to perceive opportunities, optimize interactions with customers, deliver and co-create value with them in a crisis require changing existing routines or resource allocations and build new capabilities of the joint efforts of both entrepreneur and executive team (Bai et al., 2021).

Hence, to address this gap in research we focus on the following questions: Which dynamic marketing capabilities are effective for SMEs to develop their internationalization process during crises? To answer the research questions, we conducted three focus groups and sixteen in depth interviews with industries related to medical disposable products company, medical aesthetic devices company, production machinery manufacturing, catering services, furniture, food processing company and house decoration company.

This study makes important contributions to the existing literature. In this special crisis context, we contribute to the dynamic capabilities literature in internationalization for SMEs and provide a theoretical framework for the study of the application and adaption in internationalization based on systematic integration of resources they own. In addition to the theoretical implications, this study provides managerial implications to follow in order to accomplish the internationalization process successfully of Italian SMEs, especially during crisis.

2. Resource based view and dynamic capabilities

The international business literature recognizes that internationalization is one of the most important sources of firm growth and improved performance (Lu and Beamish, 2001). Among all the theories that explain the internationalization, the most powerful is the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2018). Resources embody “stocks of knowledge, physical assets, human capital, and other tangible and intangible factors that a business owns or controls, which enable a firm to produce, efficiently and/or effectively, market offerings that have value for some market segments” (Capron and Hullan 1999). RBV’s central tenets concern resources that meet valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-sustainable (VRIN) criteria. Penrose’s (1955) theory discusses the versatility of resources, because it allows firms to recombine resources in creative ways to have growth instead of exploiting unique opportunities. A resource-based perspective has been tested its ability to verify organizational capabilities that would help firms survive during economic crisis (Barney 1991; Dickson 1992; Grewal & Tansuhaj, 2018; Hunt and Morgan, 1995).

Because crisis's formalities and timing are difficult to predict and untested. Reactive strategic flexible capabilities should be useful (Grewal and Tansuhaj, 2001).

Capabilities are “complex sets of skills and knowledge embedded in the organizational processes by which the available resources of an organization are transformed into valuable outputs” (Day, 1994). The ability to realize new forms of competitive advantage is dynamic capabilities. Dynamic Capabilities View (DCV) was originally proposed by Teece in 1997. Dynamic capabilities are a process of adjustment conducted by company resources to changing conditions. This process is composed by three steps: sensing, seizing, and transforming. Dynamic capabilities theory clearly argues that capabilities are dynamic owned by organizations, with greater level of inimitability and non-sustainability (Fang and Zou, 2009; Teece et al., 1997; Theodosiou et al., 2012; Vorhies et al., 2011). From the perspective of dynamic capabilities, aligning a company to changing business conditions by modifying common resources and capabilities (Teece 2018), therefore requires organized and systematic changes in functional areas such as production, sales, marketing or finance (Mitrega et al., 2021).

3. International dynamic marketing capabilities under crises

Although strategic literature has long supported the impact of strong business dynamic capabilities on product development, few studies have discussed how to build dynamic marketing (DMCs) capabilities during internationalization (Xu et al., 2018). DMC is an extension of the dynamic capability framework for specific marketing applications. DMC is a relatively new concept, but it has attracted several but similar definitions from marketers. Bruni and Verona (2009) argue that the DMC reflects “human capital, social capital and the perception of manager involvement in the creation, integration and use of market knowledge and marketing resources to match and create market and technological change.”

DMCs in an international business background can be defined as international dynamic marketing capabilities (IDMCs). IDMCs are considered as capabilities firms use to understand and fulfil foreign market customers' expressed and latent needs better than their rivals (Mitrega, 2019; Morgan, Feng & Whitler, 2018; Narver, Slater & MacLachlan, 2004). To have a better understand of existing studies about IDMC, we reviewed existing literature with four boundaries: the *dynamic capabilities* should be set in a *marketing perspective*, applied by *SMEs* who are active in *internationalization*. Shi (et al., 2005) found that companies who proactively and systematically carry out marketing capabilities such as intelligence acquisition, coordination, and reconfiguration are likely to outperform their competitors in the global marketplace but the subjects are leading global companies rather than SMEs; the study of Amirul et al., (2023) has identified that DMCs have strong connections with digital transformation in COVID-19 crisis set but lack of internationalization background; Dias et al. (2021), viewed both crisis and dynamic capabilities but lack marketing perspective and internationalization background. After this explanation, here with the analysis and summary of the existing literature in Table 1, we found an significant research gap of the upgraded integrated *VUCA* situation, crisis as important variable in SMEs' internationalization.

