Impact of social media on small and medium enterprises internationalization

*Assessments of cases of tech companies in Sweden*

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ABSTRACT

The internationalization of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) has become vital as it enables them to enhance their business prospects and achieve organizational objectives. This is of utmost significance for the future growth of nations, regions, and the global economy, given the progressively significant role played by SMEs in contributing to economic development. However, SMEs face numerous challenges when it comes to internationalization, primarily due to their limited capabilities. As a result, only a minimal percentage of SMEs are able to expand their business into the international market.

Despite the numerous barriers faced by SMEs, this research specifically focuses on three main barriers: lack of market knowledge, limited business networks, and challenges related to new product development. These factors are crucial when expanding a business into the international market. Therefore, this study aims to explore how SMEs can expand their business to the international market by overcoming these barriers through the effective utilization of social media.

This empirical study adopts an exploratory approach and employs qualitative methodology with an inductive research approach. To gather data, this research conducted interviews with technology-based companies in Luleå. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide, and the collected data were analysed using the thematic method.

The findings of the study highlight that social media can indeed be a successful influencer in the internationalization process of SMEs, particularly by utilizing business networking opportunities. Additionally, SMEs utilize social media as a secondary source for obtaining market information and engaging in new product development activities. However, the research also identifies hesitancy among technology-based SMEs when it comes to trusting the information obtained from social media platforms.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations have been developed, primarily focusing on technology-based SMEs. These recommendations were derived from interviews conducted with companies located in Luleå and are intended to benefit SMEs operating in the tech industry as a whole.

Keywords: Social Media and internet, SMEs, Internationalization of SMEs, Internationalization barriers

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves as an introduction to the research area of this study, providing a foundation for the subsequent research. It begins with a discussion of the problem, followed by an explanation of the study's purpose and the associated research questions. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting the study's delimitations.

1.1 The Background

Rapid business environment changes are important to increase product demand due to global changes. Internationalization gives the opportunity to identify new markets and it helps to grow the business. internationalization describes the expansion of current activities, research and development, and products beyond the domestic market into the global market. (Hollensen, 2017). Based on John H. Dunning's four internationalization motives, marketers intend to enter international markets to gain more customers, increase the efficiency of their process, and minimise production costs (Dunning, 1993; Benito, 2015). It is further explained that entering the international market can provide activities and access to low-cost products and services that are not available in the domestic market. Considering that, internationalization provides the opportunity to find new global customers. According to the economic achievements of various countries, the market will have the opportunity to expand businesses (Hollensen, 2017).

Legal, competition, consumption habits, brand awareness, media audience and marketing program success are the top variables among countries that lead to the level of consumer adaptation (Kapferer, 2012; Dumitrescu et al., 2019). This adaptation affects the implementation of business strategy for internationalization. Therefore, managers should investigate every variation within the target market and develop appropriate approaches that are suitable or relevant to the requirements and characteristics of each country (Dumitrescu et al., 2019). In addition, decision-makers are constrained to enter the international market equivalent to the domestic market because market entry is risky and costly (Benito, 2015; Hollensen, 2017).

Due to the current economic and technological changes in the world, the internationalization of SMEs has become an essential factor (Rosário et al., 2021). The internationalization of small and medium enterprises is able to increase their competitiveness (Kahiya et al., 2014; Kahiya

& Dean, 2016; Paul et al., 2017; Chandra et al., 2020). Odlin and Benson-Rea (2017) describe that small-medium enterprises appearing in the global market compete with other enterprises. In addition to that several studies have already demonstrated a clear correlation between SME internationalization and higher profitability (Lobo et al., 2020). To achieve sales growth and expand business operations in the international market, it is imperative to engage in activities such as gathering knowledge about the foreign market, strengthening business networks, and developing products in accordance with the specific demands of foreign customers (Ibeh, 2005; Sinkovics et al., 2018; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005).

However, the advancement of global technology has presented numerous challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved in international business (Chandra et al., 2020; Kahiya et al., 2014; Kahiya & Dean, 2016; Paul et al., 2017). SMEs hesitate to enter foreign markets due to a lack of understanding about the importance of expanding internationally instead of solely relying on exporting (Stoian et al., 2018). Additionally, limited resources and insufficient initial competitiveness pose vulnerabilities for SMEs seeking to expand their operations (Machkova, 2015; Pavlák, 2018). Moreover, national borders remain a significant obstacle for SME growth, leading many to primarily focus on domestic markets (Lobo et al., 2020). In fact, as of 2020, only a small fraction (around 20%) of SMEs operating in Europe had expanded their commercial activities globally through the channels of exporting, establishing subsidiaries, branches, or joint ventures in overseas nations (Lobo et al., 2020).

To overcome these barriers, social media can be employed as a valuable approach for engaging, generating, distributing, and exchanging information and ideas within digital communities and networks (Blackshaw and Nazzaro, 2004; Wang et al., 2016). According to Hollensen (2017), online word of mouth (conversation) is more effective than traditional advertising methods to communicate with consumers. Customers' online conversations about their experiences with brands and services help managers understand their buying behaviour. It provides exactly what customers need and leads to more customers and sales (Scaria, 2022). Social media (SM) is an "internet-based technology that provides online conversation and encompasses a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including social networking websites, blogs, etc." (Hollensen, 2017). In addition to that, social media enables people to advertise their websites, goods, or services through online social platforms, and access a significantly larger audience that might not have been reachable through traditional methods (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2020).

Thereby, social media can serve as a platform to strengthen sales for businesses by allowing them to share details about their products or services, acquire new customers, enhance their brand reputation, and expand brand recognition to some degree (Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2020).

SM platforms play a vital role for SMEs as they enable them to enhance their market share and gain more opportunities in the global market (Virglerová et al., 2022). SMEs possess the capability to foster customer loyalty towards their brand and enhance awareness by leveraging social media platforms, while simultaneously maintaining cost-effectiveness (Virglerová et al., 2022). Therefore, SM is a low-cost communication tool and has high efficiency compared to other traditional communication tools (Casaló et al., 2021).

The majority of SMEs operate with restricted resources and require exceptional efforts in order to attain sustainable competitiveness and performance (Susanto et al., 2023). Further, researchers have acknowledged SM as an efficient means to enhance the capabilities of SMEs, despite their limited resources (Susanto et al., 2023).

1.2. Problem discussion

As the world is becoming increasingly globalised, it is critical that SMEs divert their attention outside the national border in order to survive (Lee et al., 2012). Internationalization has therefore become a crucial strategy for SMEs to expand their business and increase profitability (Rosário et al., 2021). However, SMEs are often challenged due to their "liability of smallness" which results in a lack of critical resources (Morais & Ferreira, 2020; Child et al., 2022; Sedoglavich, 2012). Further, differences in language, culture, and business practices can make it difficult for SMEs to adapt to the market and sell their products successfully (Mendy & Rahman, 2019; Roy et al., 2016).

During the process of internationalization, SMEs face many barriers, related to access to markets, financial instruments, and business surroundings (Kneller & Pisu, 2007; OECD, 2009) as well as establishing relationships with supply chain partners in foreign markets and access to networks (Rundh, 2007; Child et al., 2022). Further, human resources, managerial capabilities and knowledge are also critical constraints that hinder the progression of SMEs to the global business environment (Francioni et al., 2016; Martineau & Pastoriza, 2016;

Narayanan, 2015). It is important for SMEs to understand and effectively address these challenges to successfully internationalise their operations. This criticality for SMEs to succeed in foreign markets lies at a national level where nations rely on SMEs to excel in international markets as these companies are the future backbone of national economies (European Commission, 2021).

Contemporary research indicates that social media plays a vital role in the internationalization process of SMEs as it offers a strong foundation to communicate effectively, establish strong relationships, trust, and networking which in turn will enhance the sales, market share and perceived value of the organisation (Kaplan 2012; Leonardi and Vaast, 2017; Wang et al., 2016; Cheng & Shiu, 2019). Social Media is an inexpensive and efficient marketing tool that strongly suits SMEs as it enables clear communication between the organisation and the customer providing organisations the ability to understand, adapt and respond in a competitive and proactive manner towards customer needs (Parveen et al., 2016; Hollensen, 2017; Virglerová et al., 2022; Casaló et al., 2020).

Many scholars claim that research on overcoming barriers to the internationalization of SMEs is particularly fragmented emphasising that research on internal capabilities and external drives such as networks as main barriers remain under researched (Dabic et al., 2020; Martineau & Pastoriza, 2016; Francioni et al., 2016; Andres et al., 2022). Despite the substantial value of social media for SMEs, there is very limited research on how SMEs can utilise social media to overcome barriers and have an impact on internationalization (Garg & Shastri, 2022).

1.3. Problem statement

In the current business context, In order for SME's to grow, internationalization can be considered a vital strategic move. However due to the scarcity of the resource SME's encounter difficulties in internationalization. Investigating the impact on social media on SME internationalization would provide insight whether they can overcome these difficulties through social media. The thesis intends to understand the impact of social media on SME internationalization through a qualitative research approach and determine if there is a positive or negative impact between social media and SME internationalization.

1.4. Research purpose

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the internationalization of SMEs by conducting a literature review and reviewing and assessing empirical data on the impact of social media on overcoming the barriers to internationalization of SMEs and thereby bridging the current research gap. Taking into overall barriers, as indicated by the OECD (2008) study, the top ten obstacles predominantly impeding the internationalization efforts of SMEs are identified (Pietrasieński & Ślusarczyk, 2015). In this study, three challenges (Lack of market knowledge, inability to connect with business networks and inability to new product development) encountered by SMEs during the internationalization process have been identified as a problem, as they hold significant importance in the context of internationalization endeavours and requirements. Furthermore, in comparison with top ten barriers identified in previous study (OECD, 2008), it was hypothesised that social media platforms can help SMEs to overcome the following three barriers related to information gathering and communication while other barriers are not connected.

Further elaborated the reason for selecting these three barriers and why they are significant in the internationalization process of SMEs.

Market Knowledge:

Market knowledge plays a pivotal role in the international expansion of SMEs (Evangelista & Mac, 2016; Ibeh, 2005). However, limited access to market information can be a significant barrier. SMEs often face challenges in understanding foreign markets, including cultural nuances, customer preferences, and competitive landscapes. This lack of market knowledge can hinder their ability to make informed decisions and tailor their products or services to meet international demands (Roy et al., 2016; Ranasinghe, 2019; Pietrasieński & Ślusarczyk, 2015).

Business Network:

Establishing and nurturing a strong business network is crucial for SMEs venturing into international markets (Sinkovics et al., 2018). Building relationships with international partners, distributors, suppliers, and potential customers can provide invaluable support and insights. However, for SMEs with limited resources and limited international connections, developing and expanding such networks can be quite challenging (Dutta & Sobel, 2016).

New Product Development:

Creating new products to suit international markets is another critical aspect of internationalization for SMEs (Hassid & Fafaliou, 2006). SMEs need to continuously innovate and develop products that cater to the specific needs and preferences of their target markets. However, the lack of resources, expertise, and access to research and development facilities can impede their ability to create and introduce new products effectively.

As described above, since the aforementioned factors are crucial for internationalization and are related to information gathering and communication, this study has specifically chosen "lack of market knowledge, inability to connect with business networks and inability to new product development" as barriers.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how social media aids the internationalization of SMEs by overcoming the barriers of market knowledge acquisition, business networks and new product development. Based on that, the following research questions are identified to examine the impact of social media on the internationalization of SMEs:

RQ1. What is the impact of social media on market knowledge acquisition during the SME's internationalization?

RQ2. What is the impact of social media on business networks during the SME's internationalization?

RQ3. What is the impact of social media on new product development during the SME's internationalization?

