

**A critical analysis of Digital Transformation Strategies on  
B2B Marketing for China's Export Apparel SMEs: A Way  
to Integrating Digital Resources, Strengthening Competitive  
Advantages and Enhancing Operational Efficiency**

LCDB7007 Research Principles and Philosophy

**Module Lead:** Dr Caroline Jawad

Submitted by: Jubin Luo

January 27, 2025

## **Summary**

This report critically examines the digital transformation strategies on B2B marketing for apparel export SMEs in China. It evaluates existing theories on technological integration, focusing on what/how digital resources and tools influence customer engagement, brand positioning, competitive advantage, and operational efficiency. Using a qualitative methodology with case studies and interviews, the study develops theoretical models contextualizing success factors for B2B digital marketing specific to China's export apparel SMEs.

The existing studies of digital transformation from a B2B marketing perspective and China's apparel export SMEs sector are limited and remain fragmented. The analysis highlights the unique cultural, regulatory, and technological landscape in China, challenging the universal applicability of existing digitalization frameworks. It identifies gaps in understanding the impact of digital transformation on B2B marketing functions. The study proposes an explanatory framework integrating digital transformation with B2B marketing principles, addressing digital resources, tools and technology adoption.

In summary, the report critiques current paradigms, identifies knowledge gaps, and offers a tailored research foundation to enhance the B2B digital marketing capabilities of China's export apparel SMEs.

**Keywords:** Digital Transformation, SMEs, Digitalization, B2B, Digital marketing,

## Table of Contents

|                                                |    |
|------------------------------------------------|----|
| Abbreviation .....                             | 4  |
| 1 Introduction .....                           | 5  |
| 1.1 Background .....                           | 5  |
| 1.2 Research problem .....                     | 7  |
| 1.3 Research objectives .....                  | 8  |
| 1.4 Research question .....                    | 9  |
| 2 Literature Review .....                      | 9  |
| 3 Theoretical Framework .....                  | 14 |
| 4 Conceptual Framework .....                   | 15 |
| 5 Research Paradigm .....                      | 17 |
| 5.1 Paradigm .....                             | 17 |
| 5.2 Four Philosophical Assumptions .....       | 19 |
| 6 Research Methodology .....                   | 21 |
| 6.1 Qualitative Research .....                 | 21 |
| 6.2 Five Qualitative Research Approaches ..... | 22 |
| 7 Ethical Consideration .....                  | 25 |
| 8 Reliability and Validity .....               | 28 |
| 8.1 Reliability .....                          | 28 |
| 8.2 Validity .....                             | 29 |
| 9 Conclusion .....                             | 29 |
| 9.1 Theoretical contribution .....             | 29 |
| 9.2 Business Practical Contribution .....      | 30 |
| 9.3 Limitations .....                          | 31 |
| 10 Bibliography .....                          | 31 |

## **Abbreviation**

Digital Transformation (DT)

Business-to-Business (B2B)

Business-to-Customer (B2C)

Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

Digital Marketing (DM)

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Digital supply chain (DSC)

Sustainable development (SD)

Machine learning (ML)

Natural language processing (NLP)

Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE)

Resource-Based View (RBV)

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT)

Network Theory (NT)

Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs)

Return on Investment (ROI)

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Background**

### **Digital transformation(DT) in Small, and Medium Enterprises(SMEs)**

DT have caught much attention of both academics and practitioners. The increasing adoption of DT is reshaping industries worldwide, with significant implications for marketing strategies. It integrates digital technology across business areas, reshaping processes, products, management concepts and customer relationships. It emphasizes the dual role of technology in driving innovation and optimizing operations (Matt et al., 2015). DT encompasses the adoption of digital tools and technologies—such as data analytics, social media platforms, and e-commerce—that not only facilitate operational efficiency but also drive customer satisfaction and loyalty through enhanced personalization and engagement.

As highlighted by Ren et al. (2022), policy support under China's 14th Five-Year Plan encourages enterprises to adopt digital tools to achieve modernization and enhance competitiveness. The platforms like Douyin, Taobao, JD, Xiaohongshu (Little Rednote), WeChat and others play a significant role in reaching and engaging domestic customers, offering personalized shopping experiences and direct engagement with consumers (Xiao J. 2024). The rise of livestreaming has further revolutionized online marketing, enabling real-time interactions and sales generation (Mao J. 2024). While large enterprises successfully leverage digital platforms, SMEs face significant barriers in adopting and utilizing digital marketing tools effectively (Deloitte Digital Transformation Survey, 2023).

China's apparel SMEs face significant challenges in digital adoption despite China's position as the world's largest e-commerce market (UNCTAD, 2021). McKinsey's "China Digital Consumer Trends 2021" report indicates that while digital retail sales reached \$1.7 trillion in 2020, many smaller apparel manufacturers struggle with digital marketing implementation. Despite China's apparel sector generating \$494.23 billion in revenue in 2023 (Statista, 2024), SMEs continue to face significant challenges in effectively implementing digital marketing strategies. Research by Sun et al. (2021) in the Journal of Business Research demonstrates that they face various

barriers, including resource constraints, technological complexity and limited expertise in leveraging advanced technologies so that result in difficulties in adopting and utilizing digital marketing tools effectively.

### **DT on digital B2B marketing in SMEs**

In a globalized and highly competitive market, where traditional B2B marketing models are increasingly being overshadowed by online platforms(Aagerup, U. et al., 2022; Hofacker, C. et al., 2020).China's apparel SMEs are at the forefront of this transformation due to the dual pressures of globalization market competition. According to the data from China National Bureau of Statistics,China's garment wholesale export annual volume was respectively CNY 299.38,334.47,313.18,276.59 The volume of 2023 decreased by 10.49% and 4.40% comparing to 2022 and 2021.With the trade tensions that led to increased tariffs on Chinese goods and diminishing competitive advantage of low-cost labor in China, many apparel buyers shift orders to the cheaper countries such as Vietnam, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India. Many China's large apparel corporations opened factories in above mentioned low-cost labor countries and established branches in the target customer's countries to tackle the labor cost problem,trade tension or barriers and competition, but for China's apparel export Small, and Medium Enterprises (SMEs),they lack sufficient funding and manpower to meet these challenges, so that they are facing significant challenges and dilemma of survival,sustaining their growth and competitiveness(Yi Huang et al.2021).

