

*Special Issue: The Nature of Marketing in International B2B Service Firms: Review, Dynamics and Prospects*

**CURRENT STATE OF THE LITERATURE AND NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS ON  
THE NATURE OF MARKETING IN INTERNATIONAL B2B SERVICE FIRMS:  
SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORIAL**

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**Abstract:** Business-to-business (B2B) services are the fastest growing segments in the global economy. Yet, cross-border B2B service trade remains relatively poorly explored for a host of reasons, including data availability. A markedly changed geopolitical global landscape and significant advancements in digitalization have prompted us to organize a Special Issue on the internationalization of B2B service firms. In our scene-setting editorial as guest co-editors, we first analyze existing literature using bibliometric analysis and science mapping. We then provide a critical review of the four articles in the Special Issue which focus on the role of technology orientation and service intensity in transnational entrepreneurs' international target market strategies, the interaction of political distance and internationalization scope with firm size for determining the long-term growth of B2B service firms, understanding B2B service firms' cross-cultural challenges in global account management and the role played by digitalization institutions in B2B service firms' divestment decisions. In the end, we outline seven research directions which point to the need for closer integration of marketing and international business theory by focusing on an increasingly relevant digitalization-internationalization nexus of particular relevance to B2B services.

**Keywords:** *B2B service firms, internationalization, digitalization-internationalization nexus, current state, important research directions*

# **CURRENT STATE OF THE LITERATURE AND NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS ON THE NATURE OF MARKETING IN INTERNATIONAL B2B SERVICE FIRMS: SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORIAL**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Services account for about 65% of global GDP (World Bank, 2025) and employ more than half the global workforce (ILO, 2025). Between 1995 and 2019, services accounted for about two thirds of global output growth and almost three quarters of global employment growth (Nayyar & Davies, 2023). Digitally-led service exports represented at least US\$ 4.5 trillion in 2023 (UNCTAD, 2024a), making up 60% of all service exports estimated at US\$ 7.9 trillion globally (UNCTAD, 2024b). However, there is still a significant data deficit when it comes to valuing services internationally (Bohn et al., 2018), since non-digital cross-border trade is harder to capture (Chen & Gao, 2022). Thus, any data about the share of services in gross exports remains significantly underestimated because official statistics struggle to capture the integration of domestic services as inputs of exported goods (Drake-Brockman & Stephenson, 2012; Johnson, 2014).

While the service sector features more prominently in developed than in developing economies, the difference is not as large as one would expect (Nayyar & Davies, 2023). In developed industrialized countries, like the OECD countries, services account for about 75% of GDP and up to 80% of employment (Bohn et al., 2018). In developing economies, services represented over 60% of GDP and more than half of employment before the Covid-19 pandemic (Nayyar & Davies, 2023). Rapid digitalization has meant the gap between developed and developing countries has been narrowing (Herman & Oliver, 2023) against the backdrop of the so-called “second unbundling” and a new era of digital globalization driven by lower information, communication and technology costs (Baldwin, 2016).

In spite of an increasingly contested global trade landscape and rising de-globalization (Tarba et al., 2024; Luo, 2024), technological advancements (Lacka et al., 2020) and digitalization have significantly lowered barriers to cross-border service trade through trade in data and intangible assets (Teece, 2025). Services linked to non-strategic inputs and sectors are still expected to “continue flowing across geopolitical zones” (Luo & Tung, 2025, p. 5) despite the increasingly politicize nature of international business (Beugelsdijk & Luo, 2024). The existing understanding of service internationalization and the internationalization of service firms (Rammal & Rose, 2014; Pla-Baber & Ghauri, 2012) thus needs to be revisited against a markedly changed

geopolitical global landscape (Chidlow et al., 2019; Rammal et al., 2022) and a rapidly evolving global digital landscape (Luo, 2022).

Business-to-business (B2B) services are the fastest growing segments in the global economy (Wirtz & Kowalkowski, 2023), especially those in the technology-based and knowledge intensive sectors. Digital transformation (Tronvoll et al., 2020; Soellener et al., 2024) and technological advancements (Lacka et al., 2020) offer immense opportunities to B2B organizations also for cross-border trade, which is why we have identified the service internationalization of B2B firms as a “hot topic” to be explored in a Special Issue (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2023, A2). The Special Issue on the internationalization of B2B service firms seeks to review the status of B2B service firms’ internationalization research, following the call by Da Rocha and colleagues (2024) to consider new research directions taking account of rapidly changing business dynamics. The articles featuring in the Special Issue capture some of the most salient developments in the B2B service internationalization research, which is why we have also included a more systematic discussion of future research trends in the area of B2B service internationalization which can hopefully further catalyze this area of research in the B2B marketing literature.

B2B services marketing is concerned with the exchange of services between businesses (Wirtz & Kowalkowski, 2023). Its main research streams are rooted in several key theoretical foundations, including relationship marketing as a dominant paradigm in B2B services (Grönroos, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), service-dominant logic (S-D Logic), where value co-creation between businesses is a key factor (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and value-based marketing, with an emphasis on customer value as central to services marketing in a B2B context (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006).