1.5. Delimitations

To focus the research on a specific area, the study has narrowed its scope to examine the utilisation of social media applications as a communication instrument for exchanging information about the international market to overcome internationalization barriers faced by SMEs. The business sector is limited to the small and medium enterprises in the tech industry which have already been internationalised located in the north of Sweden. The reason for selecting SMEs in the technology industry is that it has emerged as a significant driver of innovation and economic growth worldwide (Galimberti & Wazlawick, 2015). By focusing on technology SMEs, this research aimed to explore how these companies leverage social media platforms to expand their businesses and navigate international markets, given the increasing digitization and global demand for high-value software products and services.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The main theoretical area of this research has focused on social media and the internet, SMEs, internationalization of SMEs, internationalization barriers. The study aims to identify the role of social media and its impact on the internationalization process. In addition, the literature review attempts to compare definitions of SMEs and internationalization so that an acceptable definition is formed to proceed with the study. The literature review resulted in gathering deep insight into barriers of SME internationalization using valuable articles and books that provided a strong base for the study.

2.1. Social Media and Internet

The Internet is becoming a key factor that affects consumer behaviour. Also, consumer awareness, information search and post-purchase communication is also driven by the internet (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Therefore, social media is the most suitable medium to send and receive information that is beneficial for both the company and the consumer because of cost effectiveness and flexibility. Today social media has become an important tool for communication and marketing especially for SMEs (Samat et al., 2015). According to Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004) , social media is an online interactive site where people meet, interact and share information. Social media can also be described as the use of digital media and the internet which is different from the conventional way of consuming information through various media outlets (Dubihlela & Rundora, 2014).

Social media has changed and revolutionised the way people interact and connect with each other, and it turned ''one to many'' communication to ''many to many '' communication" (Odoom et al., 2017). According to Jagongo & Kinyua (2013), companies can use social media for various business-related activities like customer relationship management (CRM), selling products and services, gathering customer data and entering into new markets. In general, social media marketing has become a cheaper and more convenient mode of communication and advertising the traditional media channels. This helps the SMEs to access the target market and increase their market share (Jagongo & Kinyua, 2013). According to Swami et al. (2014), social media has become a vital aspect of organisational development through customer relationship management. Social media has the ability to overcome geographical barriers because it enables people to meet, communicate and gather information easily online (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Jagongo & Kinyua, 2013). According to Wang et al. (2016), social media has created a platform

for businesses to research new business prospects and contributed to the creation of new partnerships and new business relationships.

In order to boost their worldwide awareness and engage with customers in new areas, a rising number of companies are integrating social media into their global business plans (European Commission, 2021). Even though it is difficult to quantify the impact that social media has on sales, social media makes it possible for businesses to expand globally into virtually any market (European Commission, 2021). However, having access to both social media and the internet is necessary in order to properly reach customers. According to research conducted by Brusse et al. (2014) this suggests that utilising social media marketing would not enable it to penetrate all global markets due to the inadequate internet infrastructure that exists in some locations. Further, the presence of a demographic element, that younger generations are active users of social media influences the potential use of the platform (Hutchinson, 2016). This shows that social media may have limitations as a tool, however, the extent of those constraints is highly dependent on the type of the product or service that is being offered. As the potential of the various types of social media varies depending on the demographics of the audience it caters to, it is important to select the type of social media that is most appropriate for the goal of the campaign (Brusse et al., 2014). For instance, Facebook may be utilised for campaigning, publicity, and the spread of information, whereas Instagram is more favourable to two-way connections between businesses and their customers (Leibowitz, 2017). According to the European Commission (2021), social media provides numerous competitive advantages, including access to international markets, brand awareness, promotions, co-creations, real-time consumer support, customer and market insights, increased customer loyalty, spending, and recommendations, accurate prediction of real-world outcomes, and an internal network (Intranet). Therefore, companies can broaden their international reach by creating online profiles on platforms such as Facebook, where they can interact with customers coming from a variety of different cultural backgrounds.

According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), the use of social media has fundamentally altered both the dissemination and acquisition of information. Xu et al. (2010) also that the ability of companies to detect opportunities, errors, and risks is impacted by the information that businesses gain through social media. This knowledge can therefore be considered as the accumulation of experience, capacity of businesses to recognize opportunities, errors, and

hazards. According to Nguyen et al, (2015). For firms to keep their competitive edge, they need to incorporate the learnings they obtain from their use of social media and digital platforms into their overarching business strategy. Connectivity to the internet helps bridge the gap between different cultures because it enables small and medium-sized businesses to gain knowledge about the habits and tastes of consumers in other nations as well as the particular business climates of those areas (Jin & Hurd, 2018). In this way, SMEs may be improved by acquiring new information and the improved application of current knowledge through the utilisation of social media networks as a learning platform. As a result of this, the use of social media networks by SMEs to gain new information and skills from customers and other firms, as well as to mix internal and external knowledge, may affect the growth of SMEs (Williams et al., 2020).

According to Fletcher & Harris (2012), in order for enterprises to have a competitive advantage in a global market, they need to possess both experience in the market and processual knowledge (i.e., they need to understand how to internationalise their operations). According to Nguyen et al. (2015), firms may gain a competitive edge by gaining a deeper comprehension of both the target markets in which they operate and the market possibilities that are now accessible to them. According to the findings of Udomkit & Schreier (2017), small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) did not have the data and tools that were necessary to successfully manage the lack of capabilities or networks. Consequently, Nguyen et al. (2015), suggest that using social media might make this barrier easier to overcome, which would make it possible for businesses to grow. According to Annabi & McGann (2013), the use of social media platforms has the potential to enhance strategic management since these platforms make it easier for employees to communicate with one another and share information. Motahar et al. (2021) also highlight the significance of the roles that SMEs play in the exchange of information as well. Algharabat et al. (2020), and Muslim et al. (2020) each address how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may use social media at a low cost to boost brand loyalty and customer awareness.

According to Quinton & Wilson (2016), small and medium-sized businesses may increase both their tangible and intangible resources by actively participating in business networks on social media platforms and other types of online networking activities. Based on Quinton & Wilson (2016) further suggest that membership and participation in a business social media network

provides "a trusted environment with a potentially global reach through which nearly immediate contacts can be established as a foundation for future business collaboration". Since it takes less time to build credibility in a professional environment such as LinkedIn than in other contexts (Quinton & Wilson, 2016), LinkedIn is a great platform for meeting new connections and beginning profitable business interactions. Members of these online networks may boost the success of their firm by cooperating to find business solutions, having the same business goals and objectives, and exchanging information (Cenamor et al., 2019). People from a wide variety of fields and geographic locations are able to interact with one another (Chang et al., 2017). Therefore, the connection between online business networks could help enhance business support environments, particularly in rural areas, thereby reducing the geographical disparity in knowledge creation (Pettersen, 2016; Qian et al., 2022). According to the findings of King et al. (2017) businesses located in rural areas can significantly benefit from joining online business networks in order to overcome the disadvantages of physical isolation and technological backwardness and to strengthen their social ties especially to support internationalization.

Social media has a significant impact on new product development, serving as a valuable complement to conventional sensory and consumer research approaches (Carr et al., 2015). It proves particularly beneficial in uncovering emerging trends and generating valuable insights into various product categories (Carr et al., 2015). Consumers are continually adapting their behaviours regarding social media usage, becoming increasingly aware of social listening, tracking, and engagement. By utilising social media mining as a research tool, companies can collect large amounts of qualitative data at a lower cost compared to traditional methods such as focus groups or long-term global research (Carr et al., 2015).

2.2. SMEs

SMEs represent a majority of businesses globally and thereby are critical contributors to generating employment and developing global economies. SMEs account for 90% of businesses as well as more than 50% of employment worldwide (World Bank, 2022). The World Bank (2022) forecasts that 600 million jobs to be occupied by 2030 to meet the developing global workforce and as many large organisations are resorting to outsourcing and downsizing, the importance of SME development for nations worldwide has reached unimaginable heights.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have a share of more than 95% of organisations and generate 60% to 70% of employment in OECD economies (OECD, 2018). SMEs are considered as the backbone of the European economy due to the creation of employment, social stability, and economic growth (European Commission (2021). It was noted that in 2013, over 21 million SMEs offered 88.8 million jobs across the European Union (OECD, 2013). It is identified that SMEs account for nine out of every 10 enterprises and SMEs provide two out of every three jobs.

SMEs can be classified based on the country, region, and economic landscape of a nation. The EU and UK classify an organisation as an SME if it consists of a maximum of 250 employees and an annual turnover less than 50 million Euros (European Commission, 2018). In the USA, the maximum limit of employees is 500 while in China SMEs can have the number of employees as high as 2000 (Zahoor et al., 2020).

The European Commission (2017) presents that the SBA profile of Sweden is highly competitive, scoring beyond the EU average in five SBA sectors. Swedish SMEs are recognized as one of the top performers in 'Access to finance', 'Skills & innovation', 'Second chance', 'Responsible administration', and 'Internationalization' areas. The European Commission (2018) claims that Sweden has progressed effectively in 2016 and the first quarter of 2017, by following 22 policy measures that focus on 9 out of the 10 policy sections in the SBA. The SMEs in Sweden contribute 56.4% of value in terms of 124 billion euros becoming the highest contributor of value to the country compared to MNEs (European Commission, 2017). Therefore, SMEs are identified to play an imperative role, especially in the Swedish 'non-financial business economy' (which includes industry, construction, trade, and services) generating 61.2% of value-added and 65.2% of employment, against the EU averages of 56.4% and 66.6%, respectively (European Commission, 2018). Further, 122 firms were listed in Sweden in 2020 and first half of 2021, during the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic alone, transforming it into one of the leading European hubs for SME listings (European Commission, 2017).

2.3. Internationalization of SME

Globalisation can be considered as one of the most important factors in the world economy. Economic globalisation has a great impact on enterprises and provides niche markets and other opportunities for internationalised companies (Naldi, 2008). Internationalization is identified as a widely used aspect crucial in the prospect of enhancing business opportunities (Rundh, 2007; Zeng et al., 2009). Welch and Luostarinen (1988) suggest that internationalization focuses on 'increasing involvement in international operations. internationalization therefore involves directing outwards, the international operations of a firm (Zeng et al., 2008; Bell et al., 2004). Conforming to this, Ribau et al. (2018) define internationalization as a process and a set of activities that organisations employ to cross national borders and enter the international business environment. The typical definition of internationalization involves a step-by-step progression whereby a company transitions from solely operating within its domestic market to expanding its business operations into foreign markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Rundh, 2003; Ferreira et al., 2023). Consequently, internationalization explains how firms transcend in a continuum that extends between domestic and complete globalisation (Wiedersheim-Paul, et al.,1978). This increasing attraction of firms towards internationalization is a necessity due to its contribution to enhancing an organisation's managerial skills and capabilities, developing national economies and industries, increasing productivity, and driving employment as well as enhancing resource efficacy (De Rocha et al., 2009; Pinho & Martins, 2010). As a result, organisations can transform into stronger players in their domestic markets through adaptations to international competition (Židonis & Kuada, 2006).

In the twentieth century, internationalization has received an exponentially rising focus from scholars and organisations alike given its relevance to SMEs in driving national and global economies (OECD, 2009). Therefore, internationalization which seemed to be an exclusive aspect for multinational enterprises has now been utilised by SMEs to maximise their business opportunities and drive organisational goals (Rundh, 2007; Zeng et al., 2009). This is crucial for national, regional, and global future growth, due to the increasingly important role of SMEs in their contribution to economies (Knowles et al., 2006). Internationalization has now transformed into 'a must-have strategy' as domestic organisations are no longer secure within national borders, due to increasing international competition and the impact of international economic factors (Etemad, 2004). The growing global integration of markets highlights the

significance of comprehending the behaviour and performance of companies in international markets.

Many theories of internationalization exist; however, most traditional theories are based on empirical evidence of Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) which cannot be utilised to describe the international involvement of contemporary firms (Wilson, 2000). The stage models presented by the Uppsala school (Johanson & Vahlne 1977; Johanson & Vahlne 2009; Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975) claim that organisations commit to slow and incremental stages when internationalising. Based on this, the theory explains that organisations increase their commitment and investments as their knowledge and experience in the new market increases (Ibeh, 2005). However, scholars argue that contemporary firms do not pursue internationalization in an incremental manner claiming that pressures to globalise, changing domestic market conditions, and radical innovations are compelling SMEs to adjust to these shifts by making radical decisions in terms of accelerating internationalization (Kuivalainen & Sundqvist, 2007; Cavusgil & Knight, 2015). Further, according to Andersen (1993), the stage models lack focus on the dimension of time and are highly contingent on the context.