Global digital transformation on B2B marketing is evolving rapidly, driven by emerging technologies, shifting buyer expectations, and the need for greater efficiency and personalization(Aagerup, U. et al., 2022; Hofacker, C. et al., 2020). Businesses are increasingly leveraging digital tools to enhance engagement, streamline operations, and build more resilient and agile marketing strategies.The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the global business landscape, offering both opportunities and challenges for SMEs in the apparel sector. DT offers apparel SMEs the opportunity to broaden their reach and create more

dynamic customer experiences(Birkel, H.&Wehrle, M. 2022). B2B E-commerce Platforms (e.g., Alibaba, Amazon Business, Global Sources) and social media(Linkedin,Facebook,Instagram,etc.) facilitate SMEs cross-border trade and expand their global reach while maintaining cost efficiency(Zhao, Y., & Li, S. 2020) . While data-driven customer insights foster better decision-making and customer retention strategies,these technologies allow enterprises to engage stakeholders, optimize resource allocation, and deliver personalized customer experiences. It enhances customer relationship management, supply chain operations and sustain value in the digital era(Tiziana et al., 2021). This dependence is particularly significant in China, where a vast online ecosystem and a tech-savvy consumer base create unique opportunities for businesses to leverage digital transformation strategies effectively(Tiziana R.& Francesco B.2021)

## **1.2 Research problem**

China's apparel exporting SMEs face challenges in strategically adopting digital transformation due to internal limitations and evolving international trade dynamics.They are under growing pressure to implement digital B2B marketing strategies to stay competitive in the rapidly changing international marketing landscape.

China's apparel export SMEs require urgently cost-effective, adaptable strategies to navigate digital transformation on B2B marketing within China's unique cultural, regulatory, and technological landscape.The digital platforms such as e-commerce and social media are essential to maintain relevance in global supply chains and address traditional marketing challenges like limited market reach, communication inefficiencies and high cost (Zhao et al., 2024).

Existing studies on digital transformation in B2B marketing are limited and fragmented. Most research tends to focus separately on either digital transformation, B2B marketing, or digital marketing, leaving a critical gap in understanding the intersection of international B2B digital marketing within the context of China's apparel export SMEs.There is a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the

effectiveness of current digital B2B marketing strategies, the challenges faced in their implementation, and the factors influencing their success.

This disconnect between the available digital capabilities and their practical implementation highlights a critical gap in understanding how China's apparel export SMEs implement and benefit from these strategies. The alignment of these strategies with international market demands remain under-explored. Addressing this gap is essential for developing tailored strategies that can enhance the global competitiveness of China's apparel export SMEs.

### **1.3 Research objectives**

This study aims to critically analyze the digital transformation strategies on B2B marketing employed by China's export apparel SMEs, identifying key challenges, success factors, and strategic recommendations to optimize their B2B marketing efforts in the digital era. The research objectives are as below:

Examine the key components of digital transformation strategies employed by China's export apparel SMEs, focusing on the current digital technology, tools, platforms, and B2B marketing practices utilized by these enterprises.

Evaluate the impact of digital transformation on B2B marketing performance by investigating its influence on customer engagement, brand awareness, and revenue growth among China's export apparel SMEs.

Explore the role of customer data and analytics in shaping B2B digital marketing strategies, analyzing how China's export apparel SMEs leverage data-driven decision-making to enhance personalization and marketing effectiveness.

Identify the challenges and barriers faced by China's export apparel SMEs during digital transformation, assessing technological, financial, and organizational hurdles that hinder the effective implementation of B2B digital marketing strategies.

Analyze the competitive advantages gained through digital transformation, highlighting how digital strategies enable China's export apparel SMEs to compete globally by improving market positioning and customer acquisition.

Provide actionable recommendations for improving digital transformation strategies in marketing, suggesting effective approaches, technologies, and practices to help China's export apparel SMEs optimize their digital marketing potential.

#### **1.4 Research question**

What are the key digital B2B marketing strategies for China's apparel export SMEs, and how to apply these strategies?

How do we incorporate technologies and tools (AI, cloud computing, blockchain, ML, Chatbot, etc.) and digital resources (big data, social media, e-commerce platforms and others) into B2B marketing for international growth?

What challenges hinder effective digital B2B marketing transformation?

What competitive advantages result from successful B2B digital marketing transformation?

What practical frameworks support successful digital transformation?

### **2 Literature Review**

This literature review explores four key theories and some recent studies that offer complementary perspectives for examining the impact of digital transformation on marketing in SMEs. It synthesizes findings from various studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject while identifying gaps that require further research.

#### **Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)**

Originally developed by Davis (1989), the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) explains how users adopt and accept new technologies based on two key factors: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. These factors shape users' attitudes toward technology, which in turn influence their behavioral intentions and actual usage.

Rathore and Goyal (2024) provide a comprehensive overview of TAM, highlighting its evolution as a valuable model for studying technology adoption and clarifying the relationship between the uptake of technological platforms and their acceptability. Pramanik and Jana (2025) extend the model by incorporating AI-specific factors, proposing necessary modifications to existing TAM frameworks to better understand the emergence of AI-enabled products and services, as well as technological opportunities (TO) and technology emergence (TE).

Li et al. (2021) applied TAM to investigate the adoption of cloud services and e-learning in Chinese business contexts, emphasizing customer satisfaction as a key determinant of adoption.

TAM remains highly relevant for explaining technology adoption at both individual and organizational levels. In the context of SMEs, the adoption of new digital marketing tools is often evaluated based on their perceived benefits and ease of integration. Adoption decisions are further influenced by internal capabilities and external pressures from business networks and stakeholders.

### **Dynamic Capabilities Theory(DCT)**

Developed by Teece et al. (1997), Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) focuses on an organization's ability to adapt and reconfigure its resources to gain a competitive advantage. This approach is particularly useful for examining how SMEs navigate the challenges of digital transformation in dynamic environments.

Kapoor and Aggarwal (2020) trace the evolution of DCT, linking it to foundational concepts in economics and strategic management. They propose a comprehensive research framework that integrates the core components of the theory: absorptive capacity, innovation capability, and adaptive capability.

Mishra and Kiran (2024) explore DCT's application in the digital era, emphasizing how firms can leverage their dynamic capabilities to respond to technological disruptions and evolving market demands. They argue that firms with strong dynamic capabilities are better positioned to sustain long-term competitive advantages.

In the context of Chinese apparel SMEs, DCT helps explain how businesses can continuously adapt their digital marketing strategies by sensing new opportunities,

seizing them through strategic resource allocation, and transforming their operations to stay competitive in the global market.

### **Resource-Based View (RBV)**

Barney's (1991) Resource-Based View (RBV) theory explores how a firm's internal resources and capabilities contribute to creating a sustainable competitive advantage. This foundational theory remains highly relevant in understanding how SMEs, particularly in resource-constrained environments, leverage digital resources to achieve marketing success. RBV emphasizes that firms can gain a competitive edge by effectively utilizing both tangible assets (e.g., technology infrastructure) and intangible assets (e.g., marketing expertise and brand equity).

Hayes and Maiti et al. (2020) introduce a resource-based linear programming model designed to optimize resources in small innovative enterprises (SIEs). Their conceptual model, grounded in the RBV and dynamic capabilities strategy, is particularly valuable for SIEs in the early stages of their lifecycle. A key contribution of their study is the development of a new resource-based model that helps these enterprises gain competitive advantages by efficiently managing their resources.

Malhotra et al. (2024) apply the RBV theory to various management practices, including marketing and strategy, demonstrating how firms can enhance profitability and develop a competitive mindset to navigate uncertain business challenges. Their study underscores the relevance of RBV in guiding firms toward strategic resource allocation and market positioning.