As firms increasingly expand their businesses internationally, B2B service internationalization has emerged as an important research stream within both marketing (Dayan & Ndubisi, 2020) and international business (Rammal & Rose, 2014; Rammal et al., 2022). While still strongly influenced by the theoretical foundations for B2B services, research on the internationalization of B2B services has required a response to changing external environmental dynamics and contexts (Rammal et al., 2022), as well as firm-level strategies in an increasingly digitized global economy. Such a context calls for a better theoretical understanding of the digitalization-internationalization nexus (Battista Dagnino & Resciniti, 2021).

Internationalization of B2B service firms covers cross-border relationships (Barry et al., 2008), cultural and institutional differences (Deng et al., 2018), localization vs. standardization decisions (Voudouris et al., 2011), sustainability (Liu et al., 2020), the servitization of traditional products (Raddats et al., 2019), and, more recently, digital transformation and its ubiquitous presence B2B marketing (Bamberger et al., 2025; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). For example, the intersection of digital technologies with B2B servitization of traditional products is having an important impact on the contribution of B2B marketing to the global economy (Ulaga & Kowalkowski, 2022). Additionally, the internationalization of services by B2B SMEs, particularly in light of challenges highlighted in recent research, is an important area for further attention and theoretical scrutiny (Da Rocha et al., 2024).

Before proceeding with an overview of the four articles included in the Special Issue, and discussing new research directions related to the internationalization of B2B service firms, we first present a birds-eye overview of the existing literature through bibliometric analysis and science mapping.

## **2. A BIBLIOMETRIC OVERVIEW OF B2B SERVICE INTERNATIONALIZATION RESEARCH**

Bibliometric analysis provides a birds-eye view of a research field through the identification of publication patterns, trends, and the analysis and visualization of various types of networks using bibliometric indicators (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Bibliometric analysis has also been widely employed within industrial marketing research (Valenzuela Fernandez et al., 2019; Lacka et al., 2020; Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2023). It can provide a basis for understanding disciplinary evolution (Donthu et al., 2021) and can also inform theorizing (Sinkovics, 2016).

We have followed Zupic and Cater's approach (2015) and employed *science mapping* to analyze the conceptual and intellectual structure (Cobo et al., 2011) of the existing literature on B2B service internationalization using *Bibliometrix* in RStudio (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Focusing on all published works in English language in Scopus, our search string included the following search terms captured in the articles' title, abstract and/or keywords: TITLE-ABS-KEY("B2B" OR "B-2-B" OR "business-to-business" OR "business to business" OR "industrial marketing") AND ("international\*") AND ("service\*" OR "service intensive" OR "service infused" OR "servitisation" OR "servitization"). We captured various aspects and derivatives of the

service concept, including service intensity, service infusion and/or servitization, accounting also for different spellings.

We covered a wide range of top-tier marketing and international business journals. For marketing journals, we utilized the following search string: SRCTITLE("Industrial Marketing Management" OR "Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing" OR "Journal of Business Research" OR "Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science" OR "Journal of Marketing" OR "Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services" OR "Journal of Destination Marketing & Management" OR "Psychology & Marketing" OR "Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management" OR "Journal of Product & Brand Management" OR "Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics" OR "European Journal of Marketing" OR "International Journal of Research in Marketing" OR "International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management" OR "International Journal of Advertising" OR "International Marketing Review" OR "Journal of International Marketing". Following Tüselmann and colleagues (2025), we also included the following four top-tier international business journals, namely: "Journal of International Business Studies" OR "Journal of World Business" OR "International Business Review" OR "Management International Review" OR "Journal of International Management"

Our initial search produced 44 hits. However, after careful inspection and removing false positives (Donthu et al., 2021), our final analysis was based on 24 journal articles. The small number attests to the underrepresented nature of published research on the internationalization of B2B services in mainstream marketing and international business journals. It is in stark contrast to the importance of cross-border services in global trade and for the global economy (Lejarraga-Walkenhorst, 2025) and also points to the general barriers and challenges of finding and servicing cross-border business customers (Zhao et al., 2025).

In terms of general descriptive statistics, the first paper was published in 2002 by Friman and colleagues in *Industrial Marketing Management* on Trust-Commitment theory in international B2B relationships where service internationalization was first explicitly addressed in a B2B context. Since then, the annual growth rate has been 6.5%, with journal publications displaying a sort of double peak in 2005 and a significant boost since 2022. The average article was cited 37.3 times. The bibliometric analysis identified *nine* sources (i.e., journals) among which *Industrial Marketing Management* leads with eight papers, followed by *Journal of International Marketing* (4), *Journal of Business Research* (3), *International Marketing Review* (2) and *International*

Business Review, Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, Journal of International Management, and Journal of Marketing each with one article.