In contrast, there has been increasing recognition towards resource-based view and network model (Bell et al., 2003). Network theory claims that knowledge-based business organisations can attain sustainable competitive advantages by focusing on forging mutually beneficial relationships or networks with other organisations (Coviello, 2006; Coviello & Martin, 1999). The network perspective plays a key role in enabling SMEs to achieve internationalization through social capital, strategic alliances, and joint ventures (Dabic & Bach, 2008; Musteen et al., 2014). The network theory therefore supports the criticality of affiliations with external entities especially for the growth of SMEs in international markets (Bell et al., 2003). The difference between success and failure in international markets can be the formal or informal networks that SMEs develop and utilise to overcome the liability of foreignness, liability of smallness and, the liability of outsider-ship (Sinkovics et al., 2018). However, the applicability of network theory is considered to be limited even though it is a useful theory (Yamin & Kurt, 2018).

The resource-based view (RBV) (Barney & MacKey, 2016) is another theory that is considered useful for SMEs when deciding to internationalise. The RBV theory argues that if an

organisation's assets, employees, intellectual and physical properties are valuable, rare, inimitable and supported by organisational systems they are considered as resources (Barney & MacKey, 2005). RBV is identified as a critical framework to shed light on the activities of SMEs as it fits the context of SMEs (Kraus et al., 2011), however, when employing RBV theory there is a propensity to oversimplify assumptions without balancing with external factors, misdirecting firms to make wrong decisions when internationalising (Priem & Butler, 2001). Further, since the conventional RBV theory focuses on MNCs, it is not universally applicable to SMEs (Kraus et al., 2011). Nolan & Garavan (2016) argue that adopting a "complex RBV (Colbert, 2004) framework will better match the context of SMEs".

Research on the globalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is crucial because they, along with multinational enterprises (MNEs), make significant contributions to the country (Mohamad et al., 2019). The process of SME internationalization can be attributed to their capability to take on new risks and effectively integrate with the global economy through entrepreneurial orientation (EO), maintain their profitability at an international level, and adhere to the regulations of the institutional environment (Chandra et al., 2020). Mainly, export modes (direct, indirect and cooperative export), intermediate entry modes (contract manufacturing, licensing, franchising, joint venture, others) and hierarchical modes (sales representatives, subsidiaries) are identified as international entry modes (Hollensen, 2017). SMEs have a range of options for internationalising, including foreign direct investment and exporting (Golovko & Valentini, 2011; Saridakis et al., 2019). According to Naldi (2008), local market substitutes and competitor products can provide a challenge to SMEs and Armario et al., (2008) suggest that this competition led SMEs to reach global markets. Based on the study by Oviatt & McDougall (2005), a company possessing "novel complex knowledge", is expected to internationalise quickly as it has a distinctive and sustainable advantage that may be sought after by various countries. For this reason, technology companies have opportunities to expand their business in the international market (Kriz & Welch, 2018).

2.4. Internationalization barriers

Developed and developing countries increasingly rely on SMEs due to their substantial contributions to revenue generation, job creation and poverty mitigation to achieve sustainable growth of national, regional, and global economies (Ayyagari et al., 2011; Cravo et al., 2012). According to the OECD (2008), the total value of international trade is lower than its share of

the domestic market confirming the presence of barriers for SMEs in cross-country markets (OECD, 2008). Leonidou (1995) identifies barriers that represent attitudinal, structural, operational, and other restraints that deter an organisation's ability to commence, grow and maintain international functions. Consequently, factors that disrupt the growth of SMEs are regarded as major barriers to the economic progression of countries (Shah et al., 2013). According to Pavlák (2018), internationalization decisions depend on corporate culture, corporate values, and management style. According to Berndt et al. (2007), Machkova (2015) further highlights that the degree of involvement in international business activities depends on resource availability and exposure to foreign markets.

According to Morgan (1997), internationalization barriers can be divided into two categories.
1. Barriers that dishearten firms from engaging in export activities
2. Barriers experienced by firms that have already started exporting activities – these barriers are often experiential in nature

SMEs' barriers to internationalization are attracting more researchers especially concerning the developing countries (Cerrato & Piva, 2012; Sommer, 2010). Different authors categorise SME internationalization barriers in a different way. Leonidou (2004) also proposed two types of barriers based on an analysis of 32 studies focusing on 39 export barriers, classifying them into internal and external barriers. According to Leonidou (2004), internal barriers are identified as constraints within the firm's internal environment while external barriers are barriers associated with the external environment over which the firm has no control. Conforming to this, Hutchinson et al. (2009), conducted an investigation that focused on internationalization barriers of small retailers based in the UK identifying management (lack of vision, fear of losing control, and the lack of knowledge), organisational (transfer of detail of the concept abroad, lack of resources, and lack of consolidation in the domestic market), and the external environment (legislation, currency, cultural differences, and logistics) as main barriers.

Jorgensen & Knudsen (2006) suggest that SMEs must enhance their resilience to be competent and internationalise effectively. Therefore, Tuzová et al. (2017) identified the resilience and non-resilience barriers that SMEs encounter in emerging economies specifically in the international penetration phase. Accordingly, the barriers that they identified were grouped into four types: socio-political barriers (e.g., institutional, and political), environmental barriers

(e.g., uncertainty and dissimilarity), market barriers and barriers related to resources (e.g., technology and human resources).

Johanson & Vahlne, (1977) and Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, (1975) argue that SMEs usually face the entry barrier due to "psychic distance", which constitutes the socio-economic and political differences between domestic and foreign markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975). This encompasses differences in economies, language, and culture as well as different political, and institutional systems further slowing down the process of internationalization of a firm (Ruzzier et al., 2006). Additionally, Dutta & Sobel, (2016) argues that human resources can act as a barrier to internationalization, claiming that this can result in a major hindrance for SMEs to internationalise since social constraints are involved as well (Dreher & Gassebner, 2013). Therefore, language barriers and socio-cultural for instance result as a major obstacle for organisations to engage in communication and networking which are important tools when dealing with other countries (Mendy & Rahman, 2019).

According to Cho & Li (2018), SMEs also face major obstacles due to economic and technological barriers. These are external environmental constraints that SMEs have no control over (Bose, 2016). Economic barriers can be economic conditions, economic policies, and the economic system that compose the economic environment of a firm (Melén & Nordman, 2009). The economic barriers can impact organisations such as through government policy changes or restrictions as well as political stabilities can result in positive or negative consequences (Ibeh, et al., 2012). According to Cardoza et al. (2015) suggest that economic adversities can have major negative impacts on SMEs, especially in developing countries.

Technological barriers are another constraint that challenges SMEs when internationalising (Ibeh et al., 2012). The World Bank (2014) suggests that technological barriers are identified as one of the top five barriers to SME development (World Bank, 2014). In developing economies, it is identified that the priority placed on technology is very low affecting the SME's potential to internationalise negatively (Rahman et al., 2017).

Andres and Poler (2016) defined internationalization barriers based on four dimensions (i) strategy; (ii) technology; (iii) partners; (iv) product. These dimensions were based on classifying the prominent international barriers identified by previous research based on the similarities. The strategy dimension focuses on aspects such as the features of the market, the restrictions on labour, the cultural differences, the rules of the government, and the conditions for partnerships (Ojasalo, 2010) that impact the facilitation of the internationalization effort through strategic alignment (Al-Hyari et al., 2012). The technology dimension consists of the capacity of SMEs to communicate information and expertise for addressing interoperability and procedural difficulties with internationalised partners, as well as for obtaining an appropriate technical infrastructure that can overcome hurdles connected with the transmission of data across global partners (Shaw & Darroch, 2004; Okpara, & Koumbiadis, 2010). The partner's dimension refers to the capability, skill, fluency, experience, and the ability to work culturally well with other collaborators are all important factors (Hassid & Fafaliou, 2006). Product dimension includes the necessity to specify both the data exchange channel and the manufacturing process of the product to participate in the global network (Hassid & Fafaliou, 2006). The significance of a product concerning the overall system of world production is focused on here (Štrukelj & Dolinšek, 2010).

In contrast, OECD (2009) developed a notable study on SME internationalization barriers which became a reference for many notable studies in the past decade. This study thoroughly investigates the SME internationalization barriers based on the perception of the SMEs and the perception of the member organisations. Therefore, it provides an important overview of the internationalization barriers for SMEs (Pietrasieński & Ślusarczyk, 2015).

They ran a study among the representatives of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) members and ranked the barriers according to the weight of impact. As per Table 2.1, the study identified the top ten barriers that fall under the categories of ''Accessibility to market'', "internal capabilities'' and ''business surrounding''.

Table -2.1-Main barriers to the access of SMEs to international markets in OECD states

Relevance of the barrier*	SupportCategory	Description of the barrier of the access of SMEs on foreign markets
1	Capabilities	Staff unprepared for the international operations and/or inappropriate number of it
2	Financial instruments	Lack of operational capital for the financing of export activity
3	Access to markets	Limited information connected with the analysis of foreign markets
4	Access to markets	Insufficient identification of business chances connected with the conduction of activity on international markets
5	Capabilities	Lack of time, which managers can give over the management of international operations
6	Capabilities	Lack of the ability of the contact with the potential clients abroad
7	Capabilities	Limited development of new products in connection of the needs of foreign purchasers
8	Business surroundings	Ignorance of business practices being applied in other states
9	Capabilities	Lack of fulfilling requirements connected with standards and the quality of exported products
10	Access to markets	Ignorance of export procedures and required documentation

 Source: OECD, 2008

2.4.1. Resource Poverty

Not having enough financial resources can in fact hinder the performance of a business. SMEs in developing countries face many challenges due to lack of financial and physical resources which reduce their ability to internationalise (Manolopoulos et al., 2018; Weerawardena & O'Cass, 2009; Rutashobya and Jaensson, 2004). Limitations in financial and related resources have continued to be highlighted as a main barrier to SME internationalization (OECD, 2008).

2.4.2. Limited information/knowledge to locate/analyse the market

Having a solid knowledge of the selected market and selecting the market can be a success factor in successful SME internationalization (Ibeh, 2005). Based on the study of Evangelista & Mac (2016), It is crucial to have firms with a greater capacity to absorb information since they are able to acquire knowledge about export markets and strategies more effectively and efficiently. This becomes particularly significant when dealing with numerous and diverse

export markets (Evangelista & Mac, 2016). In addition to that, given the wide range of export markets, it is crucial to accumulate information concerning customer requirements, governmental regulations, business customs, and the competitive landscape (Evangelista & Mac, 2016). However, cultural differences and lack of target-market knowledge are considered some high-impact barriers to SME internationalization especially in developing countries (Roy et al., 2016; Ranasinghe, 2019).

2.4.3. Managerial capability and lack of time

The success of the SME internationalization process is highly dependent on the top management capability. Limited managerial skills and knowledge stand out as a critical barrier to SME internationalization process (Boermans and Roelfseman, 2015). According to Al-Hyari et al. (2012) SME managers lack the expertise and motivation to internalise. Since SME's have a short organisational structure, their top management is directly responsible for the strategy of internationalization.

2.4.4. Inability to contact Potential customers and partners

Finding the right partner or buyer is highly important for business success. Business networks are social and economic structures comprising individuals and organisations engaged in collaborative business activities, involving the recurrent exchange of goods, services, and payments among each other (Todeva, 2011). Furthermore, the success or failure of internationalization is influenced by both formal and informal connections established among partners, customers, and suppliers (business network) (Sinkovics et al., 2018). Lack of ability to contact the right buyers in other countries can be considered a significant barrier to SME internationalization (Kneller & Pisu, 2007). According to Rundh (2007), difficulty in finding suitable distribution partners can severely hamper SME internationalization.