In the context of Chinese apparel SMEs, RBV provides a useful framework for analyzing how these businesses optimize their limited resources to implement effective digital marketing strategies and achieve sustainable growth in highly competitive markets.

### **Network Theory(NT)**

The Network Theory (NT) of digital marketing explores how businesses leverage interconnected digital platforms and relationships to achieve strategic goals. Teo et al. (2009) applied this framework to analyze technology adoption in Asian business

contexts, emphasizing the importance of inter-organizational connections in driving digital initiatives.

Reibiger (2011) extends network theory within the framework of set theory, conceptualizing networks and related structures as set-theoretical objects. This approach uses ordered pairs, ordered triples, and similar constructs to represent network relationships, with specific axioms distinguishing them from other mathematical structures.

NT underscores the critical role of external relationships and business networks in facilitating digital transformation and market expansion. SMEs, in particular, rely on both domestic and international business networks for knowledge-sharing, strategic partnerships, and market access. Additionally, their relationships with technology providers play a key role in driving further digital transformation efforts by offering technical expertise, support, and innovative solutions.

### **Some recent studies on digital transformation strategies on marketing in SMEs**

Tajudeen et al. (2025) explore the importance of digital transformation for Malaysian SMEs, emphasizing key components and contextual challenges. The study identifies major obstacles such as financial constraints, inadequate IT infrastructure, and a shortage of technical expertise, which hinder the effective adoption and management of new technologies. Additionally, the research highlights a significant digital skills gap that further complicates the efficient utilization of technology. Concerns about cybersecurity and other barriers to digital transformation are also discussed. The study offers practical solutions to help Malaysian SMEs overcome these challenges and successfully navigate their digital transformation journey.

Elsa et al. (2025) provide a comprehensive review of the global evolution of digital transformation research in SMEs, offering insights into future research directions. Their study employs bibliometric and content analysis methods to analyze existing literature, identifying critical areas for further exploration and development in the field.

In the post-pandemic era, SMEs have struggled to maintain business relationships and address a lack of technical expertise, driving them to adopt technology and implement

innovative, sustainable marketing strategies(Jibril et al., 2024). These efforts have also led to improvements in hygiene practices within SMEs .

Bargoni et al. (2024) emphasize that digitalization serves as a vital strategy for SMEs, enabling them to build new strategic capabilities and support their internationalization efforts. Through e-commerce, SMEs can compete more effectively with multinational corporations while minimizing operational challenges and expanding their market reach.

### **Global digital transformation on B2B marketing trends**

By leveraging AI, automation, data-driven insights, and e-commerce platforms,SMEs will be better positioned to enhance efficiency, improve customer engagement, and drive sustainable growth in the evolving digital landscape(Aagerup, U. et al., 2022; Hofacker, C. et al., 2020).

In technological advancements area,AI-driven automation enhances lead generation, customer segmentation, and predictive analytics to anticipate buyer needs and personalize interactions.Chatbots and virtual assistants provide real-time support, improving engagement in global markets.AI-powered content creation optimizes messaging based on audience behavior and preferences.Data-driven decision-making enables hyper-personalization, helping businesses understand customer journeys and buying patterns.Predictive analytics optimize marketing campaigns and resource allocation, leading to better ROI(Chatterjee, S.et al.2022).Blockchain technology ensures secure, transparent, and tamper-proof transactions, fostering trust between international B2B partners.Smart contracts automate complex agreements and payment processes, reducing friction in global trade.Supply chain tracking powered by blockchain improves product authenticity and regulatory compliance(Aagerup, U. et al., 2022; Hofacker, C. et al., 2020).

In market and consumer-driven area,digital marketplaces (e.g., Alibaba, Amazon Business, Global Sources) are transforming the way B2B companies reach international customers.Self-service purchasing models are gaining traction, reducing reliance on traditional sales channels.Cross-border trade is becoming more accessible through digital payment solutions and logistics integration.Decision-making processes

are becoming more data-driven, with buyers conducting extensive online research before engaging with suppliers. Transparency, sustainability, and ethical sourcing have become key purchasing criteria for modern B2B buyers (Hayes, O. et al. 2025 ).

In emerging digital tools and resources area, platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter, and WeChat are becoming essential for lead generation, thought leadership, and brand positioning. Video marketing (e.g., webinars, live demos) is increasingly being used to educate and engage B2B buyers. Influencer marketing in B2B sectors is emerging as a strategy to build trust and credibility. AI-powered content recommendations help businesses tailor their messaging based on user behavior and preferences (Andersson, S. et al. 2024).

### **3 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework provides researchers with a shared worldview or lens through which they can interpret, analyze, and investigate a research problem (Maxwell, 2005; Creswell, 2013; Osanloo & Grant, 2016). It profoundly influences the entire research process, shaping every aspect of the study. It helps researchers justify the rationale for their study, select appropriate methods, formulate relevant research questions, refine research objectives, and anticipate potential threats to validity (Imenda, 2014).

Digital transformation in Chinese SMEs, particularly in the context of B2B digital marketing, is a multifaceted process that involves technological adoption, organizational adaptation, and strategic collaboration. To comprehensively explain this transformation, this study propose a theoretical framework for digital transformation in China's apparel export SMEs by integrating TAM, DTY and NT. Key intersections :

TAM & DCT: Understanding how perceived ease of use and usefulness influence the development of organizational capabilities for digital transformation.

DCT & NT: Exploring how firms leverage external networks to enhance their digital capabilities and respond to market changes.

NT & TAM: Investigating how network influence affects perceptions of technology usefulness and adoption decisions.

By integrating TAM, DCT, and NT, this framework provides a robust foundation for understanding digital B2B marketing transformation and offers actionable insights for both short-term technology adoption and long-term capability development, and recognizes the importance of guanxi and hierarchical decision-making in shaping transformation strategies in China's apparel export SMEs. It highlights that successful transformation requires not only the adoption of digital tools but also the development of dynamic capabilities and strategic networking efforts.

#### 4 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is a crucial part of research design, encompassing theories, concepts, and hypotheses that guide the study. It helps refine objectives, formulate relevant questions, select methods, and adjust research needs (Maxwell, 2013). Its purpose is to organize and explain study-related concepts and their interrelationships. This study's framework is based on previous literature, showing connections between various phenomena .

