

# Chapter 16


## Industrial SMEs in B2B Relationships: Perceptions of Familiarity With and Use of LinkedIn as an Effective Tool for Internationalization

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### ABSTRACT

*This study Spanish SMEs that manufacture intermediate goods, focusing on their familiarity with and use of 4.0 technologies in the internationalization process. The research centers on the Business-to-Business (B2B) market and explores the perception, familiarity, and use of LinkedIn as a professional tool. Currently, LinkedIn is recognized as an efficient platform for enhancing visibility and credibility among potential international clients. It also serves as a key instrument for digitizing client relationship management. The study adopts the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) Framework proposed by Tornatzky and Fleischer (1990) A qualitative research approach was employed to determine the framework's applicability to the industrial B2B sector. The research sample consisted of 10 CEOs and executives from industrial SMEs, and data was collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed statistically. The results reveal significant gaps in managers' knowledge of the benefits of adopting digital*

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technologies, particularly LinkedIn, for accessing international clients.

## INTRODUCTION

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is advancing at an exponential pace, driven by innovation, while society and businesses adopt these changes at a slower, more linear rate (Kurzweil, 2006). The adoption of technology within organizations depends on factors such as company size (Patterson *et al.*, 2003), organizational culture, and the nature of the products they sell or manufacture (Thatcher, *et al.*, 2006). While large, digitally-native corporations integrate these advances swiftly, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)—particularly those in the industrial sector—often rely on outdated communication models centered around personal selling (Pérez González, *et al.*, 2018).

Despite the economic significance of the B2B market, studies on the use of social media by B2B companies remain limited (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). This is surprising, given that B2B trade surpasses B2C in economic terms. For instance, in the U.S. in 2021, e-commerce transactions totaled \$10,103.3 billion, with manufacturing accounting for \$4,230.8 billion. Wholesale trade contributed \$ 3,274.4 billion, retail \$958.7 billion, and services \$1,639.4 billion (Census, 2021). In Spain, where this research is conducted, B2C e-commerce reached 31.45 billion U.S. in 2002, while B2B marketing generated 31,000 billion U.S. during the same period (Statista, 2024). Although revenue figures are comparable, B2B transactions occur less frequently but involve higher average values.

Much of the existing knowledge about social media adoption in B2B contexts comes from business reports issued by institutions, banks, or government authorities. Academic research, however, is still in its early stages (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). Research such as that by Mukherjee, *et al.* (2024) suggests that business competitiveness improves when companies effectively utilize social networks like LinkedIn to identify, connect with, and retain international buyers. In Spain, social networks offer benefits such as broader reach and enhanced connectivity for developing international relationships at lower costs (Alarcón-del-Amo, *et al.*, 2024).

Bridging the knowledge gap could empower institutions to better tailor their digitalization initiatives for SMEs. Not all digital tools are equally effective in B2B marketing, which relies on long-term relationships built gradually (Quinton and Wilson, 2016). Digital marketing strategies often overlook key differences between manufacturing companies and non-manufacturing firms, particularly in supply chain integration (Frohlich and Westbrook, 2002).

This research is particularly relevant given the significant role manufacturing SMEs play Spain's export economy. SMEs constitute 99.80% of all businesses in the country, employing 26.17% of the workforce. In the manufacturing sector, SMEs represent 99.28% of companies, employing 62.94% of workers (INE, 2024). Industrial SMEs, where 9 out of 10 companies are manufacturers of intermediate goods, account for 76.3% of the sector's turnover (INE, 2022). SMEs dominate Spain's export landscape, comprising 98.4% of exporting companies and contributing 50.6% of the total export value (MINCOTUR, 2021).

The importance of this investigation is further underscored by government efforts to boost SME export intensity. **Authorities in Spain** (MINCOTUR, 2019) and the European Union (European Council, 2024) have identified low levels of digitalization as a significant barrier to SME internationalization (ICEX, 2023), particularly for industrial firms (INE, 2022). Both national and international programs, such as Spain's Agenda 2026 (MINECO, 2024) and the European Council's **Political Programme for the Digital Decade** (2024), aim to promote the digital transformation of businesses. However, these initiatives have

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