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Evolving marketing strategies for Swiss SMEs in the ICT sector: a marketing strategy canvas in support of digital transformation

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Abstract: The research objective is to understand how Swiss small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector define their marketing strategies to benefit from digitalisation, to what extent digital transformation creates customer value, and how organisations can overcome the complexity of digitalisation. Following a literature review, managers from 14 SMEs were interviewed. Research showed that micro enterprises in Swiss ICT regard marketing strategies in the context of digital transformation, but have limited focus on the customer; small enterprises focus on external factors to adapt their marketing strategies; and medium-sized enterprises tend to describe the importance of implementing digital marketing in order to attract new customers. The results from this research include a marketing strategy canvas for evolving marketing strategies in ICT. While research outcomes are not necessarily generalisable to other industries, they show that targeting customer segments digitally and thus optimising usability and processes for them are essential for Swiss SMEs in ICT.

Keywords: marketing strategy; SME; ICT; technology marketing; marketing canvas; digitalisation; digital transformation.

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1 Introduction

Continuous and disruptive innovations are drivers of the industrial revolution. Every era has seen new sectors being created and new business models evolved, leading to clashes between the old and the new (Anderson and Vakulenko, 2014). Today, it is the digital economy that is causing profound changes in the economy and broader society (Heierli et al., 2019) and which is in the focus of public interest (Chhachhi et al., 2016). Whole industries have had to stand by and experience how business models become obsolete, almost overnight, swept away by the disruptive force of digital change (Berman, 2012; Ng, 2014; Pandey, 2021; Rohn et al., 2021; Westerman and Bonnet, 2015). Numerous researchers (e.g., Dash and Chakraborty, 2021; Fletcher and Griffiths, 2020; Pandey, 2021) highlight that driven by societal transformation, digital transformation is not just an option, but a necessity to remain competitive (Gottlieb and Willmott, 2014; Zimmermann, 2018).

To capitalise on digital transformation, organisations must adapt and adopt a digital orientation – “the deliberate strategic positioning of an SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) to take advantage of the opportunities presented by digital technologies” [Quinton et al., (2018), p.8]; a process that fundamentally impacts the activities in which organisations are engaged with. It involves a strategic shift towards digital value creation (Bloching et al., 2015; Greif et al., 2016). Driven by the COVID-19 crisis, the global economy entered another recession where large economies such as the US, EU and China are slowing down (International Monetary Fund, 2022), which makes it critical for businesses to (re)define their strategies. Dash and Chakraborty (2021) and Kang et al. (2020) suggest investing in data capabilities, marketing, and customer services, among others, to cope with the crisis. The pandemic has shown that the needs of customers have changed significantly among multiple categories. However, instead of marketing investments, enterprises paradoxically cut the marketing budget to solve short-term financial challenges (Kang et al., 2020).

The key to future market success therefore lies in the ability of an organisation to find a balance between customer orientation (Atiker, 2018; Kang et al., 2020), process management (Greif et al., 2016) and organisational culture (Pandey, 2021), and to align those with common objectives (Webster, 1992). Kang et al. (2020) propose that marketers should work closer with other departments such as product development to gain competitive advantages and to attract new customers. A recent Swiss marketing leadership study (Heierli et al., 2019) confirms that firm absorptive and collaborative capabilities represent an important competitive advantage. Organisations also need a high degree of agility, enabling quick response to ever-changing market conditions and the business environment. To achieve this level of agility in the digital age, customer needs must be considered, and firms must thus build higher levels of customer centricity.

However, not all firms embrace the digital age equally. Small and medium sized enterprises (SME), organisations with less than 250 employees (SME Portal, 2022) in particular have exhibited lower levels of digital-age readiness than other types of firms (Peter et al., 2020). Although 76% of SMEs expect their markets to be transformed through digitalisation, the majority are lacking the tools to proactively reconsider their business models as a way of harnessing the potential of digital transformation (Autio, 2017).

Digital transformation and digitalisation are not yet established in the mindset of Swiss SMEs. Their activities have, to date, primarily focused on digitising internal processes and developing websites and e-commerce solutions (Greif et al., 2016; Peter, 2017). Possibly, Swiss SMEs are not courageous and proactive enough in addressing digital transformation due to a lack of understanding about the digital industrial revolution and the opportunities it offers (Erroi, 2019). Furthermore, competing priorities and cultural barriers are management challenges that hinder firms to successfully transform an organisation into the digital age (Erroi, 2019; HWZ, 2019). Most executives do not fully leverage the benefits that digital transformation can offer to their firms (Neumeier, 2017), and only 25% have a digital strategy for their business (HWZ, 2019). Executives recognise very well that current challenges presented by digitalisation are unmanageable with the previous models and organisational forms; and new approaches are needed (Möller et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2020). This is an important notion as leaders and other key employees are both the enablers and drivers of digital transformation (Meyer, 2018; Pandey, 2021).

Given the contextual background established above, the aim of this research project is to understand and demonstrate how Swiss SMEs in the information and communications technology (ICT) industry can benefit from digital transformation in the fast-paced, highly competitive, digital technology sector by redefining and redesigning their marketing strategies. By evaluating both the enabling and constraining factors affecting the transformation of SMEs, the aim is to create a marketing canvas to support digital transformation informed by research.

This study employs a case study strategy to examine a sample of Swiss SMEs in the ICT industry in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The Swiss ICT industry contributes 5.6% to Swiss GDP overall and ranks fourth in a European comparison behind Sweden, Great Britain and Denmark (ICTswitzerland, 2019). As an economy, Switzerland ranks second in the IMD digital world competitiveness ranking (IMD, 2022). According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SME Portal, 2022), the average annual growth rate in the ICT industry is 19%. Due to the linguistic diversity in Switzerland, and with 76% of Swiss SMEs being domiciled outside the Lake Geneva and Ticino regions (SME Portal, 2022), the Italian and French speaking regions are not included in the sampling frame. As such, the study focuses on the following research question (RQ) for the German speaking part of Switzerland:

“How should Swiss SMEs in the ICT sector define their marketing strategy to benefit from digitalisation?”