2.4.5. Inability to develop new products to meet the specific needs of foreign customers

New product development provides customers with a fresh experience and helps the brand differentiate itself from competitors (Dhargalkar et al., 2016). Considering that if products and services incorporate distinctive features that align with the specific requirements of foreign customers, there exists a significant opportunity to expand business operations into the international market (Dhargalkar et al., 2016; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). Furthermore, products should be designed and modified based on customer needs. However, due to resource

limitations, SMEs encounter difficulties in developing products that adequately cater to the specific requirements of foreign customers (OECD, 2008).

2.4.6. Product quality

Product quality requirements can also become a barrier for SME internationalization. Most countries in the world have quality requirements and their own testing facilities to test any foreign products that wish to enter their market (Roy et al., 2016; Leonidou, 2000; Pinho & Martins, 2010). This can push the SMEs to match those standards which will result in complete change of product specifications and increase production costs. All SMEs are not able to adapt to these conditions and most of them seem to avoid exporting to these countries (Chandra et al., 2020).

Considering the above barriers identified by the OECD (2008) (table 2.1), this research selected to explore three specific barriers: limited market knowledge acquisition, inability to contact Potential customers and partners, and inability to develop new products customised to meet the specific needs of foreign customers.

Among the ten identified barriers, these three specific barriers were selected for inclusion in this study based on two rationales;

Social media, in general, serves as both a communication and information-sharing platform. According to Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004), social media is a platform where people can meet, interact, and share information. Samat et al. (2015) stated that social media has become a crucial tool for communication. It is assumed that the aforementioned characteristics of social media would aid small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in overcoming these three barriers, as their foundation is closely tied to information gathering and communication.

Furthermore, market knowledge acquisition, business networking, and new product development are essential factors for the internationalization of SMEs. By prioritising the mitigation of these barriers, SMEs can effectively capitalise on the potential for international market growth. This, in turn, positions them for increased competitiveness and sustainable long-term success (Ibeh, 2005; Evangelista & Mac, 2016; Todeva, 2011; Sinkovics et al., 2018; Dhargalkar et al., 2016; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005).

2.5. Frame of Reference

The purpose of the frame of reference is to paint a picture of how the research questions specified in the first chapter were derived and how those questions relate to the literature review covered in the second chapter. Before deciding on the most suitable theoretical component for this examination, several theoretical aspects were thoroughly researched. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2008 released a landmark report on the challenges that small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) face when attempting to expand internationally in the year 2009 (Pietrasieński & Ślusarczyk, 2015). In this study, the challenges that SMEs encounter when striving to expand internationally are investigated to identify ten challenges that SMEs face when attempting to expand their operations into international markets. In which, we have identified three main barriers which are the marketing market knowledge gap, less business networking and the inability to align new products to customers' requirements. Although previous research has explored strategies for overcoming internationalization barriers (Dabic et al., 2020; Martineau & Pastoriza, 2016; Francioni et al., 2016; Andres et al., 2022), there has been a lack of research examining the impact of social media (SM) on internationalization while specifically addressing these aforementioned barriers. After examining the literature concerning these barriers, this research aims to investigate in general terms the impact of social media to overcome the said barriers which prompted the emergence of a frame of research for developing the three research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the impact of social media on market knowledge acquisition during the SME's internationalization?

Based on previous studies, it has been identified that it is important to know international market influence to commit to new opportunities (Evangelista & Mac, 2016; Ibeh, 2005). Due to the perpetual evolution of market trends and varying market demands, it is imperative to continually update information in order to inform organisational decision-making and effectively confront market competition. However, SMEs encounter difficulties in gathering information about the international market due to various factors. These include cultural differences, lack of target market knowledge (Roy et al., 2016; Ranasinghe, 2019; Pietrasieński & Ślusarczyk, 2015) and lack of knowledge about the features of the market, the restrictions on labour, and lack of knowledge about the rules of the government (Ojasalo, 2010). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the utilisation of social media has significantly transformed the manner in which information is gathered and distributed. According to Nguyen et al. (2015),

for businesses to keep a competitive edge, they need to integrate the lessons learned from their usage of social media and digital platforms into their overall company strategy. This is necessary for businesses to maintain a competitive advantage. Hence, it is important to consider the impact of SM on the acquisition of market knowledge in this study when SMEs expand their business to international markets.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of social media on business networks during SMEs' internationalization?

Business networks encompass social and economic structures where individuals and organisations engage in cooperative business endeavours, entailing repeated exchanges of goods, services, and payments between one another (Todeva, 2011). Establishing favourable connections with partners and customers is imperative for the internationalization of SMEs (Sinkovics et al., 2018). The greater the number of connections, the greater the potential for market opportunities. However, SMEs encounter challenges when engaging with partners and customers, primarily attributable to the socio-economic and political differences between domestic and foreign markets (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975), differences in economies, language, and culture (Ruzzier et al., 2006), and lack of human resources (Dutta & Sobel, 2016). According to Quinton and Wilson (2016), small and medium-sized firms can benefit from increasing their tangible and intangible resources by participating in business networks on social media platforms and other types of online networking activities. According to Cenamor et al. (2019), participants in these online communities are able to provide assistance to one another, share information, and work together to improve the organisation as a whole. According to Chang et al. (2017), individuals from all walks of life and all regions of the world are able to communicate with one another. Therefore, integrating online business networks has the potential to improve business support settings, particularly in rural areas, thereby eliminating the knowledge production gap between regions (Pettersen, 2016). Hence, this research question focuses on examining how social media can generally expand business networks during SME internationalization.

Research Question 3: What is the impact of social media on new product development during the SME's internationalization?
The development of new products offers customers a unique experience while also setting the brand apart from its rivals (Dhargalkar et al., 2016). According to Roy et al. (2016), Leonidou

(2000), and Pinho & Martins (2010), almost every country in the world, including the US, Europe, and Asia, has its own testing facilities and quality and specific requirements for goods that are imported into the country. Therefore, not all small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) are flexible enough to export to countries with such rules (Chandra et al., 2020), many of them steer clear of those nations altogether. Hassid & Fafaliou (2006) specifies the importance of product as a dimension in enhancing a SMEs performance in terms of internationalization. According to the findings of Carr et al. (2015), social media serves as a valuable tool for gathering substantial amounts of data at a relatively lower cost compared to traditional methods. Therefore, this research question attempts to identify how social media can generally be used for new product development by SMEs to align with customers' needs during internationalization.

Table 2.2 Emerged Frame of Reference

Concept	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition	Source
Market Knowledge Acquisition	How the market behaves by understanding customers and competitor to enhance the firm capability	The process of acquiring information relating to market conditions, competitor information and customer preference to adjust marketing and product strategies.	Evangelista & Mac, 2016; Ibeh, 2005: Nguyen et al. (2015)
Network development	Network development is socio-economic structure of transacting economic agents doing business together and involved in the repetitive exchange of goods and services and payment between each other.	Refers to the business connections made between two or multiple entities to serve a foreign market.	Todeva, 2011; Sinkovics et al. 2018; Quinton and Wilson (2016)
New product development	New product development is not only upgrading new products and offering something more than the competitors, it is also providing the customer's new experience and making the brand stand out from the clutter.	Refers to the process of designing new products in order to reach a foreign market by extracting and incorporating market insight.	Dhargalkar et al. 2016; Hassid & Fafaliou, (2006) Carr et al. 2015

Source: Author Developed

The above frame of reference focuses on gaining market knowledge, business networks and new product development during SME internationalization, which are constructed with the help of an extensive review of the relevant body of literature. This study emphasizes the utilization of focused social media as a cost-effective tool for communication and exchange of information, aiming to improve business operations in the international market. Therefore, Figure 2.1 visually represents the frame of reference developed in this research, to facilitate the internationalization of SMEs. This framework aims to overcome barriers associated with knowledge acquisition, business network expansion, and product development by leveraging social media as a communication tool.
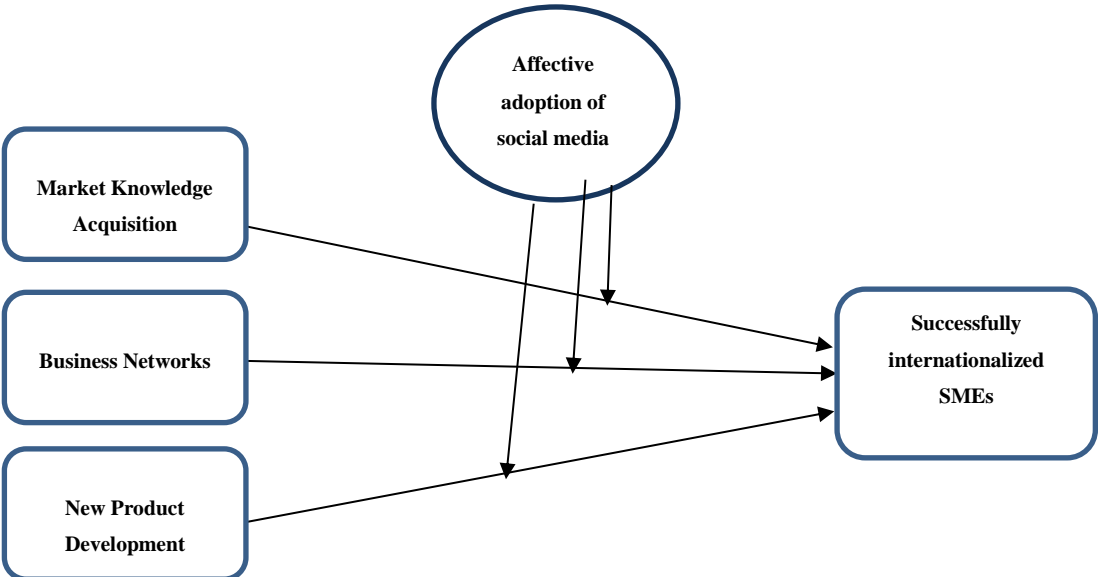
Figure 2.1- The Model adopted from the emerged frame of reference.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the methodology and research design of the study are presented. It encompasses the research purpose and approach. Additionally, the chapter provides a detailed description of the sample selection, unit of analysis, data collection, and data analysis processes. Finally, the chapter concludes by explaining the ethical consideration and measures taken to ensure reliability and validity.

3.1. Research design

The research design includes sources that are used to collect data, the way to collect data and methods used to analyse data in order to provide answers to the research questions (Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018). The research purpose of a study is to systematically investigate and gain an understanding of a phenomenon or concept through a structured process (Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018). Research objectives have been classified into three main forms: exploratory research, descriptive research, and explanatory research (Rahi, 2017). Exploratory research aims to discover novel perspectives and uncover occurrences that are taking place. The descriptive research method is concerned with collecting data on the current status of a particular phenomenon. The objective of this form of research is to present a precise depiction of circumstances, individuals, or occurrences. Explanatory research aims to clarify a particular situation or issue by establishing causal relationships. This type of research facilitates the acquisition of new perspectives regarding a scenario, with the goal of developing, expanding, elaborating, or validating a theory (Rahi, 2017).

This research was conducted based on the exploratory nature since it seeks to clarify or understand the research question and problem (Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018). This kind of research is typically utilised during the initial phases of inquiry when the concepts are insufficiently defined to establish an operational definition (Rahi, 2017). This method intends to collect more information to help the known facts (Rahi, 2017). Therefore, this research identified social media adoption and SME internationalization as established facts and aimed to gather further information on the impact of social media in overcoming the barriers to SME internationalization.

3.2. Research Approach

Though all research involves the systematic gathering and analysis of data to understand and clarify, the type of data employed differs between the two approaches (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). Quantitative data pertains to combined outcomes and statistical information (Bryman & Bell, 2017; Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018). Conversely, qualitative data is "not statistical and it incorporates multiple realities" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Further qualitative data provides deeper information about the research topic (Rahi, 2017). Based on Miles (1979), there are many reasons to attract the qualitative data collection approach. Such as rich, full, earthy, holistic, "real"; their face validity seems unimpeachable; etc. Further described that low front-end instruments were needed to collect the information. The qualitative approach provides superior tools for comprehension, can be applied to a few numbers of cases or individuals, construct social reality, place high importance on authenticity, concentrate on interactive processes, and make values present and explicit etc, in contrast to the quantitative approach (Kreuger and Neuman (2006); Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018; with sources from Creswell (1994), Denzin and Lincoln (1994), Guba and Lincoln (1994), Mostyn (1985), and Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998). Hence, in order to gather in-depth information about how companies use SM during their internationalization process, this study has utilised the qualitative method.

