

The role of communication in the digital transformation of SMEs: an analysis in the agrifood sector¹

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Abstract

Frame of the research. In recent years, the academic literature focused on understanding why small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) struggle in revising their business models and adopting digital tools for communication, marketing and operations. A common reason given is that they lack the resources and skills to adapt to change. SMEs in the agrifood industry are vulnerable to these problems, given their positioning in a low-tech, traditional industry.

Purpose of the paper. Our research focuses on online communication strategies as a gateway for SMEs' digital transformation. Since contents on brand, quality, and provenance are crucial for agrifood consumers, SMEs adopt communication technologies, but whether digitisation affects other areas is not clear. Our primary research question, thus, is: how do marketing communication strategies influence digital transformation in SMEs in the agrifood industry?

Methodology. The study is based on a qualitative multi-case approach. Through an abductive approach, we explored the field and systematized the evidence to produce accounts of the potential influences between digital communication and digital transformation by collecting extensive sets of secondary data on SMEs and interviewing key informants in a group of selected SMEs. We analysed the empirical evidence based on a checklist of categories informed by extant literature, coded it, and obtained themes that shed light on the interactions between digital communication and digital transformation in agrifood SMEs.

Results. The findings point to relevant themes that could guide further theoretical development: we find evidence on the interaction between perceived usefulness and easiness of digital tools, on the learning processes made possible by external agencies, and on the downsides of the do-it-yourself approach.

Research limitations. The study focuses on the agrifood industry; comparisons with similar depth in other industries could favour the emergence of further themes and help weigh their relative importance.

Practical implications. Our findings could contribute to improving the digital transformation process in SMEs; they systematise the different factors that managers can combine to trigger organisational learning and the emergence of consensus.

Originality of the paper. The paper explores the role of communication in the digital transformation of Italian agrifood SMEs, an empirical context previously

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unstudied in depth. It specifies constructs from the theory of acceptance (TAM), shedding light on the potential negative effects of perceived easiness. It also contributes to literature on the do-it-yourself behaviour (DIY) applied to businesses by framing the role of agencies.

Key words: Digital communication; digital transformation; digital marketing; SMEs; agrifood industry

1. Introduction

Several factors constrain small and medium-sized enterprises' (SMEs henceforward) capacity to pursue strategic innovation and operational change (i.e., De Paoli *et al.*, 2020). Small size and the absence of slack resources make them prone to focus on operational urgencies to the detriment of long-term planning (Hess *et al.*, 2016). Their specialisation in few operations and phases within larger value chains makes them domain specialists, a factor that inhibits the development of complementary capabilities (Li *et al.*, 2018). The previous factors lead to other constraints, as documented in previous literature. Domain specialism and a focus on operations channel SMEs' hiring practices towards specific competence profiles, inhibiting the hybridization of traditional and novel skills (Coco *et al.*, 2023). "Tertiary" functions such as marketing and communication are often under-staffed compared to operations. When marketing and communication are considered, literature shows that communication experts and/or agencies play a vital role in helping SMEs establish and maintain their brand image, reach their target audience, and achieve their marketing goals: they allow SMEs to access professional services without the cost of maintaining an in-house marketing department, but several obstacles often make the matching difficult (Clow and Baack, 2017). Numerous factors make it often difficult for SMEs to resort to external actors for reasons of trust, culture, or uncertainties on budget allocations.

We assume digital channels allow SMEs to adopt practices that resemble those of larger organisations (i.e., Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). They enlarge the reach of firms' communication, allowing them to talk to large and heterogeneous audiences at affordable costs. The ability to better interact with customers at acceptable costs could drive the transformation of processes and SMEs' business models, thus pushing digital tools also in the back end, such as in operations through industry 4.0 technologies (Bettiol *et al.*, 2021), servitization (Paiola, 2018), e-commerce and much more. Scholarly and practitioners' discussions stressed the need to speed up SMEs' digital transformation. Digital transformation is a multidisciplinary process that enhances an organization's performance and encompasses all changes digital technologies can bring to its business model, products, processes, and organizational structures (Hess *et al.*, 2016; Deloitte, 2018; Vial, 2019). It can change every aspect of business, in particular the marketing area (Caliskan *et al.*, 2020). Using digital tools in marketing communication could be conducive to SMEs' digital transformation and to the revision of internal and external processes, affecting the organizational

model and relationships with suppliers and partners (Alnuaimi *et al.*, 2022). Thus, we observe not only the transition from analogue to digital but also the set of socio-technical paths and phenomena of adoption and use of (digital) technologies within organisational contexts.

The emphasis policymakers put on calls to speed up digital transformation increased given the importance of information technologies in allowing firms to meet sustainability targets and, ultimately, embark on a twin transition of their strategies (Muench *et al.*, 2022). Answering to these calls requires approaches that are context sensitive and aimed at capturing the determinants of, and the constraints to, mature adoption of digital solutions. This change is also visible when looking at the evolution of some marketing communication actors, as evidenced by the proliferation of several specialized digital agencies (Ceccotti *et al.*, 2024; Hughes and Vafeas, 2019)

This paper follows suit, adopting a qualitative and sector-focused approach to highlight the potential of digital communication to accelerate SMEs' digital transformation. The agrifood sector is a telling case of the chasm between SMEs and up-to-date devices, management practices, and strategic postures subsumed in the "twin transition" label: agrifood is a low-tech industry, populated by micro and small firms lagging in terms of both management and digital maturity. Many firms in the sector are artisanal, family-owned, and product-centric. Radical challenges sweep the industry and command major strategic and operational revisions: sustainability, climate changes, uncertainty in value chains, and changes in consumer behaviour. In this context, digital technologies can offer valuable solutions. As far as the consumer is concerned, social media and online multimedia communication are important tools for conveying the values of the product, and blockchain technology can enable better traceability, enhancing consumer trust. Through e-commerce platforms, SMEs can expand their market, enabling direct sales to consumers. Precision agriculture, through digital tools like satellite imagery, soil sensors, and weather forecasting systems, allows SMEs to optimize the use of resources and increase productivity. Smart supply chain management gives the possibility to adopt software solutions to better manage inventory, logistics, and demand forecasting.