Author	Approach	Dynamic marketing capabilities for SMEs' internationalization	Crisis context
Wilson and	Mangers need to	Three innovation-related capabilities and	Not

Daniel (2007)	recombine resources, gain additional resources and dispose of superfluous resources.	three integrative capabilities: IT-related, organizational structure, and metrics/rewards.	mentioned.
Mariadoss, Tansuhaj, and Mouri (2011)	Various marketing capabilities	Product packaging capability, Sales capability, Product development capability, Channel linking capability, Price setting capability and Relationship building Capability.	Not mentioned.
Matanda and Ewing (2012)	Global brand management capability	Decision making autonomy, Balancing global standardization with regional adaptation and Building regional marketing capability.	Not mentioned.
Evers, Andersson, and Hannibal (2012)	Incremental, renewing, and regenerative DMCs.	Different stakeholder can influence the learning processes of the firm and can determine the nature of dynamic MCs needed for global competitive advantage.	Not mentioned.
Boso et al. (2013)	Measurement of Export performance	Innovation capabilities and stronger networking capabilities enhance the export performance relationship.	Not mentioned.
Bennett and Lemoine (2014)	Solutions of generalized <i>VUCA</i> situations	Restructure, bring on or develop specialists; Resources preparedness such as stockpile inventory or overbuy talent; Experiment and crisis tests; Invest in information and its analysis networks.	<i>VUCA</i> itself.
Bortoluzzi, Chiarvesio, M., Di Maria & Tabacco (2014)	Measurement of probability of presence in emerging markets	Distribution network, brand management, and product innovation capabilities.	Not mentioned.
Tang, Mu & Thomas (2015)	New Product Development (NPD) Product development capability	Market sensing, customer engaging, and partner linking Capabilities. Product development capability is positively and significantly associated with export venture performance.	Not mentioned. Not mentioned.
Vicente, Abrantes, and Teixeira (2015)	Optimize export performance	Export market intelligence, product development, communication, pricing, distribution and after-sale service capabilities.	Not mentioned.
Pham, Monkhouse, and Barnes (2017)	Optimize export performance	Specialized e-commerce marketing capabilities directly increase a firm's degree of distribution and communication efficiency, which in turn leads to enhanced export venture market performance.	Not mentioned.
Gregory, Ngo, and Karavdic (2017)	Cost efficiency and marketing differentiation	Informational, product development, and customer relationship capabilities.	Not mentioned.
Kaleka and Morgan (2017)	Measurement of business outcomes	Dispersed international marketing capabilities enhance firms' ability to manage overseas elements (adaptation strategy) and help firms accomplish key performance objectives indirectly through adaptation.	Not mentioned.
Gnizy (2019)	DMC facilitates company innovations	Speed and market success	Not mentioned.
Mitręga (2019)	Competitive advantage	Human capital contributes to the development of dynamic marketing capabilities which have a positive impact on competitive advantage.	Not mentioned.
Elsharnouby & Elbanna (2021)			Not mentioned.

Besides the inherent relations, abrupt crises such as COVID-19 and conflict often require creative but unprecedented behavior under time constraints. To assemble the necessary resources immediately after crisis is critical (Hwang & Lichtenthal, 2000). Conflict is deeply disrupting global supply chains. More localized, regional and sourcing strategies are in urgent need (Simchi-Levi and Haren, 2022). The swing from globalization to localization is seen as a solution of supply chain disrupt. Buying more locally even with additional price could provide an opportunity for Europe to strengthen its internal manufacturing sector. But localization approach is no panacea taking considerable investment and time.

4. Methodology

This study explores the IDMCs of SMEs to tackle crisis when conducting internationalization activities. The empirical data for this study were collected by applying grounded theory approach (Glasser and Struss, 1967). We have two reasons to apply this methodology: the research scope (internationalization, cope with crisis and dynamic capabilities perspectives) and firm type (SMEs). Thinking about the research aims, the grounded theory methodology is associated with research questions based on “what”, “how” and “why”. In this way, qualitative research is appropriate when the definition is emerged and on the development of a conceptual framework, the identification of critical determinants and other key variables are not but going to be identified. Regarding firm types, since SMEs are not inclined to reveal their strategic and organizational information, direct contact is favorable to understand these profiles.

The study adopted a qualitative approach using both focus groups and in-depth interviews with single expert. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, we conducted firstly the focus group interviews which are suitable for providing insights of participants’ perceptions of complex issues through an active interaction. Although the dynamic capability construct has been well delineated in previous literature, how companies make use of it under crisis is still an emerging topic. In this case, at the first stage of the research, focus groups interview, we followed inductive (phenomenology and grounded theory) approach to data generation (Glazer and Strauss, 1967; Thomas, 2006). Based on the existing literature review, we preset components as effective dynamic capabilities to deal with crisis in internationalization process. We conducted and participated then three focus group composed by twenty one participants in total interviews to test and add the factors as determinants. Following a consultation with all focus groups participants, three groups were formed consisting of seven to ten participants and arrangements from one to one and a half hours sessions were agreed.

A wider range of experience can be stress through focus groups and then, the individual in-depth interview allows the interviewers to delve deeply into social and personal matters (Chilban J, 1996). After the three focus group interviews, combined with the existing literature review, we basically determined and confirmed the boundaries, dimensions and factors for the following in-depth individual interviews of expert. A total of sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with managerial level personnel responsible for companies’ internationalization between February 2022 and July 2022. Participants shared their experiences, answering a serious of

open and probing questions in the interview which lasts about forty minutes. All the sessions were electronically recorded and then manually transcript and coded.

Such a research method is suitable at the early stages of investigation to understand the complexities of the phenomenon under investigation and to gain initial insights (Hanson & Grimmer, 2007). Then in-depth interviews guided by researchers with single experts are considered appropriate to identify and define phenomena emerged from focus groups.