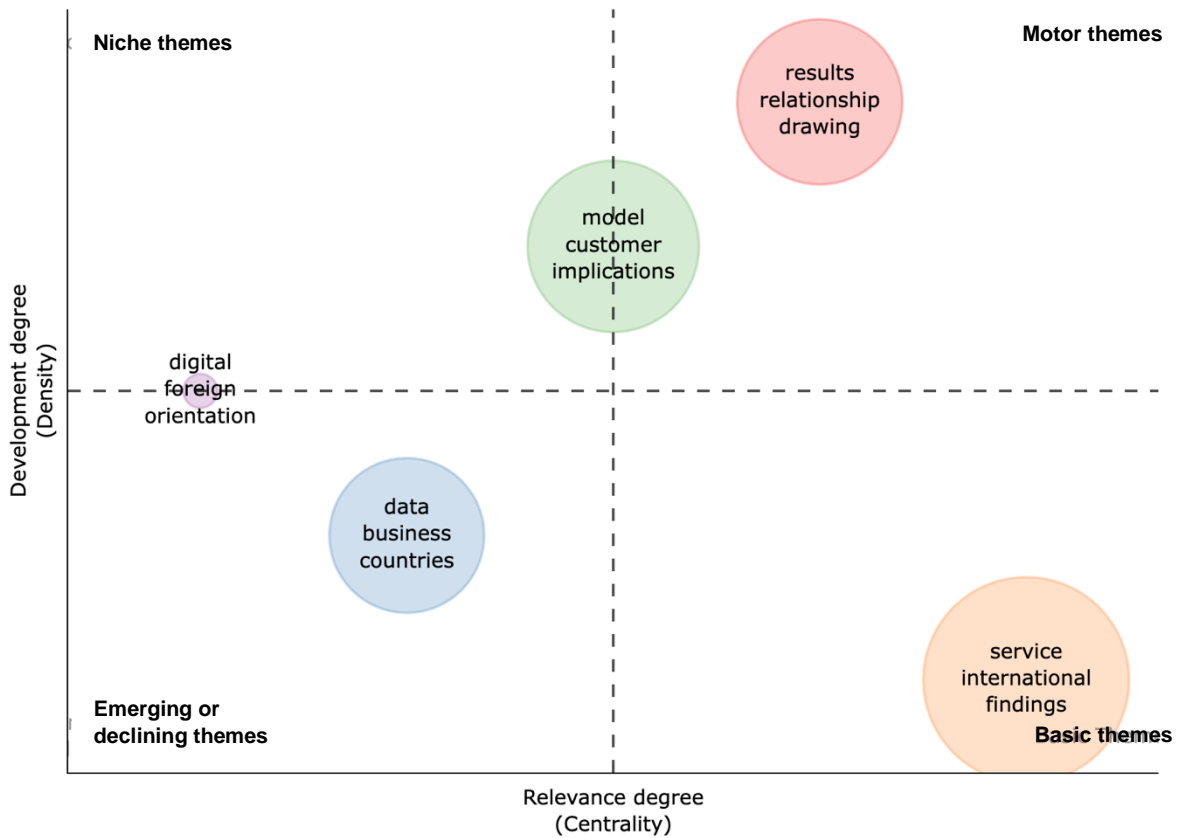
In terms of geographic production, USA leads with 22 co-authorships, followed by the UK (14) and Australia (11). Germany, India and South Korea each had three co-authorships while the rest had two or less co-authorships. Hence, scientific production is heavily dominated by western English speaking countries. It is perhaps notable to point out that country production was relatively balanced till 2009, when U.S. authored research started taking off and got another significant boost after 2015. The following three articles are among the most cited:

1. Friman and colleagues' (2002) analysis international B2B relationships based on Trust-Commitment theory in *Industrial Marketing Management*: 160 citations.
2. Bolton Mayers' (2003) paper on price-based global market segmentation of services in *Journal of Marketing*: 112 citations.
3. Homburg and colleagues' (2005) paper on the cross-cultural comparison of determinants of customer benefits in B2B markets in *Journal of International Marketing*: 74 citations.

Figure 1 presents a co-occurrence network of top 100 most frequently used abstract words. It shows three distinct groupings related to *data and business strategies* (red cluster), *relationships and relationship-based outcomes* (blue cluster) and *quality with related antecedents, determinants and customer-related outcomes* (green cluster).