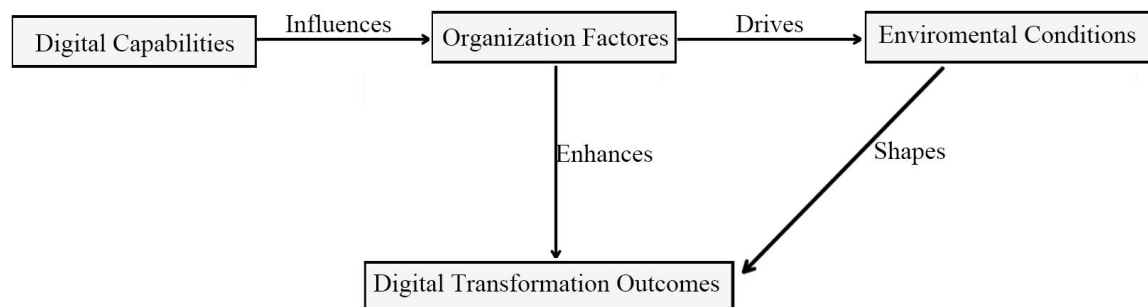


**Fig1: Conceptual Framework of Digital Marketing for China's Apparel Export SMEs**

This revised framework integrates digital capabilities, organizational factors, and environmental conditions to comprehensively explain the digital transformation of B2B marketing in Chinese SMEs. It builds upon the theoretical foundations of the TAM, DCT and NT, demonstrating how these components interact to influence transformation outcomes.

#### **Digital Capabilities (Rooted in Dynamic Capabilities Theory)**

The firm's ability to effectively deploy and leverage digital tools to enhance marketing performance.

Key elements include:

Technological Capabilities: AI, big data analytics, cloud computing, blockchain, and machine learning.

Process Capabilities: Integration of digital tools into business workflows.

Innovation Capabilities: Ability to experiment and adapt to digital market trends.

### **Organizational Factors (Influenced by TAM and DCT)**

Internal elements that shape the firm's readiness and ability to undergo digital transformation.

Key elements include:

Leadership Support & Vision: Commitment to digital initiatives from top management.

Employee Digital Literacy: Skills and willingness to adopt digital solutions.

Organizational Culture: Openness to change and innovation.

Resource Availability: Financial and technological investment capacity.

### **Environmental Conditions (Rooted in Network Theory and External Market Pressures)**

External forces that influence digital transformation efforts.

Key elements include:

Market Demand: Customer expectations for digital engagement.

Competitive Pressure: Digital strategies adopted by competitors.

Regulatory Environment: Government policies and regulations that impact digital adoption.

Business Networks: Influence of industry partners, suppliers, and digital ecosystems (e.g., Alibaba, B2B platforms).

### **Digital Transformation Outcomes**

The expected benefits and measurable results of successful digital transformation.

Key elements include:

Market Expansion: Increased access to international markets through e-commerce.

Operational Efficiency: Streamlined processes and reduced costs.

Customer Engagement: Enhanced relationships through personalized digital experiences.

By demonstrating how these elements interact and influence transformation outcomes, the framework provides a useful guide for businesses, policymakers, and researchers aiming to drive sustainable digital growth in the Chinese market.

## **5 Research Paradigm**

### **5.1 Paradigm**

Thomas Kuhn (1970) described a paradigm as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community” (p.175). A research paradigm reflects the philosophical framework guiding a study, encompassing ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Creswell, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). Understanding paradigms is crucial for identifying research assumptions, constructing meaningful questions, and designing appropriate methodologies (Creswell, 2013; Given, 2008). Kuhn (1970) emphasized paradigms as essential for “normal science,” forming a shared worldview among scientists. Guba and Lincoln (1994) outlined four key paradigms in qualitative research—positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism—while Lincoln et al. (2018) introduced the participatory paradigm, reflecting diverse ontological and epistemological interests.

The interpretive paradigm emphasizes understanding the world from individuals’ perspectives, exploring deep meanings behind organizational events through immersive observation (Saunders et al., 2019). It focuses on personal experiences and internal dynamics, offering insights into power structures and organizational politics while prioritizing understanding over intervention.

Interpretivism is particularly well-suited for understanding digital transformation in Chinese SMEs because it allows for a deep, context-rich exploration of the complex and dynamic factors influencing this process. Unlike positivist approaches that seek

objective, quantifiable data, interpretivism focuses on subjective experiences, meanings, and cultural contexts, making it ideal for studying the nuanced realities of Chinese SMEs.

China's unique business environment is deeply influenced by cultural elements such as *guanxi* (relationship-building), collectivism, and hierarchical structures. Interpretivism enables researchers to explore how these cultural factors shape decision-making and the adoption of digital technologies in SMEs. It provides insights into how traditional business practices intersect with modern digital tools, uncovering underlying motivations and resistance to change.

Digital transformation in SMEs is not just about adopting technology; it involves shifts in leadership styles, employee mindsets, and internal processes. An interpretivist approach helps capture these evolving organizational dynamics through qualitative methods like interviews and case studies. It allows for an in-depth understanding of how SMEs perceive and respond to digital trends, providing a richer picture of their transformation journey.

The digital landscape is constantly evolving, and SMEs must adapt to market demands, regulatory changes, and technological advancements. Interpretivism offers the flexibility to study these changes in context, adapting research to emerging themes and challenges. This approach acknowledges the subjective nature of business decisions, emphasizing the role of human interpretation in shaping digital strategies.

Digital transformation involves various stakeholders, including business owners, employees, customers, and external partners. Interpretivism facilitates a holistic view by capturing diverse perspectives and understanding how different stakeholders interpret and engage with digital initiatives. It helps identify potential misalignments between management goals and employee perceptions, which are critical for successful implementation.

By focusing on lived experiences and real-world challenges, interpretivism provides actionable insights that can guide tailored digital transformation strategies for SMEs. It helps uncover barriers such as technological apprehension, financial constraints, and knowledge gaps that might not be apparent through purely quantitative methods.

So that, interpretivism enables a holistic, context-sensitive understanding of the cultural, organizational, and social factors influencing their digital journey and provides valuable insights that can inform more effective, culturally appropriate strategies for digital adoption and growth.

## 5.2 Four Philosophical Assumptions

Qualitative research is guided by four philosophical assumptions: ontology (what's real), epistemology (how to get knowledge and facts), axiology (the values in research), and methodology (the process of research), which form the foundational framework and assist scientists in distinguishing and implementing various research paradigms and methods. (Creswell, 2013).



Fig2: Paradigm blocks of “Research Building” (Brown & Dueñas, 2020)

**Axiology** plays a crucial role in shaping the direction and ethical considerations of scientific research. It is a fundamental aspect of research philosophy, focusing on values, ethics, and value judgments that influence the research process (Saunders et al., 2019). Axiology affects the selection of research questions, methodologies, and data analysis approaches, while also acknowledging how both researchers’ and

participants' values impact the study. This underscores the importance of methodological rigor and ethical responsibility in research design and execution (Saunders et al., 2019).

Different research paradigms embody distinct axiological perspectives. Pragmatism, which blends objective and subjective viewpoints, is particularly relevant in qualitative research, where an inductive, constructionist, and interpretive approach is emphasized (Bryman et al., 2019; Creswell, 2013).