In the theoretical perspective, we choose dynamic capabilities approach among IMP network approach (Johanson & Mattsson, 2015) and Uppsala model (Vahline & Johanson, 2017). According to the network approach, the internationalisation process is determined by the establishment of formal and informal relationships with network participants in foreign markets and maintaining and developing these relationships in order to gain access to external resources (Johanson and Mattson, 1988). But relationship with network participants is just one of our dimensions. The Uppsala Internationalization Model implies that different groups at the operational level have a profound influence on the internationalization process. It is a relatively extreme “bottom-up” perspective, where the “bottom” plays the leading part and the headquarters play walk-on parts. It is not suitable to our research subjects, SMEs.

4.1. Profiles

Research data come from *Promos Italia* and the SMEs it cooperates with. *Promos Italia* is an Italian national agency of the chamber of commerce network that supports small and medium-sized Italian companies in internationalization processes, preparing them to international business and helping them consolidate their positioning in international markets. *Promos Italia* is active in more than 110 countries based on a wide international network of relationships and partnerships with government and national agencies, chambers of commerce, economic development and business promotion institutions, trade associations, industrial groups, and banking institutions. *Promos Italia* has consolidated experience in international project management because it has been awarded relevant international projects funded by European Commission, United Nations, National and Regional Governments as project leader or partner focused on internationalization, SMEs’ competitiveness, innovation, economic development, clusters and network for export building, renewable energy, as well as capacity building programs. We conducted two focus group interviews with the personnel of *Promos Italia*. And one focus group interview with their clients.

SMEs companies who cooperate with *Promos Italia* are also targets of our research. They are distributed in northern, central and southern Italy, and the industry is across medical disposable products company, medical aesthetic devices company, production machinery manufacturing, catering services, furniture, food processing company and house decoration company. Half of them are family-owned enterprises. All of them are actively engaged in exportation and international business accounts for a large proportion.

Table 1: SMEs’ profiles:

Number	Job Position	Seniority (in years)	Company Category
1	Export Manager	18	Medical Products
2	CEO	20	Medical Devices
3	Export Manager	5	Machinery Manufacturing

4	International Market Director	12	Machinery Manufacturing
5	Export Manager	13	Catering Services
6	Marketing director	8	Furniture
7	CEO	15	Food industry
8	Export Manager	9	Food industry
9	CEO	12	Food industry
10	Export Manager	21	Food industry
11	Marketing Director	17	Food industry
12	CEO	12	Food industry
13	General Manager	10	Food industry
14	Marketing Manager	14	Food industry
15	Marketing director	11	House Decoration
16	Export Manager	9	Packaging

4.2. Research design

We conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews through virtual meeting due to the limitation of COVID-19. We interviewed company representatives and chamber of commerce staff who are responsible for internationalization development. Marketing profiles (e.g. main business and size, degree of internationalization, distribute channel, method to cope crisis, consumer interactions and value) were explained.

The interview protocol was aimed at evaluating the internationalization in terms of: (1) transformation and new challenges companies have after crisis in international markets; (2) dynamic marketing capabilities they apply; (3) method of internationalization approach.

First (1), we asked the changes of international markets (e.g. price, competitors, partners, distribute channels, product delivery, customer relations) and companies' changes in marketing perspective or related (e.g. marketing orientation, marketing promotions, product innovation etc.). and relative if the business transformation with particular regard to marketing operations and marketing strategies. Second (2), we verified DMCs' functions in different marketing process stage (e.g. marketing analysis, marketing orientation, product design and experiment, distribution channel, marketing channels and communication, customer service and relations). The utility of resources and capabilities, together with the different dynamic marketing capabilities. As interviewees may not be familiar with the dynamic marketing capabilities framework, we added an explanation. (3), interviewees were invited to introduce and identify consequences of application of specific DMC to their internationalization process (e.g. internationalization competitiveness, internationalization popularity, internationalization degree, method, and time etc.)

4.3. Data analysis

Interviews' content was analyzed by performing a systematic practice: open coding; axial coding; and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), a method suitable to study complex phenomena through the coding of words, labels, concepts to produce theory from data, rather than the mere finding of facts (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020).

Data analysis started from open coding. Through open coding, conceptual components were emerged. For example, the sentence "the uncertainty often arises in the case that we don't know who the local interlocutor really is and how risky the action will be." was coded as "reliability of third parties"; the sentence "Promos' role in addressing new relationships and to verify the professionalism of the interlocutors,

is important.” was coded as “reliability of partner”. And by next step axial coding, concepts were pulled together and related to a larger inclusive categories. For instance, the above-mentioned items were combined into the category “reliability check of foreign partners”. The running notes constituted an intermediate step between coding and the first draft of the completed analysis. Once coding categories emerged, the next step we linked them together in a theoretical model constructed around a central category that holds the concepts together. Besides primary data from interviews, secondary data from additional documents, for example business reports or publications, corporate presentations, internet-based material, and newspapers, were also collected. We triangulated these data with the primary data to analyze the results and coherence. With the purpose to reinforce the knowledge of target companies.

5. Results and findings

Crisis is both a background of internationalization and a reason that affects internationalization’ application and adaptation of dynamics capabilities. During the discussion, four important dimensions of DMCs in SMEs’ internationalization process during crisis are emerged, which we identified as scrutinizing capability, adaptability, digital abilities and ecosystem view.