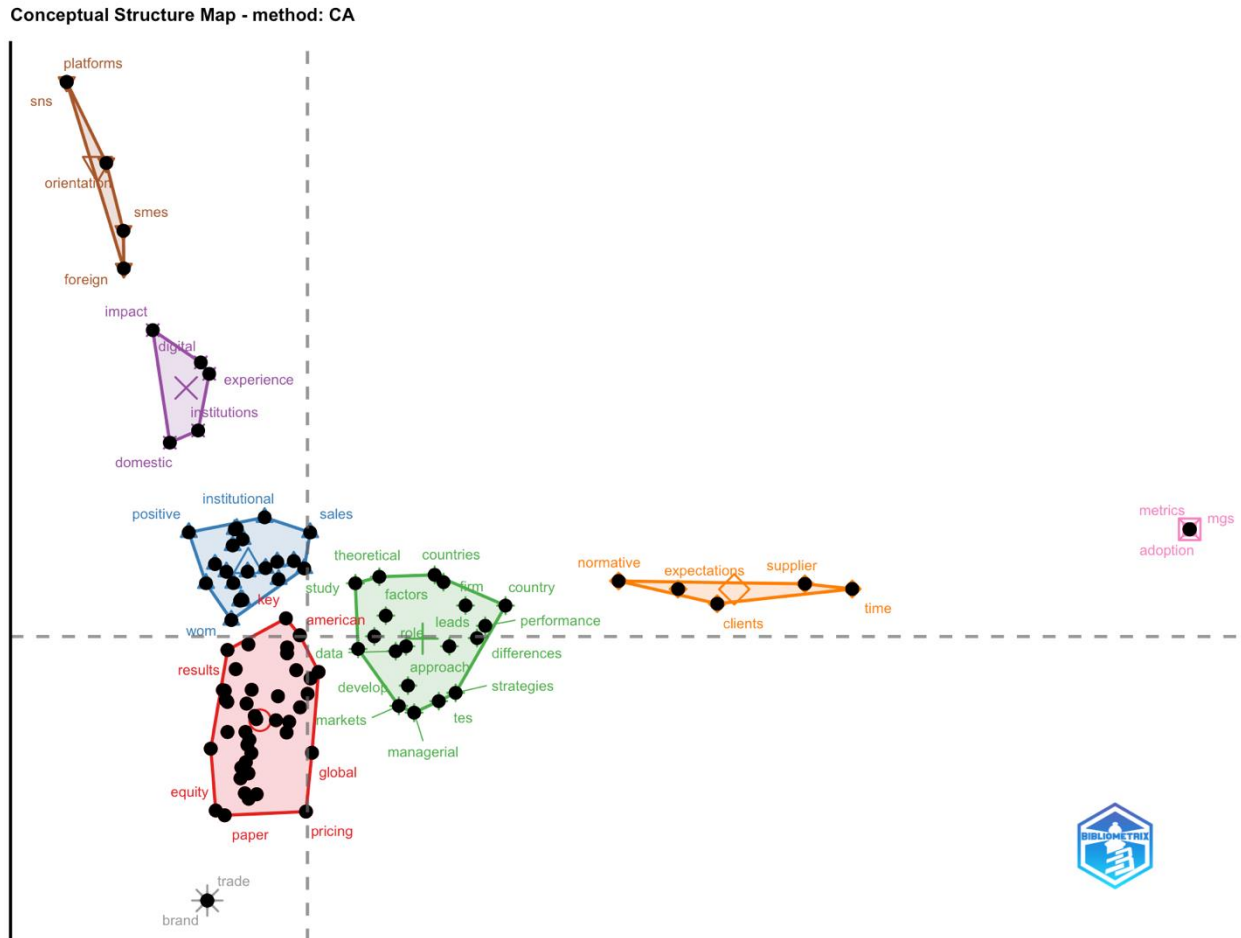
**Figure 2: Thematic analysis of 100 most frequently used abstract words**



Note: Analyzed with Bibliometrix using *biblioshiny* in RStudio (n=24 analyzed papers).

Figure 3 presents a comprehensive analysis of the conceptual structure of the analyzed 24 papers. Employing correspondence analysis on the papers' abstracts, we have identified eight distinct groups using factor analysis and a dendrogram to determine the optimal number of groups. The number of the groups, as well as their characteristics, corresponds to our discussion of new research directions in the internationalization of B2B service (firm) research in the next section, which is based on our own expert view. This further confirms the compatibility of quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches when analyzing the literature (Zupic & Cater, 2015).

**Figure 3: Correspondence analysis of abstract words**



Note: Analyzed with Bibliometrix using *biblioshiny* in RStudio (n=24 analyzed papers).

### 3. THE FOUR ARTICLES IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

#### 3.1 The role of technology orientation and service intensity in transnational entrepreneurs' international target market strategies

The article by Chaudhry, Crick and Crick (2024) focuses on the nexus between B2B marketing and international entrepreneurship which should not be confused with entrepreneurial marketing in a B2B context (see, e.g., Yang & Gabrielsson, 2017). By exploring the growing relevance of technology (Da Rocha et al., 2024) and digitalization (Kowalkowski et al., 2024), the paper extends the existing literature on service characteristics and internationalization (Taylor et al., 2021) within the specific context of SME B2B service internationalization, which also has

theoretical relevance for understanding the role of context in SME internationalization research (Child et al., 2022).

The authors focus on transnational entrepreneurs (TEs) in technology-oriented service-intensive SMEs. Such entrepreneurs maintain their business connections with their home and/or other countries (see Drori et al., 2009). Exploring the importance of cultural embeddedness and network relationship strength, Chaudry and colleagues extend previous seminal work on SME B2B internationalization by Lindsay and colleagues (2017). By applying a transnational entrepreneurship lens (Terjesen & Elam, 2009), they also extend work on network embeddedness of internationalizing service SMEs by Battisti and colleagues (2021). Through an instrumental case study design exploring the theoretical perspectives and challenges associated with the target market strategies adopted by TEs in a range of technology-oriented service sectors, the 15 case study participants represent UK-based first generation immigrants from South Asia.