Based on the study of Rahi (2017), two research approaches used to establish a link between concepts and variables called deductive and inductive. The deductive approach utilises a pre-existing and proven theory as a foundation for research, and subsequently explains it based on "empirical observation and theory generated from conceptual and theoretical structures" (Rahi, 2017), while the inductive approach involves collecting empirical data and constructing and refining a theory based on that data (Saunders et al., 2009). Since this study employed an inductive approach, utilising a theory for SMEs internationalization, internationalization barriers and Social media, while collecting empirical data via semi-structured interviews.

3.3. Sampling

Sampling refers to the act of selecting a subset of individuals from a larger population for the purpose of conducting an investigation. This subset, also known as a sample, is chosen in order to assess the various characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes of the individuals in the dataset (Rahi, 2017). The use of sampling methodology in research can lead to improved data collection speed, enhanced accuracy of results, and greater cost efficiency (Rahi, 2017). The method of

sampling is divided into two types as probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Rahi, 2017). Probability sampling is a sampling method where every unit has an equal opportunity of being chosen, while non-probability sampling is a sampling method where the chance or likelihood of each unit being selected is unknown or unverified (Rahi, 2017).

Since the chance of selecting each response is uncertain or unconfirmed, this research has used non-probability sampling method (Rahi, 2017). This study is primarily centred on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and as such, a targeted sampling strategy was employed to select SMEs operating in Sweden. Based on the European Commission (2018), SMEs in the EU are classified as organisations consisting of a maximum of 250 employees. Therefore, selected companies employ no more than 250 staff members.

Based on the selection methods, non-probability sampling is subcategorized into convenience sampling, snowball sampling, quota sampling and Judgment sampling (Rahi, 2017). Out of these methods, this study has employed convenience sampling and judgmental sampling. Convenience sampling has been employed as a means of data collection, given its capacity to gather information from a population that is easily accessible to the researcher (Rahi, 2017). This approach offers a cost-effective means of conducting interviews or collecting responses (Rahi, 2017). Given the constraints of limited time and accessibility, a targeted sampling method was limited to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Luleå city.

To obtain answers to the research question, it is crucial to select the most suitable organisation which is why a judgmental sample is utilised (Saunders et al., 2016). The focus of the sample was on tech companies located in Luleå. The present study focuses on enterprises that have strategically incorporated technology into their operational frameworks to manufacture their goods or deliver their services, thereby qualifying them as technology-driven enterprises (Schuh et al., 2022). The sample was selected based on these criteria to facilitate the efficient and effective collection of data within the constraints of the available time. To determine whether the targeted tech companies in Luleå have undergone internationalization and use social media for their business performance, their company websites were searched. However, the presence of this information varied across the websites, with only a few companies providing the required details. Subsequently, emails were sent to 10 companies, but only three companies responded. Therefore, three companies were selected as the sample size for the study.
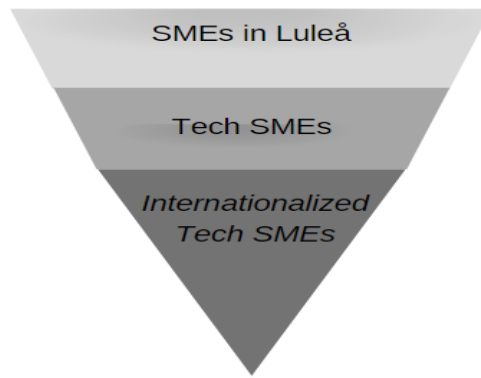
Figure 3.1- Population selection

To gather information for this study, we interviewed with CEO or senior management of SMEs as follows.

Table 3.1- Respondents' information

Respondent	Type of Business	No of employees	Interviewee	Interviewed Date	Time Duration
A	Developing the broadcast network planning software	02	CEO	04-05-2023	45 min
B	Video production, developing games	10	CEO	09-05-2023	50 min
C	Creating software for 3D LiDAR	19	R&D Project Manager	10-05-2023	37 min

3.4. Unit of analysis

In this study, the unit of analysis is small and medium-sized tech companies. This choice stems from the recognition that tech companies play a crucial role in driving innovation and offering high-value software products and services in the global market (Galimberti & Wazlawick, 2015). The city of Luleå in Sweden was selected as the research location due to its convenient accessibility for conducting interviews with senior management representatives from these companies. The primary objective of these interviews was to gain insights into how these tech SMEs leverage social media platforms as a means of expanding their business into international markets.

3.4.1. Tech SMEs

A technology company is a company that engages in the creation, manufacture, or utilisation of new technical expertise and invests resources in research and development activities (Laitinen, 2002). Also it is a digitally advanced business and should focus more on technology to develop their products compared to other companies (Schuh et al., 2022). The development of tech companies is deemed imperative owing to their features of high-growth potential and a proclivity for innovation, particularly in the case of high-tech firms (Camargo & Wang, 2015). Tech companies prioritise the use of new technologies and innovation as it can provide benefits to various stakeholders, such as customers seeking better quality products and services, businesses aiming for growth and profits, employees desiring more engaging and higher-paying jobs, and overall economy experiencing increased productivity and prosperity (Gerguri & Ramadani, 2010). Further, Innovation is one of the factors that affect the placement of "high-value-added software products and services" in the worldwide market (Galimberti & Wazlawick, 2015). Therefore, small and medium tech firms need to expand their business to foreign markets.

3.5. Data collection

In line with the qualitative methodology employed in this study, interviews were conducted with individuals within the organisation. Three types of interviews can be utilised for the research based on their nature: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews (Saunders et al., 2016; Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018). Structured interviews employ a uniform set of questions that remain consistent across all interviews whereas semi-structured interviews rely on a flexible approach through a collection of themes and open-ended questions rather than a rigid script. On the other hand, unstructured interviews do not have a predetermined guide or set of questions (Saunders et al., 2016; Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018).

The semi-structured interview has been used for this study since it provided contextual flexibility to the interviewer while incorporating some level of structure through pre-designed questions that aligned with the theoretical framework (Bryman & Bell, 2017). This approach was essential to ensure that the interviewees were asked pertinent questions related to the research topic while was also allowed them the liberty to explore topics beyond the research if

required (Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018). Follow-up questions were employed to gather additional information as required.

Despite the fact that semi-structured interviews tend to be more effective with two researchers present (Saunders et al., 2016), both researchers in this study conducted interviews physically at the respondents' business premises and online, interviewing three companies each. Questions were posed and the interview was recorded with prior consent from the participant.

3.6. Data analyse

The process of qualitative data analysis involves describing, categorising, and establishing connections among phenomena using the researcher's concepts (Mayer, 2015). The aims of qualitative data analysis are "describe a phenomenon in some or greater detail, comparing several cases on what they have in common or on the differences between them and develop a theory of the phenomenon under study from the analysis of empirical material" (Mayer, 2015). While there are established guidelines for analysing quantitative data, there is no set of clearly defined rules for analysing qualitative data (Mayer, 2015). But this should necessitate analysing the gathered data to gain understanding. In order to properly analyse the data gathered from interviews followed three steps, first reduction of data, second interpret data and conclusion.

3.6.1. Data Reduction

This stage involves reducing the amount of collected data into smaller and meaningful chunks (Mayer, 2015). Convert the recorded interview into written text by using online transcription software and read the entire transcript carefully and remove any irrelevant information.

3.6.2. Interpret data

To enhance the comprehensibility of our presented data and facilitate readers' understanding, we employed a combination of descriptive text and tabular representations.

3.6.3.Conclude

This is the stage where the final conclusions related to the research questions are drawn using the interpretations and analysis (Pärlhem & Rutberg, 2018). This study employed a manual coding approach to analyse qualitative data, whereby thoroughly reviewed the data and highlighted and categorised text that pertained to interview questions and research questions.

By comparing the empirical data with the literature review, the researcher has identified similarities and differences. This comparison helped to gain a deeper understanding of the research question and to draw conclusions based on the findings. Thematic analysis has been used for this research because it is a versatile research technique that can identify distinctions and similarities, extract relevant information, and assist in answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Blomberg & Furman, 2021).

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│   Data collected (semi-structured        │
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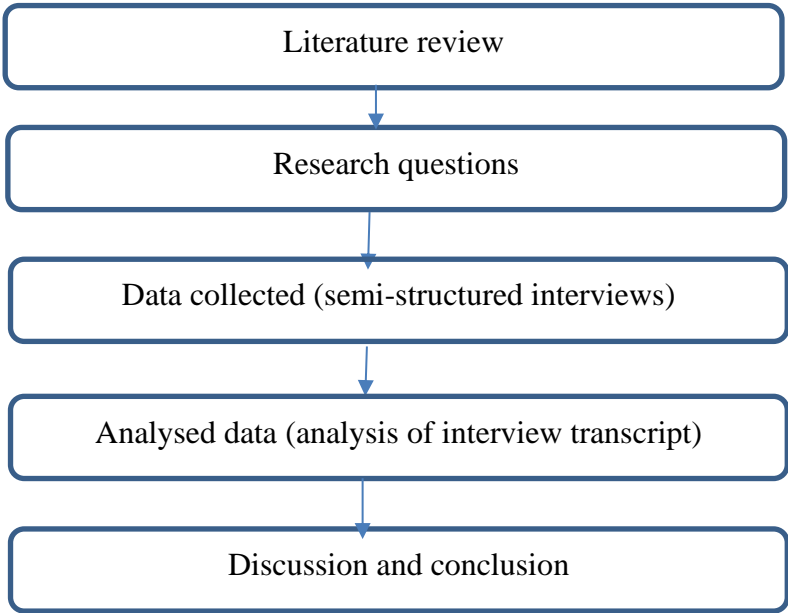
Figure 3.2-Research Design

3.7. Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations are especially significant in qualitative studies because of the comprehensive and detailed nature of the research process (Arifin, 2018). The significance of ethical concerns becomes more pronounced when conducting face-to-face interviews with vulnerable groups of participants (Arifin, 2018). Hence, researchers effectively communicate the research purpose to ensure participants comprehend its nature, potential risks, and benefits. Participants are made aware of their rights, including voluntary participation, and are encouraged to seek clarification by asking questions before giving consent. Researchers ensure the protection of participants' confidentiality and anonymity by removing or altering personal information, such as names and addresses, except for their designation. Data is handled securely

to prevent unauthorised access or disclosure. Additionally, researchers maintain transparency in their data handling and reporting practices, accurately representing participants' perspectives and experiences, preserving data integrity, and avoiding biassed interpretations or selective reporting.

3.8. Reliability and validity

"Reliability and validity are tools of an essentially positivist epistemology." (Watling, as cited in Winter, 200, p. 7; Golafshani, 2003) Reliability ensures the quality and consistency of findings in qualitative research, reducing errors and enhancing trustworthiness (Foley & O'Connor, 2013; Stackhouse, 2020). Based on Taylor (2013), states that researchers assess reliability as the measure of the effectiveness and accuracy of research findings. Validity refers to the accuracy of the measurement methods and whether they effectively capture the intended concepts or constructs being measured (Golafshani, 2003).

To enhance the reliability of this study, we conducted interviews with small and medium-sized technology companies. The primary objective of this research endeavour was to investigate the practices employed by tech companies that have successfully internationalised, with a specific focus on their utilisation of social media for facilitating their international activities. To achieve this objective, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with a selection of tech-based companies that met the criteria of being both internationalised and actively employing social media platforms for their international operations.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach, utilising both face-to-face and online formats. To ensure the validity of the research, careful attention was given to formulating appropriate questions based on the insights derived from the literature review. This approach aimed to obtain the most relevant and accurate responses, facilitating the exploration and resolution of the research questions.