Given the importance of brand, quality assurance, and narratives of provenance for food consumers, our study considers whether the upgrading of SMEs' marketing communication strategies and practices drives to digital transformation in other areas of the firms' operations to answer these challenges. We also explore the role of agencies and consultants in supporting SMEs to embrace digital transformation, shedding a light on the factors leading to in-house, hybrid or external choices. Thus, we tackle the following primary research question: how do marketing communication strategies influence digital transformation in SMEs in the agrifood industry? Based on data collected from 2020 to 2023, we adopt a multi-case approach to formulate an answer. The findings point to relevant themes for theory and practice, in particular the role of marketing and of the actors in the larger service ecosystem surrounding SMEs, specifically digital agencies. We demonstrate that collaboration between SMEs and external partners

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fosters mature approaches and effective digital communication strategies, provided issues of perceived ease of use and perceived benefit are resolved. We show the conditions under which digital communication is conducive to digital transformation.

2. Theoretical background and research questions

2.1 Communication, digitalization and SMEs

Websites, blogs, and social media possess features that transformed business communication and forced companies to adapt to novel approaches to markets. Digital communication connects firms and consumers through a many-to-many approach, vis-à-vis the traditional one-to-many logic, making content creation and distribution a complex process (McCann and Barlow, 2015). In principle, communication through digital media increases efficiency in managing customer information, penetration through various channels, and interactivity. Capitalising on the effectiveness of digital tools to communicate requires a concurrent transformation that invests the entire company for two main reasons: first, with online interactions comes an obligation for transparency (Bacile *et al.*, 2014) that involves the firms' back-end (operations, financials, human resource management); second, companies need to understand how data abundance and dispersion impact their strategies and aim at learning how to use data analytics to maximise results (Checchinato, 2021). The literature thoroughly documents how information and communication technology transforms communication flows and logic. Few studies, though, delved into the interactions between the adoption of digital tools to communicate by SMEs and the digital transformation the same companies might go through (Meiers and Peters, 2023). The current debate highlights differences in and opportunities of the implementation of digital technologies to communicate, without explicit considerations on the implications of digital communication for organisation-wide digital transitions. Some scholars posit digital tools help SMEs to vie with larger organisations due to their costs; others found out that SMEs still struggle to use them and limited resources still are a constraint. Lack of familiarity, technical skills (Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides, 2011) competencies (Bowen and Morris, 2019), and human capital (Cassetta *et al.*, 2020) are highlighted as factors that prevent SMEs from using social networks to support their brands.

The Theory of Acceptance Model (TAM) (Venkatesh and Morris, 2003) has been used as a lens to shed light on the use of digital technology in communication and on the underlying motivations. Since our paper focuses on managerial perspectives on digital communication, TAM's emphasis on individual perceptions offers direct insights into how managers and/or owners evaluate and adopt IT tools (Clemente-Almendros *et al.*, 2024; Lee *et al.*, 2009; La Torre *et al.*, 2023): technology adoption in organizations is a complex interplay of individual attitudes, shaped in part by education level, and broader organizational, relational and environmental factors. The theory maintains that perceived usefulness and perceived easiness are

attitude predictors of the use of ICT. The first one refers to the degree to which an individual believes that a particular technology-a website, social network or other digital communication tools and channels-will enhance its performance, whether it relates to marketing aims, financial targets or else. Another one refers to the degree to which an individual believes that the use of specific tools will be free of mental effort or not daunting from a cognitive point of view. Davis (1993) claimed that a user's expectations on the amount of effort required to use a system (perceived ease of use) is likely to influence the person's subjective probability that using the system will increase performance (perceived usefulness). TAM received some criticism for not considering other variables such as competitive pressure; nonetheless, it has proven to be a useful theoretical framework for analysing and explaining social media adoption and implementation by firms (Veldeman *et al.*, 2017). We use this theoretical lens to examine the increasing adoption of technologies and to investigate the role of digital communication tools in driving firms' digitalization. Becoming familiar with new technologies could change the perception of both easiness and usefulness and lead to different digitalization paths. Digital transformation is a process that requires a step-by-step strategy. This paper aims to investigate whether the incremental use of digital communication tools influences the digital transformation of the company because of the different perception of easiness and usefulness during the time. In other words, perceived easiness and usefulness of digital communication tools can lead the company to adopt technologies with a wider scope, first for the marketing strategy and then for digital transformation as a whole.

Therefore, to answer the primary research question, we split it into the following research questions:

- *How does the use of technologies in communication impact the digital marketing and digital transformation of a company?*
- *How do the perception of usefulness and perceived easiness of communication technologies interact with each other and affect digital transformation?*

2.2 *The role of digital marketing and communication agencies in fostering digital transformation*

When SMEs approach digital tools to improve the effectiveness of their communication, they often resort to external partners and agencies. Both practitioners and academics assume businesses outsource some or all of the digital marketing or communication functions (Edelman, 2010) because of the need for expertise and skills they can not find internally. Due to the rapid change caused by the Internet and ICT, SMEs are striving to make sense of the ever-evolving communication scenario and of its possible consequences for their businesses.

Literature on client/agency relationships (Ceccotti *et al.*, 2019; Ceccotti *et al.*, 2024; Keegan *et al.*, 2017) frame them as learning processes based on trust and collaboration. Some scholars argue that using a traditional agency theory approach can be misleading, since agencies serving SMEs are often small and specialised actors that partner with firms in a sort of brand and

operational alliance (Mortimer and Louise, 2019). Recently, there has been a breakdown in trust and collaboration, which has resulted in a decrease in information exchange and negatively impacted relationships. One of the main reasons behind this is the increasing access of clients to behavioural data and insights made possible by the availability of enabled by dominant platforms and their dashboards. This has given clients more power, allowing them to decide without involving agencies. Some studies found that the strength of this relationship positively impacts the performance outcomes of the client firm (Lynch and West, 2017).