The article by Chaudry and colleagues contributes to the B2B services literature in several important ways. First, the authors cast new light on the established ‘binary choice’ for SME internationalization and growth between market concentration and market spread (Piercy, 1981). TEs follow ambidextrous target market strategies, developing a deep focus on selected core markets, using strong network ties (i.e., family, close diaspora), as well as simultaneously and opportunistically exploring peripheral markets using weaker network ties (i.e., distant diaspora, intermediaries). This challenges existing assumptions that internationalizing SMEs choose either a market concentration *or* a market spread strategy. Their findings clearly indicate how TEs adopt both strategies simultaneously, drawing on the relevant types of network ties through not just glocalization (Chen & Tan, 2009) but also leveraging Granovetter’s (1973) strength of weak ties in a SME B2B service internationalization context. Conceptually, such a perspective aligns with one of the main research directions in B2B services internationalization focusing on cross-border relationships, which has also been picked up as a motor theme in our bibliometric analysis.

Second, their study challenges existing assumptions in the B2B migrant entrepreneurship literature that tends to stereotype immigrant entrepreneurs as low-skilled, low-tech, and having limited internationalization interests (Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021). Their findings position TEs as an emerging group with higher-order capabilities and progressive internationalization strategies (Czinkota et al., 2021), which feeds into their third contribution linked to the use of a microfoundational strategic lens. In their study, a new generation of highly educated TEs exhibited

higher-order capabilities, both threshold and dynamic, rather than just operational capabilities. Such capabilities help explain the competitive advantage of technology-oriented service intensive B2B SMEs in international markets. By intertwining entrepreneurial capabilities (Teece, 2012) and network management perspectives (Nordin et al., 2018), their work provides deeper theoretical understanding of TEs and their internationalization strategies (Terjesen & Elam, 2009).

Challenging the conventional literature on SME B2B internationalization, Chaudhry and colleagues also show that TEs demonstrate strategic flexibility (Herhausen et al., 2021) and dynamic improvisation based on learning (Chetty et al., 2024) in their approaches to international market entry/exit. TEs apply an intermittent market entry/exit strategy, with market exit being more likely in peripheral markets. In the case of market entry, TEs demonstrate the capability to adapt to market needs, and navigate institutional differences between home and host countries. Their findings extend the existing understanding of TEs from ‘underdogs’ to highly capable ‘arbitrageurs’ (Hamid et al., 2023). Within the context of strategic flexibility/improvisation, the authors include strategies used by the TEs for balancing personal (e.g. emotional), and economic goals, as well as the adjustment of their business models to new and evolving objectives by combining behavioral and strategic perspectives on the internationalization of SME B2B service firms.

### **3.2 Firm size: Context-specific factors influencing firm size impact on internationalization**

The extant literature has been unclear regarding how political distance and internationalization scope, as well as their interactions with firm size, determine the long-term growth of B2B service firms. Furthermore, most studies investigating the determinants of firm growth through internationalization are cross-sectional in nature (Felzensztein et al., 2022), largely conceptual (Tippmann et al., 2023), and/or are sector/country specific (Khan, 2020), prompting calls to address such a knowledge gap (Hazarbassanova et al., 2020; Rodgers et al., 2019).

The article by Khan, Sardana, Gupta, Lee, Zhu and Jain (2024) employs an institutional theoretical perspective, examining how the two relatively under-addressed macro-level factors of political distance and internationalization scope interact with firm size in determining the long-term growth of B2B service firms. Their primary research question focused on determining which factors can explain the revenue growth of B2B service firms’ internationalization effort over the long run. Using longitudinal data from almost 600 B2B service firms in 45 countries over two

decades, the authors adopted a longitudinal econometric approach resulting in the determination of generalizable conditions explaining international B2B service firm revenue growth over time; specifically, by demonstrating that international scope and political distance may drive revenue growth over time, further also influenced by firm size.

At the theoretical level, their paper nicely complements the dominant dyadic transactional or relationship basis between firms by examining two empirically generalizable factors from institutional theory that tend to hold across firms, industries and countries. Opposite to what traditional institutional theory research has shown (Peng et al., 2009) in that the scope of internationalization feeds growth by augmenting potential market size, Khan and colleagues illustrate that simply being in more countries does not necessarily translate into improved revenue growth. They also point to a negative relationship between internationalization scope and revenue growth, especially holding for smaller firms, where such firms are better off focusing their limited resources on fewer markets. Examining firms size interaction effects, their findings also reveal that while large firms stand to gain more from higher internationalization scope than small firms, their priorities should be international markets with small political distance. Additionally, in contrast to small firms, as larger firms expand internationally, they lower their growth in domestic revenue. This negative effect is further exacerbated as larger firms expand into more highly politically distant markets. These results become even more important against an increasingly politicized international business landscape (Beugelsdijk & Luo, 2024).

The authors also make suggestions regarding how best to balance risks/rewards given that despite their findings suggesting that firms avoid politically distant markets, these markets can also be very lucrative. Here, it would be interesting to examine their results in the context of theory underlying international dynamic marketing capabilities literature (Ciszewska-Mlinarič et al., 2024; Pfajfar et al., 2024a; 2024b). The findings by Khan and colleagues complement established theoretical insights on B2B service firm internationalization (Gansser et al., 2021), in better understanding how specific macro-level factors interact with firm size in determining their long-term growth. They hold important insights for both the B2B marketing literature and for the rapidly expanding literature on corporate political activity (see Gammeltoft and Panibratov, 2024; Lawton et al., 2013) which has so far been applied mostly in the context of international firms' activities under populist regimes (Hartwell & Devinney, 2024).