**Ontology**, as a foundational philosophical concept, examines the nature of reality and existence, providing a framework for understanding the structure of the world and individuals' roles within it (Crotty, 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). Ontological perspectives often rely on assumptions, as the ultimate truth of reality remains elusive (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Various ontological positions are associated with different paradigms. Scientific realism asserts that an objective reality exists independently of human perception, while critical realism acknowledges the existence of a real world but recognizes the limitations of human cognition in fully comprehending it (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In contrast, nominalism argues that reality is constructed through language and concepts, denying an objective external world. Objectivist ontology views reality as independent of human influence, whereas constructionist ontology posits that reality is continuously shaped by human interactions and perceptions (Bryman et al., 2019).

**Epistemology**, another key philosophical consideration, explores the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge. It provides the foundation for understanding how knowledge is acquired and validated within different research paradigms.

**Methodology** is the plan and guiding principle of research, referring to a set of assumptions, rules, and methods followed by researchers. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Shiping Tang (2011) pointed out that the real world may never be fully understood, but knowledge can be acquired through various research methods. Methodology not only guides researchers on how to understand rules and methods but also involves how to choose and apply the method depending on the view of the nature of the research subject and epistemology (Bryman et al., 2019). How to obtain reliable

knowledge dependent on researchers' views on authenticity and objectivity, as well as the nature and objectives of the research, that different research methods can be chosen (Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y.S., 1994).

## **6 Research Methodology**

The selection of a research methodology is influenced by the underlying paradigm that frames the study's approach and strategy. Methodology defines the researcher's approach to generating knowledge and outlines how different paradigms guide the research process (Creswell, 2013). Generally, research methodologies are classified into three broad categories: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches.

### **6.1 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research seeks to achieve a deep understanding of complex phenomena through observation and interpretation. Moving beyond traditional paradigms like positivism, it incorporates interpretive frameworks such as feminism, critical race theory, and cultural studies to examine the social and cultural contexts influencing human behavior and organizational dynamics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Social science researchers employ strategies such as case studies, ethnography, and phenomenology, using methods like storytelling, observation, and in-depth interviews to explore intricate human behaviors and social phenomena. This approach is particularly effective in studying digital transformation, where context, perception, and lived experiences are central.

By combining inductive and deductive analysis, qualitative research identifies complex patterns and themes while offering detailed descriptions and interpretations. It is particularly valuable for exploring areas with limited prior knowledge, such as the challenges and strategies of digital transformation in China's apparel export SMEs (Creswell, 2013).

In studying digital transformation strategies in SMEs, qualitative methods like interviews and case studies examine dimensions such as technological adoption,

cultural shifts, and organizational challenges. Researchers reflect on their own biases to ensure richer, unbiased insights into issues like stakeholder experiences and the adoption of big data, cloud computing, and digital platforms.

## **6.2 Five Qualitative Research Approaches**

Five widely recognized approaches in qualitative research include grounded theory, case study, phenomenology, ethnography, and narrative research (Creswell, 2007). This research adopts interviews and case studies as the primary methodological approach to critically explore and analyze the research question regarding digital transformation strategies for marketing in China's apparel export SMEs.

### **6.2.1 the case study**

A case study involves an in-depth analysis of activities, processes, or events within a specific context, focusing on individuals or organizations. Researchers identify the event's time and place and use multiple methods—such as interviews, observations, and document analysis—to gather rich, detailed data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon .

Case studies typically explore a small number of cases in depth, making them ideal for answering “how” and “why” questions. By examining real-world phenomena in their natural context and triangulating data from diverse sources, case studies provide holistic insights and can reveal patterns or unique variations through comparative analysis .

This method is particularly suited for studying digital transformation in China's apparel export SMEs, enabling detailed exploration of strategies, challenges, and outcomes within their real-world settings. Strategically selected cases can capture diversity in company size, industry sub-sectors, and digital maturity. Data collection from organizational documents, stakeholder interviews, observations, and digital artifacts ensures nuanced insights, with triangulation enhancing validity.

Case studies also highlight the interplay between internal factors (e.g., culture, resources) and external factors (e.g., market conditions, regulations) affecting SMEs' digital transformation. This contextual focus provides a deeper understanding of key drivers, barriers, and strategies contributing to competitive advantage.

### **6.2.2 Narrative Research**

Narrative research involves participants sharing stories about their lives, which researchers then organize into a coherent, chronological narrative. These narratives often combine participants' lived experiences with researchers' observations, creating a collaborative story. This method provides valuable insights into individual experiences and their cultural and contextual significance.

Digital transformation in marketing is a multifaceted process that involves integrating technological, organizational, and environmental factors. Addressing these dimensions demands a systematic and comprehensive approach. While narrative research has its merits, its methods may not fully capture the depth, breadth, and systemic intricacies required for critically analyzing digital transformation strategies in marketing for China apparel SMEs.

### **6.2.3 Phenomenology**

Phenomenology, on the other hand, focuses on exploring individuals' lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon. This approach seeks to uncover the essence of shared experiences by analyzing participants' descriptions, often using in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method (Creswell, 2007).

While phenomenology offers a rich understanding of individual experiences, its methods are less suited to addressing the complexities and practical requirements of digital transformation strategies in marketing for China apparel SMEs. More structured and systemic approaches, such as case studies or grounded theory, are

better equipped to explore the technological, organizational, and competitive dynamics involved in digital transformation, aligning with the goals of this research.

#### **6.2.4 Ethnography**

The ethnographic research method involves the prolonged observation of an entire cultural group in their natural environment to gain an in-depth understanding of shared patterns of behavior, language, and social interactions. Data is primarily collected through detailed observations and interviews, allowing researchers to explore the cultural dynamics and social structures that shape the group's daily life (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell, 2007).

While ethnography holds unique value in uncovering deep cultural and social dynamics, ethnographic research often requires researchers to spend extended periods immersed within specific communities or organizations, observing and interacting to gain nuanced cultural insights. This depth of engagement is resource-intensive and time-consuming, which may not align with the practical needs and time constraints of

Thus, while ethnographic research offers profound cultural insights, it may not adequately address the complexity and scope of digital transformation strategies on marketing for China apparel SMEs.

#### **6.2.5 Grounded theory**

Grounded theory is a sociological research approach in which researchers develop a general, abstract theory about a process, action, or interaction based on participants' perspectives and experiences. This method involves iterative stages of data collection and analysis, enabling the continuous refinement and interconnection of categories of information to better understand and explain the phenomenon under investigation.

Grounded theory is inherently resource-intensive and time-consuming, requiring a substantial investment of effort and time for data collection, coding, and analysis. For SMEs with limited resources and stringent time constraints, such an approach may

exceed practical limits, making it less feasible for studying digital transformation strategies. While grounded theory is a robust methodology for exploring novel concepts and gaining deep insights, it is less suitable for addressing the practical, time-sensitive, and generalizable needs of SMEs undergoing digital transformation. Alternative methods with a more pragmatic and outcome-oriented focus are better suited to achieving the research aims in this context.