5.1. Scrutinizing capability

The first step to apply dynamic capabilities, according to Teece (1997), is to sense opportunities and threats. The scrutinizing capability is based on an understanding of various market segments inside and outside the company and a fully understand of advantages of resources. Knowledge of overseas markets based on experience, risk assessment forecasts and competitor analysis. In our research, we found that the internationalization process of SMEs can develop in a crisis, there are several indispensable capabilities.

5.1.1. Context analysis

Context analysis is a method to analyze the environment in which a business operates. In the following first quote, the house decoration company was actively analyzing the crisis context by attending virtual trade fairs to get the latest overseas marketing information. Context analysis considers the entire environment of a international business. Its analysis happens not only when initial market entry choices and decisions are made, notable factors can serve as new micro level context to offer important insights in assessing international marketing opportunities.

“We do need a set up context to understand in which we exhibit the products during crisis. So we attend trade fairs and get information by actively participating in forums and conferences.” house decoration, export manager.

Trend analysis is the analysis of macro-environmental factors in the external environment of the enterprise. In the following case, it includes the analysis of political, economic, social, technological and demographic trends, by first determining which factors at each level are relevant to the selected topic, then assigning a score to each item to assign its importance. In this way, companies are able to identify the factors that can influence them. Even if they don’t have sufficient capabilities to control these factors, they can try to cope by adapting.

“To participate in trade fairs and conferences, for our sector the cost is high but this help is important to have a comparison with those who have been successful, otherwise it is a problem of understanding how one company exports and it is important to understand

what are the new export trends.” medical aesthetic devices, CEO.

Another important aspect of the external environment that a company should consider is its competitors. As imagined, it is important for a company to understand who its competitors are, how they do business, and how powerful they are so that they can play both defensively and offensively.

“It would help in this relationship with the customer to standardize quality standards as much as possible. Because competing with countries that do not care about quality, products and the environment is detrimental to every producer and consumer.” medical disposable product, marketing manager.

5.1.2. Scanning the value chain

The goal of the value chain scan is to develop a holistic view instead of a micro-focused one so as to catch opportunities by mapping core and complementary actors and to avoid threats by identifying, in a longer and wider way.

As Michael Porter (1998) of *Harvard Business School* introduced, the concept of value chains can be built by a five-force model to show how firms rank in market competition, and he discusses the value chain concept in his book *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. Porter wrote. “It stems from the many discrete activities a firm performs in designing, producing, marketing, delivering and supporting its product. Each of these activities can contribute to a firm’s relative cost position and create a basis for differentiation.” Conducting a value chain scanning helps a company identify factors that create or hinder cost efficiency in its business model.

“We were one of the first companies to focus on electro-medical and non-invasive medical equipment and with a focus on safety. The cost of investment and product innovation is high. But all of our innovations have often given inspiration to the market so we consider ourselves at the top because our products are of an enviable quality. That is because, for us, it is important to provide a product that can be highly effective but in a simple practical way and even after few uses. Above all we are interested in a product that lasts over time that is reliable in results and in use for years.” medical aesthetic devices company, CEO.

A innovation-oriented value chain scanning of the medical aesthetic devices company support investment and product innovation decisions. Through this process, linkages and dependencies can be understood between different business activities and product and technological innovation. Once innovation as core competency of improvement is identified, international business activities can be optimized to maximize output and minimize organizational expenses.

Value chain scanning is a tool used by business owners to split every process used by their business. This scanning can be used to improve various processes of the business to increase the efficiency of the company and build a competitive advantage, and potentially create a cost advantage over competitors.

5.1.3. Gaining knowledge of specific rules for international trade

International trade compliance is important for export business as it can speed up import customs clearance, save tariffs, reduce costs and regulation, in order to gain competitive advantage.

“A big obstacle is certification, specific courses are proved useful to understand how to overcome these barriers and get the certifications and also how to get paid abroad.” medical disposable product, marketing manager.

In the process of data analysis, industries such as agricultural machinery manufacturing and medical products companies reported that in international trade, there is a decrease in efficiency and an increase in cost due to insufficient knowledge of exports. Facing the dilemma brought by global epidemics and wars, import and export policies and norms are keeping rapid changes, and there is a lack of information on the marketing operations and actual norms of enterprises. In the case of unequal information, the formation of dynamic market capabilities that can help to respond quickly can undoubtedly enable enterprises to take effective actions in the crisis.

“Then there are the various registrations in that market in Europe. But not necessary in other countries. Medical products are subject to registration and therefore certifications that you must have to access the market. The practical situations are often complicated. We made lots of efforts try not to make mistakes.” medical service, export manager.

5.2. Adaptability

Adaptability is a dynamic marketing capability to plan and effectively respond to unexpected changes in business and environmental factors. According to Teece (1997), this learning capabilities has several key characteristics. First, learning involves organizational as well as individual skills and are intrinsically social and collective because joint contributions to the understanding of complex problems. Second, the organizational knowledge generated by such activity resides in new patterns of activity, in “routines” or a new logic of organization.

Many companies plan well how to operate when things go as planned, and companies that survive the long term often plan to be flexible to the expectations. This is an priceless skill for individuals and businesses. For sure companies cannot anticipate changes or problems that your research and intuition does not reveal. However, they can establish a standard system or method for responding to crisis in their business.