4. EMPIRICAL DATA

In this chapter, the empirical data collected through interviews to address the research questions are presented. This section presents a compilation of all the responses provided by the interviewees.

To collect practical information on how small and medium-sized companies in the tech industry have expanded their businesses to international markets and to what extent they use social media to do so, were conducted interviews with three companies. These interviews were designed to gain insights into the companies' past and current international business expansion strategies, as well as their current use of social media as a tool for conducting business in the international marketplace.

4.1.Respondents

Respondent A

This is a small and medium-sized enterprise that offers broadcast network planning software and related services (consultancy services, maintenance, and agreements). The company currently employs two individuals and has a broad international customer base. The concept behind this company was initially generated by a group of engineers, who sought to address various questions and challenges related to the planning and management of broadcast networks. The engineers created a broadcast network planning software that greatly facilitated the digital rollout of broadcast networks in Sweden. The need for such software extended beyond countries worldwide began to implement their digital rollout strategies. Therefore, in the year 2003, the development of broadcast network planning software was initiated, subsequently leading to its expansion into the international market.

Respondent B

With a primary focus on video production by using new technology this company soon expanded its services to cater to the diverse needs of its growing clientele. The operational structure of the company presently consists of a team of four employees, six international consultants. As the demand increased, the company diversified its offerings to gaming. This company has been developing mobile games with the intention of creating an engaging experience that would raise awareness about caring for our planet using technology. Despite

the absence of an international customer base for its gaming products, the company effectively leverages its seven years of experience in catering to international clients within the realm of video production to entice potential customers for their gaming endeavours.

Respondent C

This is a software company specialising in the development of software for 3D LiDARS since 2019. The software aims to simplify the setup of 3D LiDARS in industrial and security scenarios. It analyses 3D data and provides valuable insights to our customers regarding events and occurrences within the 3D space. The company currently maintains a workforce of approximately 19 employees, while also fostering strategic partnerships with international entities, particularly within the security industry. Moreover, it boasts a select number of international clientele.

According to Miles et al. (2014), it is necessary to summarise empirical data in order to effectively reduce and present it in a more concise and comprehensible manner. Hence, the development of Table 4.1 aims to provide a clearer understanding of the research respondents.

Table 4.1- Summary of the respondents according to the nature of business and type of company

Respondents	Nature of business	Type of the company	International customers (Yes or No)	Position at the firm
A	development of broadcast network planning software	SME	Yes	CEO
B	Video production and developing games	SME	Video production -Yes For games - collaborating with two countries	CEO
C	Creating software for 3D LiDAR	SME	Yes	R&D Project Manager

4.2. Social Media usage

The main aim of this topic was to understand the general role of social media in companies that interact with international customers and how it contributes to expediting the process of internationalization.

Therefore, we have asked the question that "*Describe the role that social media plays in your company's international business strategy, and how it fits into the overall approach?*". According to Respondent A, their company employs several platforms to promote their brand and products. Notably, their primary focus is on Google Ads, which receive the majority of their allocated resources. This preference is attributed to the platform's effectiveness in reaching its target audience and driving traffic to its website. Additionally, they utilise LinkedIn as a medium for marketing, specifically for sharing technical documents and information about exhibitions. The platform's ability to facilitate connections with industry professionals allows Respondent A to share valuable information, thereby establishing thought leadership in their field. With regard to Facebook, they employ targeted ads to promote their participation in exhibitions worldwide, leveraging the platform's ability to advertise based on specific geographic locations.

According to the response provided by Participant B, the role of social media within their company's international business strategy holds significant importance, constituting approximately 50-60% of their overall marketing approach. Social media platforms serve diverse purposes for their organisation. Firstly, they play a crucial role in generating interest and raising awareness for their studio. Secondly, as the company approaches the release of a game, social media platforms become essential channels for marketing the game itself and facilitating engagement opportunities. To attain these objectives, participant B employs various social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and TikTok. Additionally, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter are utilised to broaden their reach to a wider audience. These platforms enable the company to connect with potential investors, engage with professionals in the industry, and enhance brand visibility. Through the strategic utilisation of multiple social media platforms, participant B can customise their messaging and content to cater to distinct target groups and optimise their overall marketing endeavours.

Within the international business strategy of respondent C's company, the pivotal significance of social media, particularly LinkedIn, emerges prominently. The discerning selection of LinkedIn as their primary platform stems from its inherently professional nature, which seamlessly aligns with their overarching objective of predominantly functioning within the business-to-business (B2B) sphere. Alongside their focus on LinkedIn as their primary platform, they have implemented various strategies to enhance our presence and engagement.

Such approaches are maintaining a regular posting schedule, aiming for at least one post every other day, tagging the companies they collaborate within their posts.

Table 4.2- Social media usage

Respondents	Social media platform	Current usage
A	Google ads	To promote the brand and products
	LinkedIn	Marketing
	Facebook	Advertising
B	Facebook LinkedIn Twitter	Professional networking
	Instagram	Microblogging and news updates
	TikTok	video entertainment
C	LinkedIn	Professional networking

The second question which is "*In what ways has social media adoption influenced your company's competitive position in international markets?*" Based on respondent A, as an enterprise operating in a niche market, this company acknowledges that the adoption of social media has not had a pronounced effect on its competitive standing in international markets. The company's primary focus remains on traditional broadcast radio and television firms, with established relationships with the majority of domestic companies. Despite this, they recognize the potential benefits of social media platforms, particularly LinkedIn, in facilitating connections with prospective clients in foreign markets. Despite a limited investment in social media advertising, the company employs networking opportunities to broaden their outreach and identify novel markets. By engaging with other companies in their industry, they have successfully forged connections in new markets, thereby expanding their customer base. Though the adoption of social media may not have significantly impacted their competitive position, they remain open to exploring new avenues to leverage these platforms and foster connections with potential clients in international markets.

According to respondent B, one of the key aspects impacted by social media is their vision of being an inclusive studio that creates games with a meaningful impact. Through social media, they are able to effectively showcase and communicate their inclusive values, both in terms of the games they create and the people they hire. By actively sharing their inclusive approach on

social media platforms, they have been able to differentiate themselves from other studios and strengthen their competitive position. This has generated interest and attracted individuals who resonate with their values and want to be a part of their community. Moreover, social media provides them with a platform to showcase their games and emphasise their games unique qualities. In summary, social media adoption has positively influenced their competitive position in international markets by enabling them to highlight their inclusive values, showcase their unique game offerings, attract the right talent and investors, and create a sense of community around their studio.

According to the respondent C social media adoption has played a vital role in strengthening their competitive position in international markets. It has garnered attention from competitors, gained recognition from influential individuals, and generated valuable contacts and inquiries from interested companies. While they prioritise direct relationships and personal interactions, social media has proven to be an effective tool in expanding their network and showcasing their expertise and solutions to a broader audience.

To determine the degree to which social media has facilitated their internationalization process, a third inquiry was posed to respondents, inquiring "In what ways has social media helped your company accelerate its internationalization process?". Based on respondent A response, it appears that social media, specifically Google Ads, has played a role in accelerating their internationalization process, particularly in promoting new products and services. While traditional methods such as attending broadcast exhibitions have also been effective in identifying potential clients, the company recognizes the value of optimising social media platforms to reach a wider audience. Therefore, social media has become a valuable tool for the company in its efforts to expand its reach and grow its customer base in international markets.

Social media has played a crucial and instrumental role in expediting the internationalization process of respondent B's company. SM platforms afford them the opportunity to establish a prominent presence and enhance their visibility within international markets, reducing their reliance on traditional marketing methods as the sole means of achieving such goals. The absence of social media would inevitably curtail their visibility, compelling individuals to resort to conventional search methods to discover the company, which often prove less effective. By actively participating and engaging on social media platforms, respondent B's company ensures their conspicuous presence, rendering them easily discoverable and accessible to a global

audience. This increased visibility helps them in attracting potential investors, partners, and employees who find our content appealing and align with our company's goals and values.

While respondent C may not have measured the precise impact of social media on their internationalization efforts, their experience suggests that it has positively influenced their visibility and market presence. Through organic growth and consistent engagement, they have been able to capture the attention of a wider international audience, positioning themselves favourably within their industry.

According to the above responses, it can be observed that all companies employ SM as a means to expand their business in the international market, employing diverse strategies across various SM platforms. This employment of SM aids in expediting their process of internationalization. However, considering the unique nature of individual business niches, a majority of respondents opined that the impact of SM on their competitive position may not be notably pronounced. While SM can serve as a primary source, a greater reliance is placed on cultivating direct relationships.

4.3. SM impact on Market Knowledge Acquisition

To ensure business growth in line with market trends, knowledge about the international market is crucial. With this in mind, we investigated how the three respondents gather information about the international market using social media.

While Respondents B and C have reported a positive impact on social media (SM), it appears that respondent A's ability to acquire knowledge about international markets has not been significantly affected by social media adoption. Rather, respondent A relies on established relationships with other companies in the region and their membership in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to gather information on updates and trends within their niche market. The ITU serves as a valuable source of information due to its wide membership base, which includes all countries, and the fact that the company does not have any competitors operating in the same niche market. But respondent B can observe engagement metrics, such as likes and traction, to discern what resonates with the audience of these companies. By analysing both the successes and failures of social media campaigns employed by other companies, respondent B can adapt and incorporate effective techniques into their own

marketing strategies. Moreover, they can identify what strategies do not yield desired results and consequently avoid making similar mistakes in their own marketing endeavours. By posting diverse variations of content, including different looks or styles, respondent B can evaluate which approaches generate the highest traction and elicit the most positive responses from their audience. And based on respondent C, by monitoring their competitors' social media presence, they gain valuable information about the latest technological advancements competitors are working on.

4.3.1. Decision-making processes

All respondents agreed that social media insights are not the sole determinant in the decision-making process. However, they acknowledged that these insights do contribute to the evaluation and decision-making process to some extent, thereby supporting their internationalization efforts. Respondent A relies more on traditional methods, such as working with agents in different regions and relying on existing relationships with companies in those areas. According to respondent B, the integration of social media has influenced their decision-making process by furnishing valuable information necessary for launching strategies in other countries and reaching international customers. Given the niche nature of respondent B's product, the presence of a dedicated consultant to provide guidance is of paramount importance. These consultants offer valuable knowledge, expertise, and strategic input to ensure that their company's social media campaigns align with the brand and target audience. Based on respondent C, it has been instrumental in talent acquisition by providing valuable information about candidates' experience and qualifications through platforms like LinkedIn. Additionally, social media presence and engagement of potential partners or service providers play a role in assessing trustworthiness and credibility.

4.3.2. Quality and reliability of knowledge acquired through SM

Based on respondent A, does not have a particularly positive experience with using social media for acquiring knowledge in their industry. They suggest that other sources may be more effective for their specific business. According to respondent B's response, social media has brought about substantial benefits in terms of understanding how to approach and execute

strategies effectively. They emphasised that social media has provided them with a valuable understanding of how to present their content in a cohesive and impactful manner. Respondent C stated that while social media platforms have their merits and provide valuable knowledge, direct connections and face-to-face interactions, such as those experienced at trade shows, offer a deeper level of understanding and meaningful engagement. Balancing both approaches by utilising trade shows for direct interactions and leveraging social media to supplement and expand connections can lead to a more comprehensive acquisition of knowledge in the internationalization process.

Considering the challenges face when using SM, respondent A & B states while they have not encountered challenges or drawbacks associated with using social media for knowledge acquisition in the context of internationalization, they anticipate potential issues that may arise in the future. They highlighted the potential difficulty of managing and responding to negative comments or feedback from users. However, respondent C have encountered challenges related to misleading information or false claims. By actively engaging with manufacturers, testing their products, and evaluating their performance, they have developed a cautious approach to validating information before making it available to our customers. This ensures that they base their decisions on reliable and verified data rather than solely relying on social media content.