Digital communication can function as a possible starting point for a deeper digitisation. Our research aimed at understanding the role of agencies and external partners. Previous studies suggest that SMEs can use data science to improve the effectiveness of social advertising strategies. However, when more sophisticated analyses are required, they often rely on external competencies (Saura *et al.*, 2023). The role of agencies and the impact on their client's strategy depends not only on the agency's competencies and skills but also on the involvement of companies' internal actors. Based on the literature on service-dominant logic, we know that value creation is a collaborative process between the service provider (the agency) and the customer, achieved through resource integration (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

To understand companies' behaviour in the digitization process and the nature of their engagement with specialised agencies, do-it-yourself (DIY) theory comes as a useful framework in combination with TAM. Originally developed by Wolf and McQuitty (2013) for the consumer context, the DIY model was applied also to the study of SMEs and their digital marketing strategies (Ritz *et al.*, 2019). It suggests three motivations for SMEs owners/managers to perform activities autonomously: the perceived economic benefit, lack of product quality, and lack of product availability. In our context, perceived economic benefit refers to the costs of the agency compared to the cost of hiring internal resources, the lack of product quality refers to the outcomes of the agency's activity, and the lack of product availability can be referred to the chance to find an agency able to understand the value proposition as well as the company's values and convey them to the target. In the agrifood sector, especially in the Italian one, where firms are mainly family-owned and values are connected to their tradition and to the quality of ingredients and production practices, the agencies' competencies should cover the operations.

Therefore, to answer the main research question, we need to understand: *How do digital agencies support (or not) the digital transformation process?*

3. Methods

3.1 The context: the agrifood sector in Italy

The agrifood sector is an important component of the Italian economy. From farms to consumers' tables, activities related to the cultivation and transformation of agricultural products equal 4% of the Italian GDP. The

total turnover of the agriculture sector for 2023 in Italy was 74 billion euros, while the transformation of agricultural products was worth 180 billion euros in turnover. An important share of the Italian export includes high-quality products as those labelled with Geographical Indications (GIs). Their trade in foreign markets reached over 20 billion euros in 2023 (ISMEA, 2023). The authors deemed the agrifood sector and its structure in Italy relevant for a study tackling questions at the intersection between marketing communication and digital transformation. Several reasons underpin this option. First, considering communication, as research in heterogeneous fields show, Italian food has become influential among experts and also in popular culture to the point it is associated automatically to values such as high quality, exquisiteness, uniqueness and much more (Parasecoli, 2014; Grandi, 2018) and to the point it commands a differential positioning in consumers' minds all over the world (Bonaiuto *et al.*, 2012; Bonaiuto *et al.*, 2021). As the international success experimented by Italian GIs shows, certain locales invest the products originating from them of symbolic value (ISMEA, 2023). This symbolic richness enables firms rooted in the locales to design and execute differentiation strategies. Second, the sector and the locale-Italy-trace boundaries that might be rich in evidence of digital transformation. As a previous literature showed, digital transformation is complex and bewildering for small organisations. From this angle, the Italian context promises depth and insights: the industrial population of the country is dominated by micro and small enterprises. More specifically, 94% of them employ less than 10 individuals, 0.8% are large firms (over 250 employees), the rest are SMEs (Istat, 2021). The agrifood sector in Italy is populated eminently by SMEs: indeed 60 thousand food processing firms employ 464 thousand persons (the average number of employees is 7.8) and among the 103 million agricultural SMEs, 94% are individual firms or small family firms (Istat, 2022). Finally, the Italian food sector was selected for its potential contribution to enlightening matters related to the digital transformation given this transition's importance in the current European political agenda and its concerns about sustainability. The agrifood sector, in fact, has been one of the most prominent targets in the European strategy for achieving a competitive and sustainable economy. Continental strategies such as the European Green deal and the Farm to fork strategy moved from the realization that food systems generate almost 30% of greenhouse gas emissions (Tubiello *et al.*, 2021) and pointed to digital technologies as pivotal in enabling novel business models, the elimination of inefficiencies and the restructuring of supply chains in an environmentally sound direction (European Commission, 2020). Italian policymakers followed suit: the agrifood sector and its transition towards digitised and sustainable practices is one pillar of the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience, financed by the continental strategy Next Gen EU. Both the food sector and Italy (European Commission, 2023) are lagging in terms of digital maturity and digital transformation, especially when the digitalisation of business is considered (Checchinato *et al.*, 2024). Thus, considering questions related to digital transformation and the concurrent sustainable transition in the agrifood sector is critical, informative, and impactful, as suggested by several policies. Focusing on the sector in a

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peculiar setting like Italy, one that amplifies the struggles agrifood SMEs are facing all over the world, makes it more significant for a study like the one presented.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

We opted for a qualitative research design, a multi-case approach, to capture significant insights on the phenomena through in-depth interviews with 14 informants in SMEs of the agrifood industry between January 2020 and September 2023 (Table 2). Method-wise, our choices were justified by the research design. In particular, as stated in Yin (2009) case studies fit with research designs that investigate: a) “process questions” or “how and why questions”; b) engage with phenomena that are “current” and have not yet established; c) investigate a phenomenon in a context or locale to account for the depth and scope of influencing forces and factors; d) integrate a variety of data sources and evidence to provide depth and multiple perspectives. Our study responds to the enumerated criteria. First, we are considering a not yet established type of relationship among different dimensions and separated spheres of organisational practices and strategies. In fact, our research questions aim at establishing a nexus between the use of digital technologies in communication -and their perceived ease of use and usefulness- and the overall process of digital transformation in SMEs. We aimed at devising the potential relationships between the two spheres, a hitherto unexplored area, and thus were called to privilege depth and nuances to uncover potential relationships. Second, the phenomenon of digital transformation has been unfolding as we researched and wrote, especially in geographical and industrial contexts that are lagging. The case study method allowed to shed light on various aspects of the underlying phenomenon, with the perspective of singling out significant relationships that further studies might then measure and assess with quantitative methods. Then, as stated, we posit that the Italian agrifood sector is significant as a context in terms of the richness it might provide to a study like the present one, given the existence of a multitude of factors playing against the mature use of digital technologies in communication and processes of digital transformation. Finally, to make sense of the perspectives enunciated by informants on the topics framed in our research questions, we relied on several additional sources to triangulate and better grasp the specific process firms were going through, went through or the lack of any process of digital transformation. To produce a holistic view of the phenomena at hand, we opted for a multiple case study. The multiple case design that provides depth and richness of variables and factors (Stake, 2006) considering the various manifestations of firms’ configurations, their interactions with the logics of different value chains. Multiple cases under investigation allow to avoid biased insights and subsequent generalizations; they also allow for better transferability of the resulting propositions, frameworks, or theories (Yin, 2009).