5.2.1. Encompassing risk

To encompass risk needs companies to consider risk as part of the context. Encompassing risk is based on context analysis but has an emphasis of risk, and sometimes it is the context to analysis itself. In post COVID era, higher consciousness of uncertainty still remains.

“Finding a way to give the customer some credit but be sure you don't lose it or in any case reduce the risk of this happening could be useful (eg letters of credit). *Unicredit* I know that it collaborates with the chambers of commerce.” food industry, export manager.

"The most dangerous place is the safest place", furniture, overseas business manager.

Encompassing risk requires in formulating crisis into business norms in overseas markets. It is necessary to formulate crisis as a component. Find the similarities and differences between the normal period and the risk period, and formulate a dynamic and flexible risk control mechanism. Compared with passive adjustment, active inclusion can save time for the enterprise, to develop strict and reasonable strategies, and fully leverage the synergy of internal resources and external assistance.

5.2.2. More guarantees to customers

Building trust and product guarantee is an important factor in exporting business. An effective way to address customer perceived risk is to provide a satisfaction guarantee. Insurance can be introduced to protect customers, and it can also be a compelling marketing tactic. The satisfaction guarantee is a powerful tool that can put

potential customers at ease. They can also act as a differentiator that differentiates you from your competitors.

“We have focused our attention mainly on organic products. Tuscany in Italy stands out to other countries that we have a higher level than average GDP.” catering service, export marketing manager.

“We will go to a fair here in Tuscany that is really designed for the owners. It's more of a workshop, that is, they already organize an agenda of meetings for you based on a potential interest. It is perfect for optimizing times. Coca Cola can afford to be represented by a well-prepared person who does not live in the company internally, in the deepest degree of detail, because the formula is secret. Our added value is just to tell what we do in the field, what we do in the packaging, just to let people touch who we are and what we do. This can only be done by those who are in the meshes of the company's ganglia.” food industrial, export marketing manager.

Undoubtedly, consumer assurance is built on high-quality products and reliable service. Through the perception of consumer assurance, companies can keenly capture the focus of overseas markets. This can open up the demand links. The R&D and production of products introduce external reference to achieve product orientation to consumer orientation. For companies with a little development in the process of internationalization, strengthening the establishment of a consumer assurance system can promote the development of brand effects and increase market visibility and recognition.

“There is no great battle over the price because the quality is different, you have to make this thing perceive and not always so simple, or rather, maybe they know it, but maybe they clash with requests where the price is important. Hence the serving. The speed of delivery intervenes as a factor that is not given by China.” medical service, CEO.

Italian food industry products are well-known overseas for its strict food standards and production processes. This provides the prerequisites for customer guarantees. And it could possibly become strong resource for competition in overseas markets. Other industrial fields can be inspired by this and explore the focus of overseas export business in customer guarantees.

5.2.3. Reliability check of foreign partners

In export trade, SMEs want to cooperate with reputable overseas distributors and importing companies. Investigating the importer's administrative reliability system can help reduce the risk. Additionally, companies may also want to assess the local strength and reputation of these distributors, so a trusted external partner system is important.

“We will have the opportunity to connect with chamber of commerce. What really helpful for us it there will be a directory in which trustworthy companies are included together. Then we are assigned with an on-site contact personnel who will then also proceed to contact the companies in their database to do further step verification with companies interested in our products.” machinery manufacturing, operational manager.

Chamber of commerce is seen as important resource to verify reliability. International trade faces many uncertainties of its own, due to the restrictions on population movement caused by the epidemic and international wars, coupled with various reasons of language, culture and social systems. SMEs face many risk factors in the process of international trade and internationalization.

“What it would be really interesting to be able to obtain and the certainty of relying on

the right local contact in a foreign market, possibly someone who has knowledge of the sector of standards and who has their own credibility, the ideal would be that it was the Chamber of Commerce to certify the authenticity and competence of this figure. because what we see now is a flood of experts who in reality, while boasting great services and reliability and seriousness skills, have nothing behind them that can be considered truly a security for a foreigner who does not really know the market in which he wants to enter.” furniture, export director.

“Chambers of commerce could help the companies in the area to ease their burden, that is, the effort to orient themselves among the thousands of foreign contacts on the internet.” food industry, export marketing manager.

Reliability check follows *IMP* network approach (Johanson & Mattsson, 1988). The network approach, focusing on the inter-organizational interactions, argues that actors develop social relations as a way to control for uncertainties that can arise and through the interactions accepted behaviors are also negotiated. In the mentioned case, the company made use of chamber of commerce’s networking resource to develop social connection and trust.

5.2.4. Experimenting

Experimenting takes gradual approach, adjustments based on results. It focus less on theoretical and more on practical. Experiments can take place in various stages.

“After working in every department in our company going through various roles, me and my company tended to gradually adjust my role in business and company. Today I am the administrator, thanks to the experience and the experiment that I have received in the past of quality research and development and today I am, let's say, a little more moved to commercial, then with a supervisory role as legal representative.” food, marketing manager.

The experimental advantage of SMEs is that human resource capital can be rapidly experimented and adjusted thanks to the relatively vertical management. The experiment is a small-scale, low-cost and fast-cycle attempt to respond to overseas markets after formulating relevant overall plans including risk prediction and assessment, third-party verification and consumer relationship maintenance.