Based on all the responses, they believe that the knowledge obtained through social media for internationalization purposes is accurate and reliable to some extent and its accuracy and reliability can be verified by comparing the information obtained through social media with other reliable sources. Such as their various memberships, cross-referencing it with information obtained from various reputable sources, engaging in direct dialogue with industry professionals and leveraging business networks and partnerships for validation.

Overall, respondents have indicated that while the quality and reliability of knowledge obtained through social media (SM) are deemed acceptable, they consistently exercise caution by cross-referencing information with a variety of conventional sources.

4.3.3. Impact of SM on enabling companies to adapt to changes in the international business environment.

According to respondent A, social media, particularly LinkedIn, has provided a means for their company to stay informed about changes in the international business environment, including new regulations and market trends. They highlight the importance of technical groups within LinkedIn, as they serve as a valuable source of updated information. By actively participating in these groups and staying connected with relevant industry professionals, the company is able to access and stay informed about regulatory changes through their membership and engagement within the platform. Social media serves as a valuable tool specially TikTok for the company of respondent B to gather information about market trends and industry changes. It allows them to stay informed, adapt their strategies accordingly, and leverage emerging trends to enhance their social media presence and engagement with their audience. Social media serves as an initial source of insight for respondent C to stay updated with changes in the international business environment, including regulations and market trends. However, they place a strong emphasis on confirming and validating the information they gather through reliable and official sources.

Based on the above responses, all the respondents agreed that social media enable the gathering of knowledge about environmental changes in the international market.

4.4. SM impact on enhance the international Business Networks

4.4.1. Networking with partners and connection with customers

When examining the influence of social media on the expansion of the international partnership network and the facilitation of customer acquisition, respondent A underscores the utilisation of Google Ads and the company's website. The company employs Google Ads as a targeted strategy to optimise keyword selection and enhance precision in targeting. This necessitates careful avoidance of broad terms like "digital TV," which tend to attract a large volume of irrelevant search traffic that does not align with their intended customer base. Accordingly, meticulous attention is devoted to establishing precise search criteria that effectively capture the desired target customer and partners. In relation to their website's landing pages, respondent A emphasises their technical orientation and absence of restrictions. Consequently, their

approach centres on scrupulous keyword research and analysis, aimed at identifying the most effective keywords and combinations that resonate with their intended audience. This process serves to refine their search engine optimization endeavours and ensure that the landing pages align with the specific interests and requirements of their international customer base. Respondent B mentioned utilising platforms like LinkedIn and Instagram to connect with potential partners and clients. Further described tailoring their content to be more business-focused on those platforms. They also mentioned the personal involvement of the CEO in sharing relevant posts on their LinkedIn page. By sharing updates and insights about the company's activities, the CEO actively engages with their network and creates opportunities for networking and partnership development. In addition to that, Respondent B utilises platforms like Instagram and TikTok to attract new customers for games. They share posts featuring parts of the game, characters, or other enticing elements to attract the attention and interest of potential customers. This allows them to showcase their game and generate curiosity among their target audience. By leveraging tagging strategies, establishing collaborations with complementary companies, and using social media as a starting point for building relationships, respondent C have been able to connect with valuable partners, promote their software, and establish mutually beneficial partnerships that extend beyond the online realm. Further, while the direct impact of social media on identifying and connecting with new international customers may not be fully visible at the moment, they recognize its potential as an avenue for customer acquisition. By leveraging social media as a tool to showcase their expertise and engage with their partners' networks, they are positioning themselves to attract and connect with new international customers in a scalable and efficient manner.

Certainly, all the respondents highlight the impact of social media facilitating faster collaboration with international business partners. Based on the respondent A, explain that previously, the process of finding interested parties for their products or consultancy services involved attending exhibitions or relying on traditional means of communication. However, with the adoption of social media, particularly Google Ads, interested parties can now easily find and connect with their company directly. This direct accessibility has significantly expedited the collaboration process, eliminating the need for lengthy search processes and enabling more efficient engagement with potential international business partners. Respondent B specifically mentioned the advantage of quick direct messages (DMs) as a means of initiating contact and establishing connections. Instead of sending formal emails, the informal nature of DMs allows for a quicker and more casual interaction. This enables potential partners to express

their interest or share positive feedback about the company's page or content, initiating a conversation more easily. Social media, particularly LinkedIn, has provided respondent C with a platform for free advertisement and increased visibility, allowing them to collaborate with international business partners in a way that was not feasible before. It has democratised the process of spreading knowledge about their partnerships and has become an invaluable tool for fostering collaboration and expanding our network on a global scale.

According to the company's A & B response, they have not yet observed significant differences in customer preferences or needs between international and domestic markets. Because their products and services are niche and customer preferences are mostly the same. However, respondent B anticipate potential variations based on the player-based nature of their business. This suggests that they acknowledge the potential for different customer segments with distinct preferences, and they intend to incorporate new changes in their social media presence in the future to cater to these customer requirements. Based on respondent C, they have observed some differences in customer preferences and needs based on the regions they have interacted with. However, to gain a better understanding of customer preferences and needs in international markets, they rely on direct interactions and engagements with customers, as well as market research specific to each region. While social media may not play a major role in identifying these differences, it does serve as a platform to communicate and share information about our products and solutions, potentially reaching a broader audience globally.

Considering the cultural differences and language barriers, both respondent A & B have acknowledged encountering challenges when utilising social media to engage with international customers, while respondent C have not encountered any challenges. Particularly due to respondent A exclusive use of the English language for Google Ads. For instance, when targeting the South American market, they have faced the need to overcome language barriers in Portuguese and Spanish. To overcome this obstacle, they have sought the assistance of a dedicated agent who facilitates translation and communication with clients in their preferred language. The involvement of these agents has played a pivotal role in bridging the language gap and ensuring clear and meaningful interactions. Respondent B recruited team members from Indonesia and Malaysia who offer valuable insights and assist in ensuring that their content aligns with the cultural preferences of those specific markets. With regard to social media posts, they have highlighted the importance of being able to write in multiple languages

to cater to specific markets. In accordance with the collective perspective of the respondents, it is generally perceived that SM has not exerted a substantial influence in effectively resolving language barriers.

Based on the above responses, it is evident that SM plays a significant role in enhancing international business networks, with the exception of addressing language barriers.

4.4.2. Customer service and support strategies

All the respondents acknowledge that their company could not leverage social media more effectively in the realm of customer service and support in international markets. Currently, respondent A approach involves maintaining a personal contact with their customers, particularly when it comes to services and product maintenance. In terms of support inquiries, customers are directed to their company's website homepage where they can fill out a form. The support team then receives the submitted information via email and promptly responds to the customer's query. Although their customer service and support primarily rely on direct contact and email channels, respondent A recognizes the potential for utilising social media platforms to enhance their customer service efforts in international markets. Respondent B mentioned that their focus is on providing new things within the game rather than offering specific customer service or support services. Respondent C stated that, "it's important to note that as our international customer base grows and the need for customer service and support expands, we may explore leveraging social media more actively as a communication channel". However, for now, they find that maintaining direct relationships with their customers and supporting them through their partners is the most effective approach.

4.4.3. Sales and marketing strategies

The adoption of social media has had a significant impact on all the respondent's company's marketing and sales strategies for international markets. In the current landscape, they have observed a reduction in the number of meetings and participation in exhibitions. As a result, they have shifted their focus towards leveraging social media platforms, specifically Google Ads, to effectively target and engage with new markets. This shift represents a substantial change in their marketing and sales approach, allowing them to expand their reach and connect with potential customers in international markets more efficiently. The adoption of social media has influenced the company's B marketing and sales strategies for international markets by

allowing them to showcase traction and progress, as well as engage with their audience and establish thought leadership. These benefits contribute to building brand awareness, credibility, and ultimately, supporting their marketing and sales efforts in international markets. Respondent C´s adoption of social media, particularly LinkedIn, as a supplementary marketing channel has enabled them to enhance their international marketing and sales strategies. While they have not heavily invested in paid advertisements, they have successfully leveraged trade shows to generate content for our LinkedIn platform, creating a synergy between the two channels and maximising their reach.

4.5. The impact of social media on Product Development to cater to international customer needs

4.5.1. Product or service offerings

When it comes to offering the products and services to the international market, respondent A has utilised their website and Google Ads to effectively showcase their offerings to a global audience. This approach has allowed them to present their products or services in a manner that is both accessible and targeted, ensuring that their message reaches the intended audience with precision. By leveraging the capabilities of social media platforms, respondent A has been able to tailor their marketing efforts and optimise their reach, thereby increasing its visibility and engagement in the international market. Based on respondent B with the ease of conducting campaigns on social media platforms, they have been able to effectively showcase their products and services to a global audience. One of the key advantages is the ability to create engaging content such as special videos or animated posts that allow them to provide more in-depth information about their offerings. Additionally, social media platforms have provided them with the opportunity to leverage influencer marketing. By identifying and partnering with relevant influencers, they can tap into different target groups and have them create posts about our products or services. This approach allows them to specifically target niche audiences, ultimately generating more traction and interest in their offerings. Based on respondent C, while social media adoption has not significantly influenced their company's product or service offerings in international markets, they acknowledge the potential benefits of utilising social media platforms to collect data and insights. However, their current approach is centred around

direct communication with customers, particularly through personal interactions, which enables them to gather valuable information for product development.

Social media adoption has not played a direct role in aiding respondent A's company in identifying international market opportunities or identifying gaps in existing product offerings. According to Respondent B, they conduct comprehensive research through social media platforms to ascertain whether similar games are already present in the market. They engage in an analysis of the gaming landscape, examining the existing types of games that are currently circulating. This examination aids in their understanding of which games are performing favourably and the reasons behind their success. By studying successful games, they acquire valuable insights into the factors that contribute to their popularity and engage with the audience effectively. In addition to leveraging social media platforms, respondent B also relies on conducting their own independent research. As per the response from C, social media adoption is not the sole means of identifying international market opportunities or gaps in our product offerings. It serves as an additional source of knowledge for the company.

Based on the aforementioned responses, it is apparent that both respondents A and B utilise SM platforms as a means to offer products and services, while Respondent C relies more heavily on personal interactions. However, the impact of SM in identifying gaps in the international market is not significantly pronounced for both respondents A and C.

4.5.2. Gathering customer feedback, insights, and product testing for international markets

All three respondents expressed that social media has not been extensively utilised for gathering customer feedback or conducting product testing and validation in international markets. Instead, respondent A's company relies on agents to acquire information and insights pertaining to developments in various technical platforms and broadcasting standards. They have established direct connections and relationships with their customers, enabling them to gather feedback firsthand. Additionally, their product testing processes, particularly for software, are predominantly conducted locally. While social media has not yet played a significant role in gathering customer feedback and insights for respondent B company, particularly for their game or service product, they recognize the potential it holds for the future. Further, if they notice a significant number of players expressing their appreciation for a particular character or

identifying certain pain points in the game leading to player attrition, they would consider making appropriate changes to enhance user satisfaction. Based on Respondent C, they have established a strong direct communication channel with their customers. By working closely with them, they actively seek their feedback and insights, which they readily provide. This direct approach allows them to capture comprehensive and specific information that informs their product development decisions in international markets.

4.5.3. Product development process

While a majority of respondents acknowledge the impact of SM in facilitating the offering of products to the international market, a similar majority expresses the belief that SM does not significantly contribute to the identification of market gaps, customer feedback, and testing processes associated with product development. Furthermore, additional factors indicate below that SM does not directly influence the product development tailored to meet the needs of international customers, and it is utilised as a secondary source.

Based on the respondent A,B & C's answers, social media adoption has not influenced the speed and efficiency of their company's product development process for international markets. Respondent A rely more on specific standards and sources other than social media for their product development. Respondent C stated that "our customer-centric approach, emphasising direct interactions and customer projects, has proven to be more influential in driving the timely and efficient delivery of products".

Looking ahead, respondent A sees a potential role for social media in their company's future product development and internationalization efforts, but the extent of its impact will depend on the type of information they can gather through these channels. While respondents A,B & C acknowledge the possibility of obtaining additional information through social media networks, they emphasise the importance of obtaining technical and advanced knowledge directly from reliable sources involved in developing new standards. Thus, social media may serve as a secondary channel or supplementary source of information, complementing their existing channels for acquiring crucial insights for product development and internationalization.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the empirical data analysis is presented, taking into consideration the theories discussed in the literature review section of this study.