Our sample exhibits variety and heterogeneity: SMEs come from different value chains, have different sizes, own their own brands sometimes, and supply brand owners in others. We selected from a list

of 520 food companies extracted for the Bureau Van Dijk's repository Aida (a commercial database with financial information on companies) and classified them according to their presence on social media and the existence of one or more proprietary websites. The sheer number of profiles or pages on social media, the number of websites attributable to the company, and the articulation of such websites in sections (including foreign language versions) were used as proxies for the digital readiness and fluency of the selected firms. Thus, we attempted to equilibrate the group of analysed companies in terms of an equal number of mature and lagging firms. The research protocol comprised a preliminary analysis of secondary data sources, followed by semi-structured interviews. Each company's website and digital form of presence was analysed, as were data and information related to them and gathered on online sources, such as specialized publications. One critical issue emerging from a research design relying on respondent's analysis, especially on emerging topics, is biased perspectives. We thus interviewed 4 informants coming from the agency/consulting sector, to have a specular perspective on the factors plaguing mature approaches to digital communication and transformation or enabling them (45 minutes each on average).

The selection of informants responded to our main preoccupation with obtaining relevant information from decision makers within the firms. Respondents in our case were selected according to the standards in key informant interview methods. We aimed at accessing a heterogeneous and composite set of domain-related contents in a parsimonious way by identifying individuals who oversee complex processes and have decision-making power in their organisations. As in Taylor and Blake (2015), our preoccupation with identifying the key informant was that of selecting individuals who possess expert knowledge. In addition, the individuals we interviewed represent a broader group (the organisation and its teams), as stated in Bogner *et al.* (2009). Thus, independently from their position or role, we requested, and had access to, people in charge of making the final decision on digital transformation investments and investments in digital communication. Although the search might have offered different informants for each company, the size of organizations in the sample revealed those decisions are made by one individual which we had access to in all cases. Informants were company owners. Just in one case (case M), a second interview was necessary to complement the information: we interviewed both the marketing manager and the IT director. When interviewing informants from the consulting/agency world, we asked to have access to the individuals actively engaged in the development of digital communication or transformation projects with clients.

As far as the data collection strategy and the approach to the field are concerned, we proceeded as follows. Based on previous research, we developed a list of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview guide. We also elaborated a checklist of relevant factors (e.g., technologies, strategies, factors determining the adoption of solutions) deriving from both literature, industry publications, and our knowledge of the field. Respondents were asked to answer the questions and left free to interpret them as they wished. This way, we got additional details related to how they

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framed the questions, the problems they referred to, and the underlying technologies or solutions and strategies. The checklist of relevant constructs and factors was then used to guide the conversation when the respondents were digressing in directions that were not significant to the study. The group of selected companies (Table 2) comprises SMEs in Italian northeastern regions (Veneto, Trentino Alto Adige, and Friuli Venezia Giulia). Interviews were recorded, saved and accessed from the authors at different times for coding purposes.

Tab. 1: Data sources

Data Source	Data Type	Analytical Use
Secondary data	Descriptive (demographic and general, marketing and communication activities) data on 14 firms.	Appreciation of differences related to size, and resources. Assessment of digital readiness.
Interviews (2020-2023)	Semi-structured interviews (14) - face-to-face or via zoom - with the owners/CEOs of each firm. Each lasted approx. 45-60 minutes - 14.5 hours (audio).	Understanding the degree of involvement of the firm in the digital transformation process (or lack thereof). Collecting qualitative information about each context and the process. Grasping the digital strategy and the role of the actors involved.
Interviews (2023)	4 interviews with informants coming from agency/consultancy sector - 3 hours (audio).	Data Triangulation with identified themes.

Source: created by authors

Data interpretation and analyses were performed on the corpus of evidence by the authors in waves, first on an individual basis and then collectively. Two of the authors coded the evidence of all the cases since the beginning, while two others intervened in the refinement of the resulting categories in the subsequent iterations of the analysis to triangulate and ensure the robustness of emerging themes.

Process-wise, the authors proceeded in an abductive fashion. We approached the field after the systematization of the extant literature on the themes we were facing, developed a list of codes that was then used to categorize the contents of the interviews and of the other data collection activities (Blaikie and Priest, 2022). Despite having a predefined list of categories emerging from the literature, the two authors that made the first wave of coding open-coded the excerpts of interviews, without assigning them to theoretical categories. Such a way of proceeding responds to the recommendations of Corley and Gioia (2013): while they refer to inductive research designs, their indication as to code at the first level with a language that is close to that used by the informant was key to synthesize the evidence and to make it intelligible to the other researchers. Those two, then, took part in the higher-level coding of the evidence. These iterations were aimed at two objectives. First, they aimed at validating, or settling around, the first-level categories coded by the researchers working on the corpus. Second, they aimed at starting the triangulation that, after the

validation of a code structure at the first level, allowed to reconcile the evidence with the extant themes that were identified from the analysis of the literature. No new themes were identified thanks to this process. Rather, the relationships between existing themes emerged (e.g.: ease of use and perceived usefulness on the one hand, and the commitment to higher investments in communication on the other). The division of labor among authors allowed for the triangulation and validation of the categories in the different iterations.