### **3.3 Beyond Borders: A Configurational Framework for understanding B2B service firms' cross-cultural challenges in Global Account Management**

The third article by Lautenschlager, Tzempelikos, Kooli and Viglia (2024) focuses on the under-researched area of global account management (GAM), which is a tool for managing global accounts, like, managing a single customer across multiple countries (Yip & Madsen, 1996). As B2B service firms expand their international operations, the significance of effective GAM strategies becomes increases (Kadam et al., 2023), primarily because firms must balance the centralization of GAM decision-making with the localization of sales and service activities. Although GAM is vital for B2B service firms' internationalization efforts (Kadam et al., 2023), research on the phenomenon of GAM implementation in culturally diverse environments remains sparse. Ellis and Iwasaki (2018) observed that research on GAM implementation in B2B service firms is insufficient and have called for a more nuanced, culturally sensitive approach to GAM. Similarly, Kadam and colleagues (2023) have recently highlighted that the factors driving GAM implementation are still not well understood, primarily due to the challenges of conducting empirical research on B2B firms from various countries, especially non-Western ones.

The article by Lautenschlager and colleagues employs an institutionalism perspective to examine the impact of cross-cultural differences on GAM in B2B service contexts. Based on data from 432 global account managers covering Europe, Asia, Middle East and Africa, as well as the Americas, their study identifies key cultural factors influencing GAM implementation at both the organizational and individual levels. Their findings demonstrate that B2B service firms face significant cross-cultural challenges in their GAM programs due to variances in cultural dimensions between the sales organizations and their strategic accounts. They also show that developing a learning organization is crucial for identifying and managing cross-cultural challenges within the GAM context, which contributes to advancing the existing understanding of cultural determinants and cross-cultural aspects related to learning organizations remaining relatively under-researched (Rupčić, 2024). It involves fostering an environment where employees continuously learn and adapt to new cultural insights.

The authors also highlight the importance of institutionalizing GAM programs, which involves standardizing processes and practices to create a consistent approach across different cultural contexts, mitigating cross-cultural variances and ensuring effective relationships with global accounts. At the theoretical level, the article provides a configurational framework for cross-

cultural GAM, highlighting the importance of psychic and cultural distance (Avloniti & Filippaios, 2014) for learning organizations to effectively serve their strategic customers across diverse cultural contexts. Such a framework helps B2B service firms understand and navigate the complexities of managing global accounts across diverse cultural landscapes (ALHussan et al., 2014).

The authors offer recommendations to international B2B service firms for identifying and managing cross-cultural challenges. They suggest that B2B service firms must develop a thorough understanding of cultural differences, which has important implications for the recruitment, training, and education of global account managers. Data from their study shows that emotional skills are crucial for global account managers, followed by intellectual and experiential skills, with physical presence being less important. The article also provides guidelines for B2B service firms to establish standardized organizational systems to coordinate resources and activities across various markets. Their findings underscore the need for more comprehensive research on cultural determinants in GAM implementation and management (Jean et al., 2015), particularly within diverse cultural contexts (Sandesh et al., 2023).

### **3.4 Digitalization: Understanding B2B service firms' divestment decisions and the role played by digitalization institutions**

The last paper by Tang, Rammal and Cavusgil (2024) explores the multi-faceted nexus of digitalization and internationalization (Battista Dagnino & Resciniti, 2021) through the optics of B2B service firms. Despite digitalization offering opportunities for disentangling the intangible from the tangible aspects of service co-creation (Behl et al., 2023), B2B service firms operating internationally still need to navigate national-level institutions across host countries (Meyer et al., 2023). This is consistent with the existing understanding of the role institutions play in business across international markets (Henisz & Swaminathan, 2008; Aguilera & Grøgaard, 2019) and particularly their impact on firm-level international strategy (Peng et al., 2009).

However, through the introduction of “digitalization institutions” – which relate to “human-devised constraints and social elements that shape and facilitate digital interactions among individuals and organizations” in a society (Tang et al., 2024, p. 277) – the authors' contribution lays in testing the moderating effects of three specific types of host-country digitalization institutions (i.e., regulatory support of digitalization, the overall quality of the digital business

environment and digital affordability) on how the B2B service firms' exposure to institutional unpredictability impacts their foreign *divestment* decisions. The latter is in its own right an under-researched and under-theorized area within the international business literature compared to foreign market entry decisions (Sethuram & Gaur, 2024; Tang et al., 2021).

Analyzing a sample of 261 B2B service firms operating in 56 countries and 132 foreign divestment decisions, the authors find that a one-unit increase in exposure to institutional unpredictability in a host country translates into a 31-fold increased likelihood of divestment. This is a substantial effect and probably much higher for B2B service firms than manufacturing firms due to the nature of their business models. Estimating the effects of digitalization institutions, the authors find that a one-unit increase in regulatory support for digitalization further amplifies the underlying effect by 11 units. The marginal moderating effects for overall quality of the digital business environment and digital affordability have also been partially supported. Overall, the authors find that digitalization institutions provide B2B service firms “more flexibility to escape from unpredictable institutions” (p. 287) in foreign markets by divesting from their tangible host-market presence and switching to digital offerings (Tang et al., 2024). While digitalization can pose additional risks (Teece, 2025), it can also offer opportunities to firms (Sanchez-Riofrio et al., 2022), especially B2B service firms (Behl et al., 2023).