5.1. Social Media usage

Based on previous studies, by utilising social media, companies can effectively manage customer relationships (CRM), promote and sell their products and services, gather valuable customer insights, and enter new markets, all cost-effectively and conveniently compared to traditional media channels (Jagongo and Kinyua, 2013). In reality, technology companies are actively employing diverse platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok for various business activities, recognizing them as highly cost-effective and efficient means of communication, such as for sales and marketing, as a professional networking tool etc. In addition to that as mentioned in previous studies (Nguyen et al., 2015; European Commission, 2021) majority of respondents believed that SM helps compete with the international market by gathering competitors' information, highlighting their values and showcasing their unique offerings.

In addition to the widespread adoption of social media for various business activities, this study analysed the practical impact of social media on gaining market knowledge, building business networks, and facilitating new product development, as outlined below:

5.2. Market knowledge acquisition

In the context of SME internationalization, acquiring comprehensive knowledge regarding market trends and environmental disparities assumes significant importance (Evangelista & Mac, 2016; Ibeh, 2005). According to Nguyen et al. (2015) knowledge acquired from social media with help to improve business performance. The data that were gathered from the three companies further cement this finding. All three companies highlighted the importance of gathering knowledge about the market, customers and the competitor. But it is observed that different companies use social media for this purpose in different ways. Respondent A's social media usage is very little for the purpose of knowledge acquisition. Instead they depend on their

partner network and the formal industry associations while both companies B and C have heavy use of social media for knowledge acquisition purposes.

Based on the research conducted by Nguyen et al. (2015); Williams et al. 2020; Fletcher & Harris (2012) play a significant role in assisting companies in their decision-making processes. It aids in the identification of potential customers and partners. However, all respondents in tech companies note that social media insights alone do not serve as the sole determinants in the decision-making process. Rather, they are used as an initial source of information, particularly when assessing candidates' experience and qualifications.

As mentioned in the research findings (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Xu et al., 2010) the ability of companies to identify opportunities, mitigate errors, and manage risks is notably influenced by the extensive information they obtain through social media channels. In line with these findings, all three respondents expressed a general belief in the authenticity of the information gathered through social media. However, they also acknowledged the importance of conducting third-party verifications to ensure the reliability of the acquired data. Company A runs that through their partner network to verify them. In addition to that all three companies are part of the online communities and discussion forums that represent their industry which is another form of validation of information. It is also observed that all three companies use ''LinkedIn'' to stay up to date with industry updates and regulations as it is a professional social network. It is assumed that the information that is gathered from "LinkedIn'' is more reliable and trustworthy.

5.3. Business network building

Despite the existence of a larger pool of potential customers and partners, it is imperative to effectively reach out to them. Consequently, it becomes crucial to establish a robust business network (Todeva, 2011). Social media has made the process easier to form partnerships and networks (Quinton and Wilson, 2016; Michaeliddou et al., 2011). It is observed that all three companies rely on social media when it comes to partnership creation. Company A uses a different approach; other companies mainly use social media advertising options to push their message through to potential partners and try to establish relationships while company B and C use LinkedIn to form partnerships.

The study presented by Quinton and Wilson (2016) suggest that behavioural factors of the social media networks like trust and sharing helps to create business relationships that create value and ultimately improve business performance. The evidence gathered from this research also reflects the above findings. It is observed that the business social platform ''LinkedIn'' plays a major role in partnership formation as 2 out of 3 companies use it. According to Hoffman and Fodor (2010), social media can promote more collaboration between companies and the evidence gathered from research reflects the same. Two out of three companies highlighted the simplicity and access to the key contacts in organisations helps the communication and collaboration more easily. They also highlighted the importance of instant messaging and communication.

5.4. New Product Development

Given that products and services incorporate unique characteristics that correspond to the specific needs of overseas customers, there is a substantial potential to extend business operations into the global market (Dhargalkar et al., 2016; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). It is observed through the study that 2 out of 3 companies use social media to offer their products while Company C relies on its network. In addition to that, based on the study by Dhargalkar et al. 2016, customer input is highly important in the new product development process and social media is one of the most effective methods to gather consumer insight (Carr et al., 2015). But it is observed through this study that all three companies are not specifically using social media to identify consumer feedback in order to fine-tune their product and services and also significantly not influence gathering consumer insight and product testing. All the respondents use secondary verification methods to verify the information gathered from social media. Companies are testing the information they gathered from through their partner network to be 100% reliable. It is observed that the companies are hesitating to incorporate insight gathered from social media into their strategies without proper verifications.

6. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the findings and conclusions of the research study. The key results derived from the data analysis have been summarised to fulfil the purpose of this chapter and address the research questions. Additionally, this chapter explores the managerial limitations of the study, and provides suggestions for future research.

6.1. What is the impact of social media on market knowledge acquisition during the SME's internationalization?

It is identified that social media play a major role in providing market intelligence and consumer insight. There are many platforms to select from based on the industry and mode of operation. For example B2B companies might use social media in a different way than a B2C company. But in general, there are a variety of tools and platforms that are available for both B2B and B2C companies. Tech companies that are mainly B2B, who rely on trade shows and physical events can reduce their marketing expenditure through social media adoption. It is also observed that companies can use ''LinkedIn'' to form industry alliances and for industry-related communities where they can share and absorb information regarding industry updates. When it comes to decision-making and ensuring the reliability of data collected through SM, it is generally accepted to a certain extent. However, this acceptance often hinges on the validation of such information through traditional connections or established sources. Overall, the adoption of social media can aid SMEs in their internationalization efforts by offering valuable information to foreign markets. However, due to the specialised nature of business within tech companies, they often rely on third-party confirmation to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information obtained.

6.2. What is the impact of social media on business networks during the SME's internationalization?

Social media plays a crucial role in enhancing communication. In the business environment, ''LinkedIn'' is seen as the main reliable business communication platform where most companies tend to go when it comes to relationship building. Companies value the ability to contact business personnel directly and being able to present the individuals and the companies in a professional manner. They also value how the information is easily searchable and how easy it is to find people. This has made building relationships easier than ever. Social media

can provide the first step in starting a conversation and it has also removed the barrier of geography by bringing people and organisations together into one platform.

6.3. What is the impact of social media on new product development during the SME's internationalization?

Based on this study, it can be concluded that while tech companies are utilising SM to offer their products or services, SM has a limited impact on new product development. Further conclude that it can be inferred that social media has the potential to serve as an additional channel or supplementary source of information, complementing the existing channels used by companies to acquire essential insights for product development and internationalization purposes.

6.4.Overall conclusion

Based on the findings, it has been observed that all three companies acknowledge the positive impact of social media on the business internationalization process. Additionally, it has been noted that social media has a lesser impact during the knowledge acquisition and new product development process. There seems to be a hesitancy among tech companies to directly incorporate insights gathered from social media into their planning process. Instead, they tend to conduct secondary verifications and rely more on their business networks to verify the information. This could be attributed to the nature of the industry and the nature of their operations. Conversely, there is a noticeable impact of social media on network development, as the majority are focused on utilising social media platforms to form partnerships with potential foreign entities.

6.5. Recommendations

6.5.1. Decide which platform suits the best.

Various social media platforms offer promising potential. But it might not be a good idea to target all due to different reasons. Some social media platforms may not be suitable due to the general audience and the nature of the industry. For example for the Gaming industry TikTok, Facebook and YouTube will be good platforms but for a software development firm TikTok might not be a suitable platform. Therefore, it is important to select the right channel.

6.5.2. Invest in research and insight

It is important to invest in research to gather consumer insight. Social media is filled with consumer data that can help companies launch new products or reach new markets. In order to make it a success, there should be enough budgets allocated for research.

6.5.3. Have an information verification system

It was observed from the data that all companies rely on some sort of secondary verification or third-party verification of data that is gathered from social media. This hesitancy to trust might come from the nature of the data or security reasons. Therefore it is important to have a verification mechanism.

6.5.4. Incorporate social media into a communication mix.

It is important to treat social media as a strategic communication tool. It should be given prominence within the company. Social media can attract new customers and partnerships given the fact that it is used according to the plan. Therefore it is important to incorporate social media into the overall business strategy

6.5.5. Maintain a presence in professional networking platforms

It was identified that all companies use ''LinkedIn'' as a professional networking platform. Therefore, it is important to maintain a presence on LinkedIn to create professional partnerships. Also, companies use LinkedIn to connect with companies that operate in the same industry to form communities. These communities provide valuable industry updates and regulation changes.

6.6.   Managerial implication

6.6.1. Possibility of internationalization.

Study provides the insight that can be used by the managers in tech SMEs to internationalise their companies. Social media and the internet in general have made it possible for SMEs to compete with large companies.

6.6.2. Operational advice

The study provides important recommendations that companies need to consider during the internationalization process. Based on that they can adjust their business strategies and social media strategies. The study also highlights the best practices that the interviewed companies practice. These practices can be the key success factors when using social media for the internationalization process.

6.7.   Limitations

One limitation of this study is its focus solely on tech SMEs, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation of this thesis is related to the sample size. The intention was to interview relatively 4 to 5 organisations. However, due to difficulties encountered, the final sample was limited to three companies. Because challenges were encountered in finding tech SMEs that had successfully expanded their business to international markets and actively used social media platforms.

The selected SMEs were specifically located in Luleå, which is in northern Sweden. Consequently, the geographic scope of the study was limited to northern Sweden, which poses another constraint on the generalizability of the results.

6.8.   Suggestions for further research

This study can be replicated in another industry to identify the industry-specific outcomes. It is also possible to identify any industry-specific social media practices during the internationalization process.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

Background questions

1. Respondent's personal information
2. Background of the company
3. How many employees are working in the company?
4. Does the company have international partners and customers?

General questions

5. Can you describe the role that social media plays in your company's international business strategy, and how it fits into the overall approach?
6. In what ways has social media adoption influenced your company's competitive position in international markets?
7. In what ways has social media helped your company accelerate its internationalization process?

Knowledge Acquisition

8. How has social media adoption impacted your company's ability to acquire knowledge about international markets?
9. How has social media adoption influenced your company's decision-making process related to internationalization, and what role does knowledge acquisition play in that process?
10. Have you noticed any differences in the quality or depth of knowledge acquired through social media compared to other sources (such as traditional market research)?
11. Have you experienced any challenges or drawbacks associated with using social media for knowledge acquisition in the context of internationalization?
12. Is the knowledge obtained through social media accurate and reliable for internationalization? How do you ensure its reliability?
13. How has social media enabled your company to keep up with changes in the international business environment, such as new regulations or market trends?

Business Networks

14. How does SM influence to expand network of international business partners?

15. How social media has helped your company to identify and connect with new international customers?

16. Can you give an example of how social media has enabled your company to collaborate with international business partners in a way that was not possible before?

17. As a SME you don't have the capability, skill, fluency, experience, and the ability to work culturally well with other collaborators, so how do you overcome it by using social media?

18. Have you noticed any differences in customer preferences or needs in international markets compared to domestic markets, and how has social media helped you to identify and address those differences?

19. Can you describe the role that social media plays in your company's approach to customer service and support in international markets?

20. Have you encountered any challenges related to cultural differences or language barriers when using social media to engage with international customers, and how have you addressed them?

21. In what ways has social media adoption influenced your company's marketing and sales strategies for international markets?

Product Development

22. How has social media adoption influenced your company's product or service offerings in international markets?

23. Has social media adoption helped your company to identify international market opportunities or gaps in existing product offerings?

24. Has social media enabled your company to gather customer feedback and insights to inform product development decisions for international markets?

25. In what ways has social media adoption influenced the speed and efficiency of your company's product development process for international markets?

26. Can you describe the role that social media plays in your company's approach to product testing and validation in international markets?

27. Looking ahead, what role do you see social media playing in the future of your company's product development and internationalization efforts?