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Tab. 2: SMEs cases at a glance

Case	Activity	Online presence	Informant's role	Informant gender	Turnover (,000 €) (last year of analysis)	Employees (last year of analysis)
A	Manufacture of grain mill products, starches and starch products	6 social media profiles, website (3 languages) and e-shop	Marketing director	Female	1,986.657	15
B	Dairy products	6 social media channels, website (5 languages), no eshop	Marketing director	Female	117,608	316
C	Manufacture of grain mill products, starches and starch products	4 social media profiles, website (2 languages) and eshop	Sales Manager	Male	7,718.24	13
D	Manufacture of other food products	no social media profiles, website (2 languages) no eshop	Administrative staff - responsible for digital activities	Female	5,875.86	15
E	Bakery and farinaceous products	6 social media profiles (not all updated), website (3 languages), eshop	Owner	Male	9,139.49	52
F	Fruit and vegetables	3 social media profiles, website with some errors (2 languages), eshop	Owner	Male	203.00	4
G	Wine	3 social media profiles, website (2 languages) and eshop	Owner	Female	ND	4
H	Bakery and farinaceous products	2 social media profiles, 2 websites (corporate and for one of the company's brand), no eshop	Marketing and NBD Manager	Male	22,909.86	123
I	Manufacture of other food products	only Facebook, website (2 languages), eshop with another brand	Manager of sales	Male	1,895.23	15
J	Manufacture of grain mill products, starches and starch products	4 social media profiles, website (2 languages) and eshop	Marketing director	Female	24,367.64	36
K	Diary products	website with some errors (2 languages), 6 not updated social media profiles, no eshop	Owner	Female	4,515.66	18
L	Processing and preserving of fish, crustaceans and molluscs	Facebook profile, website (1 language), eshop	Managing Partner (marketing activities delegate)	Male	2,175.14	13
M	Fruit and vegetables	website (2 languages), 3 social media profile, no eshop.	A. Marketing director B. IT director	Male/ Male	75,925.02	209
N	Processing and preserving of fish, crustaceans and molluscs	website (italian language only), 4 social media profiles, no eshop	Managing Partner (sales and marketing activities delegate)	Male	36,011.74	38

Source: created by authors

4. Findings

The triangulation among researchers' notes and codes and the iteration with extant literature determined the emergence of four main themes, elucidated in the following section.

Theme 1: usefulness and ease of use as drivers of the increase in digital communication commitment and investment

A first finding pertains to the two attitude factors evoked by TAM: the intertwining of perceptions of usefulness and ease of use, leading to both positive and negative consequences. First, according to some of our respondents, perceived usefulness can trump the preoccupations related to the reduced easiness of digital solutions. A solution whose perceived usefulness is very high is considered even if it scores low on ease of use.

«We started in 2013 with our Facebook profile, at a time when very few companies, especially in the organic sector, had a professional Facebook presence. During the first year, we were guided by Agency X - a leading Italian agency -, and from the beginning, we wanted to set things in motion in a certain way» (case F)

Our interviewees suggest that the motivation to learn and explore new solutions can reduce the perception of low perceived easiness, ensuring the benefits of technology. SMEs willing to capitalise on the potential brought about by digital tools and strategies are triggered into learning processes (e.g., training courses, workshops, support by external actors) to lower the perceived barriers to adoption.

«During my graduation, I was working at the company where I first came across Facebook, which was just emerging in Italy. I realised the potential of the platform for the business, but I didn't want to create a profile for the company by myself. So, I took a course with an agency that taught me how to open and manage company pages without any sponsored content. As a personal challenge, I started working on it during the weekends» (case A).

When a company creates a website or a social media profile, managing activities might seem easy. However, as they explore more complex and costly digital activities such as sponsored posts, Google ads, and other paid activities, the perception of "ease of use" may change to "difficult to use". This is confirmed by the waiting behaviour of some companies that remain at the initial level of a digital communication strategy, related to the development of owned media.

Although, if the results of past activities are good enough, they put innovation in communication, marketing, or business in their agenda.

«We did not do exclusive contracts (with food bloggers) with anyone yet...this will probably be a step for the next few years» (case A).

Based on our informant's responses, some tools seem to fit with the specificities of SMEs, in particular Google Ads or sponsored posts; others, such as search engine optimization and email marketing, did not surface from our coding. As far as the former are concerned, the respondents pointed to their complexity and technicality that require SMEs to search for external help. Social media is another area that captured the interest of SMEs we interviewed. One shared posture is that after a few experiments, firms realise they are more time-consuming and demanding than a superficial assessment might suggest. There seems to be a parallel recourse to specialised figures (external and internal) when the commitment of the company to social media communication increases:

«We have a *modus operandi*: either we do things in the best possible way with maximum quality and maximum service, or we don't. [...] In the last year we hired a social media agency to follow us on the social side because personally I couldn't deal with it» (case H).

The intertwining between perceived usefulness and easiness might also play a role in hindering the development of mature approaches to digital transformation. Some respondents allowed us to appreciate an interesting path when a company invests in digital communication through social media but then does not escalate to more complex forms of digital transition. In these cases, when they do not achieve positive results in the initial phase, they fail to leverage the possibilities of digital transformation, and they underperform.

«We were supported by an agency, but the results were not brilliant, so we internalised the social media management. [...]. We have an ecommerce, but I do not even consider it because results are negligible» (case N)

Thus, the potential lying even in elementary measures, which are characteristic of digital technologies, is often overlooked such in the case of insights analysis:

«We did not analyse results, either on social media, or on ecommerce. For the last one, we just look at sales» (case N)

Theme 2: The role of external actors in suggesting new activities and supporting future strategic choices

A second theme that emerges from our analysis is related to the acquisition of skills to manage digital communication. The more SMEs venture into digital communication, the more they gain the skills to recognise the gap between extant competences and those needed to manage digital tools. Firms already possessing a marketing orientation and pointing to digital communication for their strategies recognize the problem and search for the support from external actors from the beginning. There seems to be a scaling up of the competences of the firms that derive from the relationship with agencies that allow them to skillfully buy better services when they upgrade their digital communication objectives:

«The company has always been supported by a digital agency because it recognized the importance of having an external expert to ensure the job was done right from the very beginning [...]. Over time, the company improved its digital capabilities by partnering with better agencies that kept up with the latest trends. Our brand has been associated with new values by today's agency» (case B).

Even if companies outsource digital communication, agencies can affect the overall marketing strategies. The nature of digital communication and ongoing audience interaction means agencies' services shape the company's marketing decisions. Again, this represents a benefit of the relationship for those companies who already are marketing oriented. Some SMEs posit they need to collaborate with agencies because they are

«partners allow broader insights and views as they work in various markets and collaborate with large companies. I search for agencies that criticise my brief» (case K).