“The one we preferred was that of direct knowledge. But it has a limit, the knowledge runs out after a while. In the other cases, we have to experiment how an intermediator function. Results show that we can go through more channels that a little more institutional (such as the chambers of commerce).” medical service, CEO.

5.2.5. Anti-fragile planning ability

Chaos reigns in politics and public health during crisis time and causes economic breakdowns. The fragility creates uncertainty for marketers and consumers. No relations are assumed to be sure and stable. Companies should treat failure as an opportunity to improve. It is the opportunity to break established limits and to achieve successful flexible term plan. As the final item of adaptability, anti-fragility require SMEs’ product, business model and marketing capabilities, and connections with customers actually grow robust when confronting with disorders.

Chaos makes practice more realistic during the period companies must to act and respond quickly. Realistic means they normally take many factors into a comprehensive consideration.

“We responded (to crisis) very fast and added the technical characteristics of the

national market instrument infrastructure because we want to be plugged into our re-analytical after-survey of the market, in order to cover the amperage and full electromagnetic compatibility of the instrument, as well as software compatible safety equipment, rather than a material that is already widely available in this market. This means that, in order to enter different markets, we must also rethink the technical and operational characteristics of our products.” medical equipment, marketing decision maker.

This is a typical scenario planning. A scenario planning has a simple way to explain, that is, always think about “what if”. This mindset contains possibilities to expand companies view of what might happen in the further and how to get prepared for it.

“Surely we make efforts to create our business networking, perhaps even creating synergies with other complementary companies, because even being small, perhaps being all together we can better face the challenges.” food industry, export manager.

This the the procedure to diversify intelligence sources. A single company can receive limited information of static sources. A gathered information of both quantitative and qualitative sources should be understood and catered to meet customers’ satisfaction. By diversify intelligence sources and join efforts. Companies are seen to better cope with crisis and develop their anti-fragility capabilities.

5.3. Digital abilities

Just in the past couple of years, business world is going through untested changes and new forms of competition, relative capabilities in communication due primarily to technology of global sale (Moncrief, 2017). Digitalization is fundamental in the internationalization of SMEs (Morais and Ferreira, 2020), by shaping the traditional interaction between consumers and businesses (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015) and it is identified as key informant of this constantly changing business markets phenomenon.

5.3.1. Combine human and technologies based approach

A collaborative abilities and intelligence are emerging. Digital uses give SMEs a lot, such as advertising online, targeting the right audience and measuring the results precisely. But the real emotions and live impressions that really remain in memory of customers.

“Digital solutions are useful because in any case they are faster, more immediate and less expensive and above all without wasting time. When I go to visit a client obviously we never talk about a single day but at least two when maybe in a couple of hours. I finish charity but the productivity agreements that are in these two years have been effective because in any case it was for everyone so it was become the norm.” food industry, CEO.

In our research, digital uses are frequently mentioned by the companies as an ideal way to make their business survive during crisis in international markets. Digital uses, although not perfectly help companies to conduct their every single daily business operation, but we find they are favorable in customer relations maintain and customer expansion.

“The relationship with the partner is precious precisely because we are not a big company and we do not attribute a code to our customers, they are not numbers, that is, we know a lot about them. Maybe we went to them, they came to us ... maybe there is dinner where we don't talk about work but about something else, which really allows us to bond.” food industry, marketing manager.

Although digital uses are proved to be effective during crisis for SMEs’

internationalization, SMEs' degree of digitalization and digital transformation is not sufficient. The management tier of many SMEs are composed by single family and sometimes they have differences in perceptions of digital usage. Due to technical and financial constraints, the digital development of SMEs still has a long way to go and a lack of strong support.

5.3.2. Using marketing platform to enable an omnichannel approach

Using marketing platform to enable an omnichannel approach allows SMEs to integrate communications on social media, email marketing, e-commerce and CRM and to win easier in internationalization process.

"It is true that before we had a lot of customization, as we do now, but we didn't push much on our brand. In recent years we have opened a line with our own brand and therefore we are making variations. We have created a new website, one dedicated to the dental line. We have indexed the products on Google, advertise on customer catalogs and co-branding. A novelty in recent years is also the use of social networks and they are giving you results that are interesting or are more of a side thing to give continuity, let's say to marketing operations." furniture, overseas marketing manager.

Here, the interface between marketing platforms and brand is emerged. To build brand awareness and identity of SMEs in a foreign markets is not easy due to the barriers such as language and culture. But good products and excellent service sometimes can "speak" and "tell the story". The missing part is a good channel or platform to visualize the brand. Digital marketing platforms enable an omnichannel. Approaches such as influencer marketing, social media advertising and self-owned site can help to broaden distribution channels as well as to get a better result of customer integration and reaction with tackles such as user generated content.

"Channels that you use to communicate also with customers to manage relationships are effective you had to adapt them that is, tell me a little about the customer dynamics please practically on the dynamics not much has changed except precisely the introduction of these video call which before however were not nearly never used." agricultural machinery manufacturing, marketing manager.

5.3.3. Digitalization in value chain levels

Now, an ecosystem of technology a offers digitalization as solution to address value chain optimization and management needs. Powerful and user-friendly analysis tools make it possible to compile large amounts of unstructured data and extract useful insights from it. AI applications can automatically track the root cause of performance issues and even predict performance degradation, then recommend corrective actions to managers. With cross-functional alignment, for example, from sales and operations planning, to other areas, and from senior management to business unit or location managers, major decisions can be implemented faster.