In addition to providing valuable insights into how B2B service firms respond to institutional unpredictability in host markets (in terms of deterioration or improvement), the authors also provide a more “parsimonious understanding of institutional dynamism” (Tang et al., 2024, p. 287), which integrates the B2B marketing literature with the IB literature. Their findings highlight the theoretical value of studying the internationalization of B2B service firms in better understanding drivers of firm internationalization decisions, the additional strategic choices firms (can) make in their divestment decisions in foreign markets because of digitalization (Gansser et al., 2021; Teece, 2025) *and* new ways institutions “matter” when it comes to international business (Meyer et al., 2023).

#### **4. NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND IDEAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In this section, we outline seven key research directions related to B2B service internationalization research which also provide fruitful avenues for future research. Jointly, the seven research directions also point to the need for closer integration of marketing and international business

theory by focusing on an increasingly relevant digitalization-internationalization nexus (Battista Dagnino & Resciniti, 2021). Exploring this nexus has the potential to make B2B service research more central within the international business literature and also beyond.

#### **4.1 Cross-border Relationship Marketing**

Relationships and relationship marketing are central elements of B2B services marketing (Grönroos, 1997; Gansser et al., 2021). They have formed the theoretical foundations for this research since the 1990s. However, B2B marketing of services internationally requires additional and unique considerations, since the long-term nature of the relationship between B2B parties across borders is paramount (Barry et al., 2008). Hence, trust, loyalty, and value co-creation across markets are emphasized more in B2B service relationships than in consumer-based marketing or in product-based firms.

Achieving these outcomes requires the relationship partners to successfully navigate the challenges of cultural and institutional differences (Barry et al., 2008). Further, the influence of digitalization in managing these challenges is an additional dimension in current and future research directions relating to the marketing of services in a B2B context (Shaheer & Li, 2020). In this vein, Hallikainen, Hirvonen, and Laukkanen (2020) conducted a study to explore perceived digital trustworthiness in using B2B services.

#### **4.2 Cultural and Institutional Differences**

Differences in the socio-cultural environments and other core institutions, notably regulatory institutions, between the home and host countries underpin many of the challenges associated with the internationalization of services by B2B firms (Deng et al., 2018). For example, institutional differences are known to affect cross-border B2B relationships, and highlight the need for adaptation to local market expectations (see, e.g., Lindsay et al., 2017).

Building on the traditional foundations of relationship marketing, service dominant logic, and customer-based value, along with institutional theory and cross-cultural management perspectives, new research is emerging to address the challenges of cultural and institutional differences in a B2B services context. For example, factors that are now considered paramount include demands for localization (Deng et al., 2018), perceptions of customer value (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2020), variations in sustainability expectations and performance measures (Liu et al.,

2020), feasibility of value-creation efforts (Vargo & Lusch, 2016), and digital readiness for B2B marketing and transactions (Ojala et al., 2020).

### **4.3 Demands for Localization**

Service firms, including B2B firms, require more localized adaptation than product-based firms, since services more often require customization to suit local preferences, as well as to respond to cultural and regulatory requirements (Racela & Thourunrojje, 2020). Within these parameters, it is necessary for B2B service firms to assess the optimal level of adaptation, in order to account for localization requirements and cost efficiency (Vrontis et al., 2009). Griffith and Harvey (2001) suggest that B2B service firms should develop dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007) and particularly international dynamic marketing capabilities (Pfajfar et al., 2024a) in order for them to adapt to local requirements for multiple international markets and especially in emerging markets through, for example, service infusion (Rod et al., 2014). International experience of B2B service firms is also important in decision-making for local adaptation (Racela & Thourunrojje, 2020).

### **4.4 Digital Transformation**

Digitization is the process that enables an organization's products, services, and processes to be internet capable (Banalieva & Dhanaraj, 2019), rendering any transaction more efficient and enhancing the organization's market reach. By reducing transaction costs, and enabling increased efficiency with other key elements of the internationalization process, digital technology provides many benefits for internationalizing firms. Specifically, digital platforms facilitate direct contact between key stakeholders in identifying international opportunities and in international business transactions (Da Rocha et al., 2024). Further, such interactions can take place in real time across numerous global markets (Sinkovics et al., 2013).

The availability of digital platforms and digital platform ecosystems (DPEs) in recent years has dramatically changed the landscape for internationalizing firms, especially in the B2B context (Song, 2019). Da Rocha and colleagues (2024, p. 982) summarize DPEs as “meta-organizations (Kretschmer et al., 2022) organized around platforms via shared or open-source technologies (Jacobides et al., 2018), through which different actors interact, directly or indirectly, and co-create value (Senyo et al., 2019).” By leveraging a digital platform of “intermediaries of matchmakers” (p. 579), organizations enjoy substantially reduced transaction costs (Song, 2019). Since digital

platforms connect multiple players, they can enable combinations of B2B, B2C and C2C interactions on the same platform (Song, 2019), thereby blurring the boundaries between these otherwise distinct categories and considerably reducing transaction costs.