«We brought in talented young professionals who had collaborated with major groups, allowing us to add value to our business» (Case F)

«I met by pure chance a new agency that gave me a breakthrough. Now I am starting to work in earnest the website that is certainly not the site that was intended with the precious consultant» (Case G)

Critical aspects emerged on the relationships between SMEs and agencies. The lack of trust in the agency's commitment represents a factor that might slow down the process of escalating commitment to digital communication. Owners are often uncertain about the results they could achieve and need to be guided into making sense of the available options. This leads to questioning whether outsourcing to an agency is worth it.

One informant stated that:

«The disadvantage of having an agency is that you never know whether you could have better results with alternative ways of doing» (Case D).

Another maintained that:

«There is a disadvantage: they do not just serve you, they have other clients. [...] they are not as reactive as one would want, surely not as a direct employee would be» (case E).

The lack of perceived economic benefits seems to motivate companies' scepticism and their switch to internalize digital communication activities, even if the internal competencies are not developed. Nonetheless, in several cases the solution is still outsourcing to agencies: other elements are more important than the economic benefit.

Perceived economic disadvantage may drive SMEs to sever agency ties, particularly with poor service. In these cases, the do-it-yourself prevails. When do-it-yourself is paralleled by the investment in adequate internal competences, the choice might make sense and could avoid the negative loop we illustrated in the previous theme. On the contrary, the lack of skills and specialisation might compromise future investments:

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«The problem is that they cannot be as good as an internal resource. Thus, we hired our own marketing responsible [...]. This solves a lot of problems, solves communication and coordination problems. The entrepreneur often does not have time to formulate thoughts, brief somebody: he needs someone who is constantly here and can understand everything in a matter of seconds» (Case F).

«We invested in people who can do different things rather than hiring an external partner». (Case I).

Respondents highlighted the lack of specialised agencies as a relevant factor. Some players, in fact, serve firms in many industries without entering the specificities and subtleties of one. As informant G emphasized, storytelling related to wine and a correct communication of its attributes requires a collaboration between the company's oenologist and the agency, often leveraging languages and semantics that are very dense and sophisticated.

While many SMEs experiment with digital tools via a "learn by doing" method, trying to manage tools in autonomy and learn technicalities when needed, there seems to be a key transformation in their approaches and maturity when they are supported by a consultant.

«When developing a communication strategy, it is important to professionally manage the digital tools [...] the consultants forbade me from publishing on social media» (case M).

We recognize that if an agency is perceived to provide a good service quality, it can support the development of employees' knowledge and improve their competencies, making them aware about the challenges of digitisation. Informant A and B provides a rather insightful assessment of the importance of the relationship between internal employees and the agency to educate companies:

«On those [sponsored ads on social media], I want to be followed by an external agency. [...] my idea is that a consultant also leaves knowledge and information to my workforce and my managers. I chose a consultant based on his/her sharing of this idea» (case A).

"We have an internal resource that works daily with our social media agency." (case B).

Talking to practitioners to triangulate data, they confirm their role as mentors: “sometimes it is the entrepreneur her/himself who transparently asks for training/transfer of experience and skills internally and to work towards objectives” (Digital PR consultant)

Theme 3: From online communication to digital marketing

In our interviews, most of the respondents discussed online promotion and digital marketing activities as they were part of a continuum. This could explain why digital technology to relate with markets represents a gateway to digital transformation for SMEs. Some firms approach digital tools thanks to a website or a social media profile, then they understand how to exploit them for wider marketing purposes. What our evidence suggests is that there might exist a process wherein SMEs use digital tools for one aim and then realise that the same tools, either stretched or joined with others, could extend their usefulness to other functions/areas.

In answering our questions about the use of digital communication tools, informants switched easily to websites, e-commerce, storytelling, and then came back to influencers and word of mouth. This evidence brings us to conclude that when SMEs are concerned, the investigation on their approaches to digital tools should consider wider scopes rather than focusing on single functions and tasks. SMEs might have their own framing of the usefulness of these tools; they might be in a learning process guided by consultants, a journey that articulates along different stages; tools might be used to experiment and build confidence and competence, and then firms might figure out what device and channel is better for what. In small organisations, the absence of dedicated communication employees and even the absence of a formal marketing function in some cases, make it difficult to classify activities rigidly.

In some of our cases, this emerges clearly. For instance, companies create a website or a profile on social networks to communicate their brand values and their activities, to reach their target audience without filters. The high positioning of some of the interviewed companies makes them rely heavily on storytelling, and so they consider digital technology as the best way to showcase their products and assortment. However, when the presence matures and becomes more structured, and consumers interact with them, they change their vision. Social media becomes an instrument to collect data on consumers and redefine the firm's marketing strategy. One company clearly explains this point

«We use Facebook and Instagram mainly to collect comments and acquire insight» (case M).

According to the same informant, the firm is testing a non-proprietary e-commerce platform to gather data and redefine the target audience without making huge investments, according to an affordable loss principle.

How digital communication drives to digital channels - and backward - are well explained by two informants. The first one (case J) explained that they created the new website to better communicate their sustainability value and to explain products to bakery addicts. Soon they understood they

wanted to buy products on the digital channel, so they opened an e-shop. The online shop helps the company to better explain their products. The second firm explained intermediaries sell their products through Amazon, so they started selling on Amazon too-with positive results-but it caused communication issues related to the price (because of shipping costs) and the perceived value of their products. they opened a direct e-shop where prices are clear and convey the right positioning.

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Theme 4: the interaction between digital communication and digital transformation - triggers, determinants and relations

For SMEs, digital communication can be a trigger for more general transitions to digitally enabled business models and for more efficient reconfigurations of their operations. Literature accentuates the importance of digital technologies as devices that create bridges between the outside environment and the firm, allowing SMEs to interact across their borders with suppliers, distributors, and eventually customers (Singh and Hess, 2020). Our cases suggest that the adoption of more mature approaches to digital communication triggers awareness of the potential transformations of strategies and operations in SMEs. As one entrepreneur in the milling industry stated recollecting their digital transformation journey:

«Our digital transformation started back in 2010, probably 2008. We were ambitious and we wanted to make further steps in that direction. We first increased our investment in digital communication on web spaces, our website in particular: a new image of the firm, a new look and feel to the corporate website [...] Then, we approached social media, since we saw it was growing since 2008» (case C)

«At the moment we digitised our communication, to be known by the B2B market and to sell online. Next, we are going to digitise our production process» (case N)

Several responses from informants were on the same tone: the realisation that digital technologies can be a conduit to bidirectional flows (brand and image from the firm, data and insights from consumers) might push SMEs to strategize long term commitments of digital transformation that move from the interface with clients.