## **7 Ethical Consideration**

Research ethics encompasses a set of principles and standards that researchers must follow to ensure the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants are respected and protected throughout the research process (Creswell, 2014). Ethical research requires researchers to uphold key responsibilities, including securing voluntary participation, preventing harm to participants, safeguarding their identities, providing clear and sufficient information, and maintaining honesty and transparency in data collection, analysis, and reporting. Additionally, ethical research necessitates critical self-reflection, requiring researchers to acknowledge their own privileges and biases, respect participants' perspectives, and internalize ethical principles in all aspects of their work. Adhering to these ethical standards is crucial for maintaining research integrity and credibility, preventing unethical practices such as data manipulation, and fostering trust within the academic community.

Conducting research on digital transformation in China's apparel export SMEs presents unique ethical challenges that require careful attention to cultural, regulatory, and business-specific sensitivities. Given China's distinct business environment, it is essential to adopt research practices that respect cultural norms, ensure data security, and uphold the integrity of business relationships. This section outlines key ethical considerations and concrete strategies for addressing these challenges while maintaining research integrity.

## **Protection of Commercially Sensitive Information**

Digital transformation in B2B marketing involves the collection and analysis of confidential business data, such as customer lists, pricing strategies, supply chain logistics, and proprietary technologies. Given the competitive nature of China's apparel export industry, safeguarding commercially sensitive information is critical to maintaining trust and compliance with local regulations.

Clearly communicate to participants how their data will be used, stored, and protected. Obtain written consent with detailed assurances regarding confidentiality. Remove or obscure identifying details from research findings to protect sensitive business insights from competitors. Utilize encrypted storage solutions and restrict data access to authorized personnel only. Comply with China's Cybersecurity Law and relevant data protection regulations (e.g., the Personal Information Protection Law, PIPL). Where necessary, sign NDAs with participating firms to provide additional assurances of data confidentiality.

## **Managing Cultural Expectations Around Hierarchy and Guanxi**

In Chinese business culture, relationships (guanxi) and hierarchical structures play a significant role in decision-making and interactions. Researchers must navigate these cultural norms carefully to build trust and foster cooperation, avoiding actions that could be perceived as disrespectful or disruptive to business operations.

Ensure that communication is directed through appropriate channels, engaging with senior executives before reaching out to lower-level employees. Acknowledge the authority of key decision-makers and adhere to formal business protocols. Take time to cultivate relationships through trust-building activities, such as face-to-face meetings, reciprocal exchanges, and mutual introductions by trusted intermediaries. Demonstrate long-term commitment rather than a transactional approach. Structure interviews and focus groups to align with Chinese communication styles, emphasizing indirect and respectful dialogue rather than direct confrontation or criticism.

## **Addressing Face-Saving (Mianzi) Concerns**

The concept of face (mianzi) is deeply embedded in Chinese business culture, where maintaining a positive public image and avoiding embarrassment are crucial. Researchers must be sensitive to the potential impact of their inquiries on participants' reputations and professional standing. Reinforce that participation will not result in reputational damage or negative exposure. Present findings in a way that emphasizes strengths and opportunities rather than weaknesses. Frame questions in a way that allows respondents to discuss challenges without implying failure, focusing on opportunities for improvement and shared industry challenges. Allow participants to provide input anonymously to reduce the risk of self-censorship and encourage honest responses.

## **Regulatory Compliance and Ethical Approvals**

Research in China must comply with local laws and regulations governing data collection, business practices, and academic research. Adherence to both international ethical standards and local legal requirements is crucial to avoid legal complications and ensure the legitimacy of the study. Stay informed about Chinese regulations related to data privacy, trade secrets, and business operations, ensuring full compliance throughout the research process. Obtain ethical clearance from relevant academic or institutional review boards to validate research protocols. Work with local academic institutions or business associations to ensure that research methods align with legal and cultural expectations.

## **Transparency and Research Integrity**

Maintaining transparency and integrity in research is crucial to ensuring credibility and ethical responsibility. This involves accurately representing findings, avoiding conflicts of interest, and being honest about research limitations. Provide participants with a comprehensive overview of the study's goals, methodologies, and potential outcomes. Ensure that the research is conducted impartially and without influence

from commercial stakeholders. Present findings in an unbiased manner, acknowledging both successes and challenges faced by participating SMEs.

In conclusion, ethical research in the context of digital transformation for China's apparel export SMEs requires a nuanced understanding of cultural, regulatory, and business-specific considerations. By implementing robust data protection protocols, respecting cultural norms related to *guanxi* and hierarchy, and ensuring sensitivity to face-saving concerns, researchers can conduct their studies with integrity and foster long-term relationships within the Chinese business ecosystem.

## **8 Reliability and Validity**

In the context of research on digital transformation strategies for marketing in China's apparel SMEs, social scientists employ a range of tools and methods, such as surveys, experiments, and statistical data analysis, to observe and record participants' behaviors, perceptions, and opinions. These observations are converted into quantifiable data to identify patterns, formulate theories, and enhance the understanding of how digital transformation influences marketing and operational strategies (Bryman et al., 2019).

### **8.1 Reliability**

Reliability refers to ensuring the stability and consistency of research results. It assesses whether the findings of a study can be consistently replicated under similar conditions. A reliable research method and tool are essential for producing consistent results (Bryman et al., 2019).

To enhance the reliability and consistency of research processes and findings in the study of digital transformation strategies for marketing in China's apparel export SMEs, several measures can be employed: Ensuring consistent data collection procedures and uniform interview questions across all SME cases. Using standardized frameworks or codebooks for systematic data analysis to ensure consistency in coding

and interpretation. Cross-checking data interpretations between researchers to reduce subjective bias and enhance objectivity. Thoroughly documenting all research procedures to promote transparency and enable replication by future researchers.

By applying these measures, this research ensures the reliability of findings, providing robust insights into the digital transformation of marketing strategies in China's apparel export SMEs.

## **8.2 Validity**

Validity ensures that research findings accurately reflect the phenomena under investigation (Bryman et al., 2019). This study, which explores digital transformation strategies in marketing for China's apparel export SMEs, employs several approaches to enhance validity: First, key concepts—such as digital transformation strategies, marketing performance, and operational efficiency—are clearly defined and aligned with real-world SME practices to ensure precise measurement and analysis. Second, the study examines causal relationships between digital transformation strategies and key outcomes, including marketing performance, adaptability, and competitive advantage. The use of triangulation—drawing from interviews, documents, reports, and observations—further strengthens the reliability and depth of the findings. Finally, by incorporating diverse case studies that consider variations in SME size, regional distribution, and levels of digital maturity, the study enhances the applicability and generalizability of its findings to similar industries and contexts.

## **9 Conclusion**

### **9.1 Theoretical contribution**

This study makes significant theoretical contributions to the understanding of digital transformation strategies in the marketing domain, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Chinese apparel industry.

By examining the application of digital transformation strategies in the unique context of China's apparel SMEs, this research refines and extends existing theoretical models. It identifies key elements such as the integration of digital resources, the alignment of these resources with marketing goals, and their role in enhancing operational efficiency and competitive advantage.