"The fact that products are on an online platform in Singapore, Italian products made in Italy... this gives us what is now called awareness, so it will certainly take longer, but over time the situation should become more positive. It is important to have the value transfer and visibility of the brand abroad, realizing by the digital uses. Maybe the customer from the platform goes to the company and becomes attached to that kind of product." food industry, export manager.

In other words, the latest digitalization enable companies to change the way their value chains work across the board. At the enterprise level, digitalization means employing analytic, artificial intelligence, CRM, the Internet of Things and other

advanced technologies to automatically collect and process information in order to support decision-making and operating functions in internalization. When there are disruption about prices or logistic issue caused by crisis, technology can support more easily and fast adaptations.

5.4. Ecosystem view

In rapidly changing environments, there is obviously value in the ability to sense the need to reconfigure the firm's asset structure, and to accomplish the necessary internal and external transformation (Teece, 1997).

5.4.1. Value based offering

Value-based offering is a pricing method in which a company primarily relies on its customers' perceived value for the goods or services they sell (also known as customer willingness to pay) to determine the price it charges. Because it revolves around the customer's priorities, it is sometimes called customer centric pricing. The company's goal is to get the most profit from every sale. But they also strive to maximize customer satisfaction in order to build brand loyalty and turn single purchases into repeat purchases.

“This is because ours is a disposable product so we go from price to service, which is something they appreciate more and more. It is no longer just price but also speed of delivery.” medical disposable products, overseas director.

With interaction with customers and analysis of overseas markets, the company in this case sensitively captures new touch points for the company's international development.

“We are making traditional investments, always increasing the budget, to brand key congresses (base where you buy the space and set it up, bronze silver gold platinum). We always take silver and gold or platinum sponsors, to have seats with stands among the big names, space in the classrooms to dedicate time to the product, offering free admissions to doctors. In addition we hold specific events besides the conference where we invite doctors and experts to enhance our brand recognition.” medical aesthetic devices company, CEO.

In addition to continuously optimizing products and improving services, promoting the formation of value based offerings with the help of third-party reputation and social recognition is also an innovation found in the research.

5.4.2. Perspective selling

Perspective selling offers customers irreplaceable product which is hard to be beaten by other companies or competitors. In our research we found that culture is an element that influence the perspective of other people.

“The European market is by far the most relevant for the whole business, mostly for gastronomic culture. Our products may or may not be liked but in the meantime if someone knows them or is in any case used to accompanying an aperitivo with crunchy products. If you think about “crunchy”, you think about us, then it is easier for our product to emerge.” food industry, export manager.

“Made in Italy” is somehow an implicit quality assurance and brand symbol of some types of products. Similar to the logical process of reliability check in adaptability, perspective selling for SMEs is looking for irreplaceable points similar to “Made in Italy”. This irreplaceable point is based on the company's brand and product characteristics.

“Certainly East and South East Asia for the number of potential customers. But the biggest obstacle is to be able to transfer the gastronomic culture and the predisposition to

the consumption of products like ours first. Abroad, especially in these areas, these products are difficult to impose in areas beyond the capitals.” food industry, export manager.

5.4.3. Leverage the relationship with local partners

Businesses around the world are using their marketing to grow their businesses through partnerships. In our industry, there are many opportunities for collaboration. The key is to choose a good partner. Building relationships and building mutually beneficial partnerships is critical.

“We prefer to work with a partner within a market, naturally in a market that is not very large... that is, in the United States it is not possible... but on the market we try to find a partner and then grow together...Due to the way we are structured and the size, we need an on-site partner to take care of the distribution.” food industry, marketing director.

“Currently we have a connection with at least 50 countries but we cannot say that they are all strong. Present in the same way the brand is present abroad only through local distributors with whom we have very specific agreements that we try to cultivate at best. What reassures us in our relationship with distributors is precisely the bond that has been going on for years to the relationship of trust that we have established for a long time.” furniture, export manager.

Distributors are spokespersons for companies’ overseas markets. A strong local distributor can make a decisive change for the company to expand the local market and create a good marketing opportunity. In this case, the enterprise has refined the operating contract with the distributor to achieve a normative consensus on the business needs of both parties. This is conducive to regulating the market behaviors of distributors and adjusting market mindset. Through the intermediary role of distributors, enterprises and local consumers can establish a connection link, establish a brand image, and build consumer commitment.

“However, we guarantee them closer and direct contacts with us, otherwise the distributor takes care of the rest within their own sales area. We have a very close relationship with distributors, also because there is now a relationship of trust and collaboration that has been going on for several years. since we focus mainly on a few people in a rather narrow niche market...It is important to convey that we have the quality as a “brand” should have and we are a company based on product quality and customization.” food industry, marketing director.

Networking is to develop a one-to-one, one-to-many linear relationship into a many-to-many network connection. This helps to form dynamic docking, which is a manifestation of dynamic development ability. In this case, even if there are problems in the supply chain or distributors of the enterprise, the enterprise can adjust the new internationalization strategy in time; the enterprise relationship of the website can optimize the resource allocation of the enterprise, adjust the gap between production and R&D, and contact and utilize new technologies. Provides exponentially more resources than itself.