One typical “story” is that of firms that strengthened their digital communication by investing in branding on social media and digital channels, then resorting to e-commerce, because of strategy or necessity as with the acceleration of electronic transactions during the peaks of the Covid-19 pandemic. E-commerce per se is not the fundamental trigger: what pushes towards full-fledged digital transformation processes is the logic imposed by underlying software such as customer relationship management suites that go hand in hand with transaction management systems:

«The moment that started our digital transformation is the one in which we bought our CRM solution» (case N).

Similarly:

«The CRM was already present in our e-commerce systems: in other words, I have an e-commerce system for B2B clients, and I would like to extend its logics to the B2C market: we are currently evaluating different solutions; for sure I will want to work with SAS solutions that integrate with our systems and thus grow from there in the future» (case A)

Where we found a commitment to further expand the digitisation of the firm starting from communication and moving to the back end of operations, we spotted a recurring pattern. First, the company pursues an upgrade in its communication online, especially to be more visible to final customers or B2B clients. Embarking in different digital communication initiatives, firms start a learning process that relates especially to the realisation of how digital tools produce data related to the interactions with customers and their effects. SMEs understand how to deploy these technologies in other functions and processes whenever this learning happens. The visibility of digital activities and the opportunity to measure their effectiveness seem to be the main factor legitimating these devices in small organisations and producing the escalation of commitment by entrepreneurs and managers.

External providers of services-consultants and agencies are pivotal in channelling the willingness to invest in digital technologies from communication to other activities. One respondent, a mid-sized firm in the milk sector, stated that

«Besides social media editorial planning agency, we do not have any other external consultants for digital transformation» (case B)

While this quote seems to suggest that firms depend strongly on external competences to upgrade their digital transition, it suggests a more nuanced proposition. It suggests that through the journey of upgrading their fluency in digital communication, firms might accumulate knowledge and skills that make them able to recognize that digital transformation requires other competences and diverse suppliers of services and skills.

The point was made clear by another respondent, that represents a variation on the point made earlier:

«We are also working on digital transformation. For that, we work with the agencies that are serving us in digital communication plus another one that guides us on Amazon, a sales channel that is performing extraordinarily well» (case E)

Using digital technologies in communication can represent for SMEs of this type a sort of experimentation that produces two types of outcomes:

i) awareness of the measurability of digitally enabled actions, a factor that legitimises novel devices that might have been conceived as difficult to be understood in the past; ii) a more fine-grained comprehension of the various competences needed to wire entire business models and processes with digital tools and strategies. First, SMEs we interview seem to suggest their ability to scope the market for services seeking differentiated skills in agencies and providers of services. Second, such fine-grained understanding can be accompanied by a similar ability to ponder the necessity to differentiate internal human resources and competences, as one firm in the milling industry effectively stated.

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«I am revolutionising the entire organisation of the firm [...]: E-commerce is multiplying the things that need to be taken care of and we cannot afford anymore to have the same people do the same things. We are pushing on digital transformation and thus we are aiming first to digitize our warehouse.» (case A)

5. Discussion

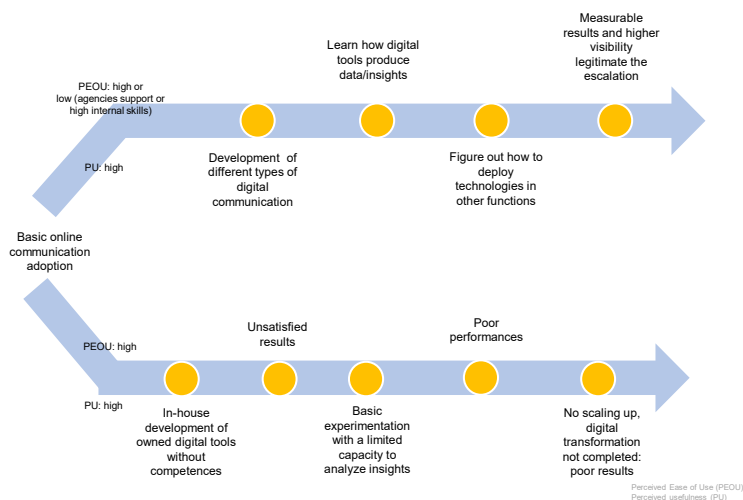
5.1 Theoretical contribution

Our study extends research on digital transformation, shedding light on the role of digital communication. When analysing the social media and digital communication activities, literature mainly refers to the way these tools help to diffuse information and/or reach a wide audience of potential customers (i.e. Kumar *et al.* 2016), instead of analysing how these tools can support consumers' and market knowledge. Just a few studies point to the interaction between digital communication and digital transformation given this bidirectional flow (Klewes, *et al.*, 2017); Meiers and Peters, 2023). As highlighted by Saura *et al.* (2023) digital communication tools such as mobile phones, QR codes, and websites help SMEs adapt their business models to the needs of customers and this is the first step of digitalization, in which marketing and communication sometimes overlap.

Our paper contributes to the theory in three ways. First, this research explores how perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use impact digital technology adoption and escalation, discovering that they do not always impact positively. Second, we could identify different paths based on the dynamic role of these attitudes: how they interact with each other determines the adoption of a higher level of digital transformation. We depict how companies move from a simple digital communication approach to the broader concept of digital transformation, conceived as a process that, thanks to the use of technology, improves the performance of an organization and every aspect of business, in particular the marketing area (Caliskan *et al.*, 2020). Finally, by merging the theory of acceptance models (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003) and the Do-It-Yourself theory (Wolf and McQuitty 2013), we identified the role of the agencies in supporting the path toward digital transformation.