The research introduces a comprehensive framework for analyzing digital transformation strategies that integrates marketing, operations, and competitive advantage. This framework can be adapted for use in other industries and regions, offering broader applicability while maintaining a focus on localized challenges and opportunities.

This research not only enhances theoretical models but also serves as a foundational reference for future studies exploring the interplay between digital transformation and marketing strategies in SMEs.

## **9.2 Business Practical Contribution**

This study offers several practical contributions to the business landscape of China's apparel export SMEs, providing actionable insights and strategies to guide digital transformation efforts in marketing.

The research provides a structured approach to integrating digital resources into marketing strategies, helping apparel SMEs optimize the use of digital tools such as e-commerce platforms, social media, and big data analytics. This contributes to the efficient allocation of resources, ensuring that businesses can achieve maximum impact with limited budgets.

By analyzing real-world cases, the study identifies specific digital transformation strategies that can enhance competitive advantages, such as improving brand visibility, streamlining supply chains, and delivering personalized customer experiences. This equips SMEs with practical techniques to differentiate themselves in a competitive market.

The study addresses common obstacles faced by apparel export SMEs during digital B2B marketing, such as limited technological expertise, resource constraints, and resistance to change. It provides practical solutions and recommendations, empowering businesses to navigate these challenges more effectively.

The research offers insights into how digital B2B marketing can enhance operational efficiency by integrating digital technology, tools and resource. This helps businesses reduce costs and improve productivity.

### **9.3 Limitations**

As both a business owner and a researcher exploring digital transformation in Chinese apparel SMEs (Berger, 2015: 219), my study is subject to several limitations. These include potential biases in data interpretation and participant responses resulting from my dual role (Bryman, 2021: 397). Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research presents sample size constraints, which are further compounded by the regional focus (Saunders et al., 2019: 297). Cultural and linguistic nuances may also pose challenges to accurate data interpretation (Silverman, 2020: 144). While my industry expertise offers valuable insights, it may inadvertently influence the analysis of digital transformation strategies (Bell et al., 2022: 189).

To address these challenges, I will implement mitigation strategies such as maintaining detailed reflexivity journals to systematically document potential biases (Mason, 2018: 228), conducting rigorous member checking in both Mandarin and English to enhance data accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 201), explicitly acknowledging my positionality as a researcher-practitioner (Tracy, 2020: 245), and triangulating findings through the analysis of organizational documentation where possible (Yin, 2018: 128).

## **10 Bibliography**

1. Christian Matt, Thomas H., Alexander B., 2015. Digital Transformation Strategies. Business & Information Systems Engineering. DOI: 10.1007/s12599-015-0401-5.
2. Ren R., CHEN H., 2022. Research on digital transformation and upgrading path of garment enterprises under the 14th Five-Year Plan. Wool Textile

Journal. 50(4).104–111.

3.Xiao J.,(2024).The impact of digital transformation on the value of textile and apparel companies.China Garment.8.58-59.

4.UNCTAD. (2023). "Digital Economy Report 2023: Value Creation and Capture - Implications for Developing Countries." United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. <https://unctad.org/der2023>

5.McKinsey & Company. (2021). "China digital consumer trends 2021: Understanding Chinese consumers in the post-COVID era." <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/china/china-digital-consumer-trends-2021>

6.UNCTAD. (2021). "Digital Economy Report 2021." United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/der2021\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/der2021_en.pdf)

7.National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2023). "Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2022 National Economic and Social Development." [http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202302/t20230228\\_1919019.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202302/t20230228_1919019.html)

8.Sun, S., Hall, D. J., & Cegielski, C. G. (2021). "Organizational intention to adopt big data in the B2B context: An integrated view." *Industrial Marketing Management*, 93, 205-218.

9.Aagerup, U., Andersson, S. and Awuah, G. (2022), "Building a warm and competent B2B brand personality", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 56 No. 13, pp. 167-193.

10.Hofacker, C., Golgeci, I., Pillai, K.G. and Gligor, D.M. (2020), "Digital marketing and business-to-business relationships: a close look at the interface and a roadmap for the future", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54 No. 6, pp. 1161-1179. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-04-2020-0247>

11.Yi Huang,Liugang Sheng, Gewei Wang, 2021(3).How did rising labor costs erode China's global advantage.*Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*.Volume 183, Pages 632-653

12. Birkel, H. and Wehrle, M. (2022) 'Small- and Medium-Sized Companies Tackling the Digital Transformation of Supply Chain Processes: Insights From a Multiple Case Study in the German Manufacturing Industry', *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*, pp. 1–16. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1109/TEM.2022.3209131>.
13. Di Vaio, A. et al. (2020) 'Artificial intelligence and business models in the sustainable development goals perspective: A systematic literature review', *Journal of Business Research*, 121, pp. 283–314. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.08.019>.
14. Tiziana R., Francesco B., 2021. Digital transformation in the cultural heritage sector: challenges to marketing in new digital era. 88-120.
15. Mao J., (2024). Digital transformation and improvement strategies for small and medium-sized textile and garment enterprises. *Chemical Fiber and Textile Technology*. 53.73–75.
16. Zhao, Y., & Li, S. (2020). Digital tools for customer management in the apparel export industry: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 35(8), 1427-1439.
17. Davis, F. D. (1989). "Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology." *MIS Quarterly*, 13(3), 319-340.
18. Rathore, J.S. and Goyal, N. (2024), "Extending the Technology Acceptance Model as Predictor to Explore Student's Intention to Use an Online Edtech Platform in India", Singh, N., Kansra, P. and Gupta, S.L. (Ed.) *Navigating the Digital Landscape*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 129-148. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83549-272-720241008>
19. Pramanik, P. and Jana, R.K. (2025), "A consumer acceptance model in the artificial intelligence era", *Management Decision*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-03-2024-0574>
20. Li, F., Lu, H., Hou, M., Cui, K., & Darbandi, M. (2021). "Customer satisfaction with bank services: The role of cloud services, security, e-learning and service quality." *Technology in Society*, 64, 101487.
21. Teece, D. J., Pisano, G., & Shuen, A. (1997). "Dynamic capabilities and strategic