“Networking, such as trade show marketing and loyalty programs, these techniques have been proven to still be an effective source of making connections and growing a business.” furniture, export manager.

6. Discussion and conclusion

While previous studies on dynamic capabilities or dynamic marketing capabilities have focused on the consequence and influence of SMEs' internationalization, we provide further understanding from the perspective of how SMEs' perceive and resolve crisis such as Covid-19 and supply chain disruption caused by partial area war. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to connect international dynamic marketing capabilities, crisis and SMEs' internationalization. Our analysis has not limited just in SMEs' marketing department, but extended to more complex synergy of dynamic capabilities in other operational departments and external stakeholders, in marketing perspective, such as managers, distributors and partners.

The context of analysis is represented by SMEs and chamber of commerce operating internationalization development. From the four core dynamic marketing capabilities emerged from data, we find that the SMEs we examined are inclined to explore and exploit the resources to develop quickly and flexibly strategies. By building dynamic marketing capabilities under the request of internationalization needs, they create and delivery value which can help to form an business ecosystem. This ecosystem is not only suitable for surviving from crisis. With its dynamic and sustainable characters, it can also be formed as continuous norms to accelerate and boost the subsequent internationalization process. From this perspective, the company has resolved the crisis, and at the same time grows new development opportunities from the crisis.

This study tested and agrees with Penrose (1955) that versatility of resource allows firms to recombine resources in creative way to have growth instead of exploiting unique opportunities. From SMEs' business behaviors in our study, aligning companies to changing business conditions by modifying common resources and capabilities requires in systematic and organized changes in functional areas (Mitrega et al., 2021), throughout the entire value chain of production, sales and marketing, customer service, and human resources. We identify DMC in SMEs' internationalization (Xu et al., 2018) framework composed by four dimensions: scrutinizing capability, adaptability, digital abilities and ecosystem view.

During our study, we found that previous studies didn't pay sufficient attention on sensing capabilities, weakening and ignoring the role of it to some extent. Previous studies (Evers et al., 2012; Mitreęa, 2019) have hardly given specific operational procedures for sensing capabilities of dynamic marketing capabilities in international markets, tending to conceptualize and generalize this capability. As the background premise of the focus in this study, the crisis has tangible and unavoidable substantive effects. Therefore, we analyze the specific methods of scrutinizing capabilities from three aspects.

Nonetheless, we found many organic echoes of our study with previous research. *VUCA* situation (Bennett and Lemione, 2014) can still be applicable in the current crisis environment. Innovation capabilities (Wilson and Daniel, 2007; Matanda and Ewing, 2012; Boso et al., 2013; Pham, Monkhouse, and Barnes, 2017) are still playing an important role in marketing technology, sales intelligence, customer service and decision making. Our study spotlights digital abilities based on the expansion and development of e-commerce (Gregory, Ngo, and Karavdic, 2017). One of the most innovative points is the discussion about digitalization and value chain.

Our findings are partially consistent with previous studies, but more systematic and generalized thanks to the contributions of previous studies. Under the dimension of adaptability, we confirm the positive effect of adaptation (Matanda and Ewing, 2012), specialist (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014) and customer satisfaction (Pham, Monkhouse, and Barnes, 2017) in SMEs' internationalization during crisis. Under the dimension of building ecosystem view, confirmation of positive effect in channel linking and relationship building (Mariadoss, Tansuhaj, and Mouri, 2011), markets balancing (Matanda and Ewing, 2012), leveraging the relationship such as stakeholders (Evers, Andersson, and Hannibal (2012) and partners (Mu, 2015) in a network (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014) are made in SMEs' internationalization process under crisis.

As a consequence, this study provides theoretical and practical implications. First, this study helps to enrich the internationalization and dynamic marketing capabilities literature for SMEs. There is no shortage of literature for each individual perspective, but the combination of theories helps to open up new space for the development of theories. Second, we conceptualize a constructive framework of determinate dynamic marketing capabilities for SMEs' internationalization. Third, the study stresses the validity of components for internationalization such as digital abilities and perspective selling, especially for this type of small firm to gain competitiveness in international markets.

The practical implications could be extended to the following areas. First of all, this work is necessary for the establishment of enterprise's risk awareness and crisis control ability. Second, this work is useful for companies and managers who have an international orientation. It can help to understand and calibrate the main capability deficiency for SMEs that want to enter international markets. Third, this work encourages business organizations and governments invest relevant factors that have not been perfectly developed for SMEs' internationalization. Although the scale of individual SME is relatively small, the overall economic volume of SMEs is large. SMEs are actively seeking opportunities to develop their internationalization level, whereas there is still a vagrancy of relevant research and studies. Scholars and academy should pay more special attention.

Although the empirical and practical implications are important, this study raises some inherent limitations that may be carried on in future studies. First, the sample size of this study needs to be expanded. To what extent every factor among the related variables needs to be further analyzed and tested. Whether there is a moderator or mediator needs further discussion. But it provides a "steppingstone" for building new theories. In this sense, this is a pilot study for other analyses. This study is based on the international marketing perspective of small and medium-sized enterprises in a single country with limited sectors. Future comparative research can consider other factors, including geographic location, industry differences, and various functional departments, so as to expand the analysis of different applications and triggers in the process of enterprise internationalization possibility.

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