Contrary to the original model and other studies on SMEs (Rokhim *et al.*, 2018), our findings suggest that a high level of perceived ease of use can be negative in exploiting the benefit of technologies initially adopted for communication, slowing down the upgrading. Perceived ease of use leads companies to manage the communication function in-house, but in these cases, results are often poor because of the lack of necessary skills inside the firm. The consequence is a reduced perceived usefulness and a tendency to maintain the status quo, without reaching a more mature level of digital communication (Effing and Spil, 2016; Checchinato *et al.* 2024) or moving on digital transformation (Figure 1) that could reshape their business model. This is consistent with the theory of smallness (Anderson and Ullah, 2014): owners' attitudes and reluctance to grow (Davidsson, 1989) combined with limited finance and managerial expertise (Tocher and Rutherford 2009) limits growth opportunities.

Fig. 1: Proposed main paths



Source: created by authors

Our findings confirm that, in a trial or initial phase (Tuten and Solomon, 2017; Effing and Spil 2016), a firm might experiment with social media without finding them complex to manage: their “consumer” nature and their apparent ease of use might produce a sensation of easiness. Instead, up-to-date and mature exploitation of social media is far from being elementary. The absence of skills in digital communication can bring a user to overlook the more sophisticated aspects of their use and produce a double negative effect: a perception of easiness and a perception of uselessness. This, in turn, might project a sense of uselessness on all categories of digital tools for communication or on digital tools at large (Lacka and Chong, 2016).

The role of agencies can significantly influence the direction of SMEs’ digital transformation, both supporting them with low perceived ease

of use and when managers' or owners' motivations and visions require sophisticated approaches from the beginning. When companies recognize an agency's ability to operate effectively in a specific industry, such as the food market, and appreciate the positive outcomes of the agency's activities, they start trusting the agency. This trust allows agencies to co-create growth. Agencies not only provide the necessary expertise when they lack it, but they also help companies enhance their performance. Agencies leverage the knowledge gained from working with various clients to support other firms effectively (Aronson and Liang, 2005). Prior knowledge and the ability to recognise its value are important antecedents of absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) and since they are cumulative, agencies must be recognized as valuable.

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5.2 Managerial implications

Our findings provide SMEs' managers, owners, and marketing practitioners in firms and agencies, with valuable guidance recommending attention to potential biases that could reduce the success of digital communication strategies and digital transformation paths. Thus, we can advance some indications that could inform the actions and decisions of individuals guiding or supporting SMEs in the industry.

First, managers and entrepreneurs should define how to embrace digital technologies in their communication strategies. If they aim at surviving in the current market landscape, SMEs are required to intervene on their organizations' cultures to avoid the fear of innovation and loss of control. We highlight the importance of balancing internal development with targeted external support. While many SMEs lack the resources and/or skills to fully internalize complex digital functions, relying solely on external partners/agencies can create misalignment with company values. They should match external support and advice with an internal development and internal competences and responsibilities, to compensate for the lack of flexible approaches: typically, digital natives within the organization and in supporting agencies might compensate for the lagging of agrifood SMEs. Thus, inclusion of younger generations in the decision-making process could bring new perspectives and skills in the management decisions. We see in cross-generational collaboration, especially by empowering digital natives within the organization, a way to bridge the gap between tradition and innovation.

Second, our results suggest that starting with small and controlled experiments in the communication activities could help SMEs become acquainted with the specificities of technologies and their marketing uses, to test their limitations and their potential applications. Communication and marketing can serve as crucial gateways for digital transformation, making these functions more important than ever before. Continuing to understaff these areas can have a detrimental impact on the company's long-term strategy-not only in terms of image and narrative, but also because they represent a testing ground for broader transformation initiatives. On the contrary, prior experience can shape how external knowledge is absorbed and applied, compensating SMEs limited absorptive capacity.

Finally, our considerations on how technology changes or can change communication management are similar to what Quinn *et al.* (2016, p. 2125) revealed on marketing transformation: “It is not technology per se that is changing how marketing activities are conducted but how, where and by whom these activities are being carried out”. Our findings can help agencies to better define their role in the market, especially when they support SMEs. Because of the technicalities and the always-on requirements by the new media, an entire service industry has been transformed (Ritz *et al.* 2019), agencies should help SMEs not only to apply the new rule of communication but to incorporate digital tools and processes in the entire company’s strategy. Agencies should play a more embedded role as long-terms partners who can support the integration of digital tools across different departments.

6. Conclusions, limitations and future research

Combining TAM and DIY we analysed the interviews with key informants (14 SMEs) and 4 practitioners to understand how communication might influence digital marketing and the adoption of digital tools along the whole value chain. Our data show that the agrifood industry has passed through an accelerated wave of digitalisation during the heights of the Covid-19 crisis. We identified how the perception of usefulness and ease of use of digital tools interact in the process of companies’ digital transformation. An interesting insight is about the willingness to develop and change when high levels of usefulness are identified as they can lead SMEs (especially in the case of family businesses) to overcome their reluctance to engage in technological collaboration with external partners. External actors can provide learning and enriching experience able to unlock different growth paths.

When time, resources, and competencies lack, the process of self-learning is not the only possible path. Sometimes, the strong technical background of entrepreneurs leads companies to internally focus on product strategies and to be open to collaborations with external actors to manage relationships with customers. On one hand, agencies can help companies introduce new professional specialisations such as search engine optimization (SEO), social media management systems, CRM and so on. Although access to digital marketing media is free and open, an entire service industry has emerged where specialized professionals can perform these activities for other businesses.

Our research suffers from some limitations that open avenues for further research directions. The research primarily focuses on Italian agrifood companies, which might limit the generalizability of the findings. To address this limitation, future research should expand the sample to include a more diverse array of companies. The sample should include companies of different industries but also investigate diverse cultural settings to shed light on how cultural factors might influence digital transformation of SMEs. Indeed, this specificity prompts questions about the wider applicability of our findings beyond Italian SMEs.

We can also identify an opportunity for a longitudinal study, providing a nuanced and profound understanding on the transformation process over time. From a theoretical point of view, TAM and DIY may not capture the full complexity of organizational change, especially in SMEs where informal decision-making, emotional factors, or family dynamics can play a significant role. As a result, integrating organizational learning theories, or dynamic capabilities might provide a more holistic understanding of digital transformation processes.

Finally, as we adopted a qualitative approach, future studies could employ mixed methods or quantitative research methods to test our model and compare our results in the firms with different levels of digital maturity and different levels of digital transformation adaptation (digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation).

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