While digital platforms are beneficial for large, medium, and small firms (Nambisan et al., 2019), smaller firms stand more to gain, with corresponding reductions in their liabilities of newness, and resource scarcity, among others (Da Rocha et al., 2024.) In their systematic literature review, Da Rocha and colleagues highlighted the relative paucity of research on SME digital internationalization, including firms in the service sector, and in the B2B context. This highlights the need for research avenues to explore this phenomenon further in internationalizing B2B service firms.

#### **4.5 Sustainability**

Governments and other stakeholders in many parts of the world are highlighting the importance of sustainability as a key requirement for businesses. The rollout of different ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reporting standards, particularly in Europe (Tzanidis et al., 2024), and a focus on triple-bottom line outcomes now represents an important global business trend (Ahmad et al., 2024). Sustainability goals are relevant for all organizations in the supply chain, including those involved in industrial services marketing and B2B service transactions (Tandon et al., 2024). In an international context, such firms must adapt their sustainability strategies for different market requirements and expectations. Several studies highlight the connection between sustainability and internationalization, with an increased focus on sustainability being evident in firms that are more highly internationalized (DasGupta et al., 2022; Yau et al., 2024). However, while this work generally focuses on manufacturing firms, the intersection between sustainability, internationalization in B2B services is less well understood – both empirically and theoretically.

#### **4.6 Servitization and Service Productization**

Servitization, the adding of services to traditional product offerings (Kowalkowski et al., 2017), as well as service productization, or product-oriented services (Wirtz & Kowalkowski, 2023) offer B2B firms a way to add value to customers. These approaches allow firms to benefit from co-creation opportunities, and expand into new markets, including international markets (Kowalkowski et al., 2022). By adapting the service component to local requirements or

preferences, a firm may also reap the benefits of a localization strategy to complement that of the product offering.

In recent decades, servitization has evolved to digital servitization, through its intersection with digital technologies (Minaya et al., 2024). As highlighted in the authors' systematic literature review, the transition to digital servitization in the manufacturing sector has been explored, with key drivers, actors and strategies identified. Several facets of digital servitization have recently also been explored in a B2B context, including its impact on relationship quality in manufacturing firms (Grandinetti et al., 2020).

#### **4.7 Services Internationalization by B2B SMEs**

Research on services internationalization by B2B SMEs is relatively limited, especially in the context of digital transformation (Da Rocha et al., 2024). B2B SMEs, like all SMEs, suffer from resource scarcity, liability of newness and foreignness (Cavusgil & Knight, 2015), poorly developed, or absent, local networks, and information asymmetry, when internationalizing (Crick et al., 2023). In addition, B2B SMEs must navigate cultural and institutional differences when conducting business in international markets (Lindsay et al., 2017). The previous discussion highlights several of the major themes, theoretical foundations, and recent developments that apply to B2B services marketing in an international context. However, elucidating how these apply to internationalizing service B2B SMEs is a particularly important direction for future research.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

Services represent the largest share of global GDP and are the strongest driver of output and employment growth globally (Nayyar & Davies, 2023). Yet, capturing cross-border service trade remains elusive (Bohn et al., 2018), explaining their limited coverage within marketing (Grönroos, 2020) and B2B marketing despite the advancement of servitization research (Raddats et al., 2019; Ulaga et al., 2022) and their growing digitalization (Chen & Gao, 2022). As a consequence, and despite the importance of services in global trade and their global economic relevance (Hazarbassanova Blagoeva et al., 2020), internationalization of (B2B) services and (B2B) service firms has received limited attention not just within the marketing but even more so within the international business literature (Rammal & Rose, 2014; Pla-Baber & Ghauri, 2012; Hennart,

2019). This deficit also has important consequences for the advancement of international business theory.

While technology and digitalization (Kowalkowski et al., 2024) will undoubtedly make the internationalization of services more relevant for both international business (Chidlow et al., 2019; Hennart, 2019) and marketing scholars (Da Rocha et al., 2024) the digital tsunami carries profound implications for servitization (Chirumalla et al., 2023), business models (Caputo et al., 2021), internationalization (Drori et al., 2024), as well as global strategy more generally (Meyer et al., 2023). Existing international business theory (Alcacer et al., 2016) and B2B marketing theory (Bamberger et al., 2025) will need to keep up with the evolving industry and societal needs and expectations. This will require going beyond leveraging contextual differences, exploring possible boundary conditions and/or testing new types of moderators and mediators within existing theoretical models. It will require deeper theoretical probing into the place-space-organization nexus, which sets apart international business from the other disciplines (Beugelsdijk, 2022) and can be of tremendous value also to the B2B marketing theory and practice.

Serving as an intersection between service marketing, B2B marketing, and international business, we hope our Special Issue inspires new research and catalyses theory testing/extensions and eventually new theory building related to the internationalization of B2B service firms, which remains an often-overlooked research area at the crossroads of the global economy and marketing.

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