- management." *Strategic Management Journal*, 18(7), 509-533.
- 22.Kapoor, M. and Aggarwal, V. (2020), "Tracing the economics behind dynamic capabilities theory", *International Journal of Innovation Science*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 187-201. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJIS-05-2019-0050>
- 23.Mishra, R. and Kiran, K.B. (2024), "Unveiling the dynamic capabilities' influence on sustainable performance in MSMEs: a systematic literature review utilizing ADO-TCM analysis", *Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/APJBA-05-2024-0295>
- 24.Barney, J. B. (1991). "Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage." *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99-120.
- 25.Maiti, M., Krakovich, V., Shams, S.M.R. and Vukovic, D.B. (2020), "Resource-based model for small innovative enterprises", *Management Decision*, Vol. 58 No. 8, pp. 1525-1541. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-06-2019-0725>
- 26.Malhotra, G., Dandotiya, G., Shaiwalini, S., Khan, A. and Homechaudhuri, S. (2024), "Benchmarking for organisational competitiveness: a resource-based view perspective", *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/BIJ-09-2023-0668>
- 27.Teo, T. S., Lin, S., & Lai, K. H. (2009). "Adopters and non-adopters of e-procurement in Singapore: An empirical study." *Omega*, 37(5), 972-987.
- 28.Reibiger, A. (2011), "Foundations of network theory", *COMPEL - The international journal for computation and mathematics in electrical and electronic engineering*, Vol. 30 No. 4, pp. 1319-1332. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03321641111133226>
- 29.Tajudeen, F.P., Moghavvemi, S., Thirumoorthi, T., Phoong, S.W. and Bahri, E.N.B.A. (2025), "Empowering Malaysian SMEs: Navigating Digital Transformation for Growth and Competitiveness", *Digital Transformation of Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83662-168-320251002>
- 30.Tajudeen, F.P., Moghavvemi, S., Thirumoorthi, T., Phoong, S.W. and Bahri, E.N.B.A. (2025), "The Importance of SME's Digital Transformation in Promoting the

- Malaysian Economy", Digital Transformation of Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 21-44. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83662-168-320251003>
- 31.Tajudeen, F.P., Moghavvemi, S., Thirumoorthi, T., Phoong, S.W. and Bahri, E.N.B.A. (2025), "Impact of Digital Transformation on Business Functional Areas of SMEs", Digital Transformation of Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 45-68. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83662-168-320251004>
- 32.Elsa, D., Indrawati, H. and Caska, C. (2025), "Digital transformation in SMEs: global maps and trends of research", Strategy & Leadership, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SL-09-2024-0104>
- 33.Jibril, A.B., Amoah, J., Panigrahi, R.R. and Gochhait, S. (2024), "Digital transformation in emerging markets: the role of technology adoption and innovative marketing strategies among SMEs in the post – pandemic era", International Journal of Organizational Analysis, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOA-05-2024-4509>
- 34.Bargoni, A., Ferraris, A., Vilamová, Š. and Wan Hussain, W.M.H. (2024), "Digitalisation and internationalisation in SMEs: a systematic review and research agenda", Journal of Enterprise Information Management, Vol. 37 No. 5, pp. 1418-1457. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEIM-12-2022-0473>
- 35.AlMulhim, A.F. (2021), "Smart supply chain and firm performance: the role of digital technologies", Business Process Management Journal, Vol. 27 No. 5, pp. 1353-1372. <https://doi.org/10.1108/BPMJ-12-2020-0573>
- 36.Saura JR. Using data sciences in digital marketing: Framework, methods, and performance metrics. Journal of Innovation & Knowledge. 2021 Apr 1;6(2):92-102.
- 37..Busca L, Bertrandias L. A framework for digital marketing research: investigating the four cultural eras of digital marketing. Journal of Interactive Marketing. 2020 Feb 1;49:1-9.
- 38.Warokka A, Sjahrudin H, Sriyanto S, Noerhartati E, Saddhono K. Digital marketing support and business development using online marketing tools: An

experimental analysis. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*. 2020 Jan 1;24(1):1181-8.

39.Behera RK, Gunasekaran A, Gupta S, Kamboj S, Bala PK. Personalized digital marketing recommender engine. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*. 2020 Mar 1;53:101799.

40.Taiminen, H.M. and Karjaluoto, H. (2015), "The usage of digital marketing channels in SMEs", *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, Vol. 22 No. 4, pp. 633-651. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-05-2013-0073>

41.Andersson, S., Aagerup, U., Svensson, L. and Eriksson, S. (2024), "Challenges and opportunities in the digitalization of the B2B customer journey", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 39 No. 13, pp. 160-174. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-12-2023-0714>

42.Cheng, Z., Plangger, K., Cai, F., Campbell, C.L. and Pitt, L. (2023), "Charting value creation strategies B2B salespeople use throughout the sales process: learning from social media influencers", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 57 No. 3, pp. 718-744.

43.Chatterjee, S., Chaudhuri, R., DeVrontis, D. and Pereira, V. (2022), "Examining the industrial buying behavior in indian market: from behavior and cultural perspective for B2B buyers and suppliers", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 151, pp. 86-99.

44.Andersson, S. and Wikström, N. (2017), "Why and how are social media used in a B2B context, and which stakeholders are involved?", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 32 No. 8, pp. 1098-1108.

45.Baumgarth, C. and Schmidt, M. (2010), "How strong is the business-to-business brand in the workforce? An empirically-tested model of 'internal brand equity' in a business-to-business setting", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 39 No. 8, pp. 1250-1260.

46. Bryan, J. (2018), "What sales should know about modern B2B buyers", available at: [www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/what-sales-should-know-about-b2b-buyers-in-2019/](http://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/what-sales-should-know-about-b2b-buyers-in-2019/) (accessed 27 February 2023).

47. Brink, T. (2017), "B2B SME management of antecedents to the application of social media", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 64, pp. 57-65.

48. Hayes, O. and Kelliher, F. (2025), "The role of social media data in enhancing B2B omni-channel marketing efforts in small businesses", *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 151-172. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSBED-02-2023-0051>

49. Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

50. Osanloo, A. and Grant, C. (2016) 'Understanding, Selecting, and Integrating a Theoretical Framework in Dissertation Research: Creating the Blueprint for Your "House"', *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 4(2), p. 7.

51. Imenda, S. (2014) 'Is There a Conceptual Difference between Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks?', *Journal of Social Sciences*, 38(2), pp. 185–195. doi:[10.1080/09718923.2014.11893249](https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2014.11893249).

52. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

53. Denzin, N. K., and Lincoln, Y. S. (2007). *Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. The landscape of qualitative research*. 3rd edn. Sage Publications, 632, pp.1-44.

51. Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Competing paradigms in qualitative research*. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

52. Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 191–215). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
53. Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
54. Given, L.M. (2008) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. SAGE Publications.
55. Kuhn, T.S. (1970) *The structure of scientific revolutions*. [2d ed., enl. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (International encyclopedia of unified science. Foundations of the unity of science, v. 2, no. 2).
55. Bell, E., Bryman, A. & Harley, B. (2022) *Business Research Methods* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
56. Berger, R. (2015) 'Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research', *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), pp. 219-234.
57. Bryman, A. (2021) *Social Research Methods* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
58. Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D. (2018) *Research Design* (5th ed.). SAGE.
59. Mason, J. (2018) *Qualitative Researching* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
60. Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2019) *Research Methods for Business Students* (8th ed.). Pearson.
61. Silverman, D. (2020) *Qualitative Research* (5th ed.). SAGE.
62. Tracy, S.J. (2020) *Qualitative Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
63. Yin, R.K. (2018) *Case Study Research and Applications* (6th ed.). SAGE.
64. Maxwell, J.A. (2005), *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*, 2nd ed, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

#### **Reference Website:**

China National Bureau of Statistics <http://data.stats.gov.cn>