In addition, a set of sub-questions (SQ) can be formulated:

- a Why should Swiss SMEs in the ICT sector adapt their marketing strategies in the digital age?
- b To what extent did digitalisation create (added) value to customers?

- c How can organisations successfully overcome the complexity of digitalisation and what tools or procedures do they apply?

To answer these questions, the findings from a literature review provided the framework for the case study research.

2 Literature review

A list with keywords related to the RQs was generated to conduct a review of the literature available in both German and English. The utilised databases were EBSCOhost and the database of Swiss libraries for books and journals. To ensure that scientifically valid materials were used, books were chosen based on the authors' reputation, their relevance in the field or their citation/s in academic journals. At the same time, mostly scholarly (peer reviewed) journals were chosen. A total of over 325 articles was identified, collected, and reviewed as part of the initial literature research. From these articles, those relevant to the RQ were reviewed.

2.1 *Innovation and competitiveness in the SME service industry*

SMEs dominate the European landscape and account for almost 60% of total value added in the European Union (European Commission, 2012) where the service sector contributes a significant part to the economy (Habersaat et al., 2000; McDermott and Prajogo, 2012). The ICT landscape in Switzerland is characterised by owner-managed, cash-flow financed and highly specialised SMEs such as Abacus, Opacc and Netcetera (Switzerland Global Enterprise, 2018). Ethical business conduct is paramount to Swiss SME managers. Their primary responsibilities towards customers are high quality product and services, fair prices, and to maintain a relationship of trust with consumers. According to Fülöp et al. (2000), employees of SMEs (compared to large enterprises) were found to more likely demonstrate these higher moral behaviours.

As a cross-sectional function, the targeted use of ICT enables numerous sectors to increase their productivity (Baumann et al., 2011; Switzerland Global Enterprise, 2019). According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SME Portal, 2022), the ICT industry has 335,700 full-time employees – comprising around 11% of all employees in the service sector. The use of ICT plays a key role in securing a competitive advantage through innovation (Arvantis et al., 2013). With intensive application of advanced technologies and given the current speed of transformation, innovation is a crucial strategic component for the competitive advantage of businesses (Clauss et al., 2021; Kostic, 2018).

2.2 *Marketing and marketing transformation in SME*

Marketing as a management concept has many definitions: the AMA (2019), describes marketing as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” The CIM (2015, p.3) describes marketing as “the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably.” This definition places emphasis on the customer focus and the way through which

business units can collaborate to achieve profitability together. Lamb et al. (2018, p.2) see marketing as a “philosophy, an attitude, a perspective, or a management orientation” that fulfils customer needs and expectations. Kumar (2018) refers to the current phase of marketing as the era of ‘engaged customisation’.

Marketing as a discipline has been studied predominantly in the context of large enterprises that have sufficient resources to drive change, and where digitalisation appears to be less of a challenge (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Researchers (Lei and Ki Moon, 2015; Möller et al., 2018; Kotler et al., 2020) highlight that large enterprises tend to assess market needs through surveys and customer research before a new service or product is developed. Contrary to large corporations, SMEs often begin with an idea, and then attempt to locate a market for it by speaking to customers (Gilmore et al., 2001). Traditional marketing views rarely apply to SMEs who tend to use informal, loose, and spontaneous methods in their strategies. Fust et al. (2020) note that SMEs exhibit significant differences from large enterprises and require special treatment in many respects. Therefore, it is necessary to update and review the existing marketing techniques and methods, specifically for SMEs (Pradhan et al., 2018; Tabuena et al., 2022).

In the context of digital transformation, the traditional marketing mix is undergoing a profound change, and as ICT firms reconsider and reconfigure their marketing strategies, adaptation of the marketing mix will be required (Patruti-Baltes, 2016). Marketing 4.0 involves the combination of offline and online interactions between organisations and customers (Dash and Chakraborty, 2021; Kotler et al., 2017; Ramanujam and Kumar, 2022). In theory, SME ICT firms have the technical and material resources available to support a digitally focused marketing approach (Patruti-Baltes, 2016). Kaufman and Horton (2014) suggest considering customer relationship management (CRM) as a strategic priority; and Kang et al. (2020) conclude that in addition, customer retention and loyalty programs improve a firm’s value proposition.

2.3 Marketing strategy in support of digital transformation

Marketing strategy is characterised as “business crucial decisions concerning its planned pattern of behaviour in the marketplace to achieve [...] a competitive advantage, and thereby realise specific organisational objectives” [Varadarajan, (2018), p.16]. Hence, marketing strategy answers the questions of how an organisation can be competitive in the fast-paced, evolving and digital business environment. Strategic marketing is therefore concerned with strategies to achieve organisational results and customer centricity across competing priorities (Dash and Chakraborty, 2021; Morgan et al., 2018; Pandey, 2021). According to Pandey (2021, p.118), customer engagement with a brand focus can be increased through ‘persuasive and authentic’ content creation. Derived from the marketing strategy, marketers then create an integrated marketing mix (Kotler et al., 2020; Vignali and Davies, 1994). Kang et al. (2020) suggest that marketing strategy (especially after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis) should also cover new technologies, new digital infrastructure for product development management, supply chain management, and CRM.

For Schrader (2018), digital transformation (linked to marketing) is about developing products that change customer behaviour in a sustainable way, and Atiker (2018) characterises digital transformation as the exploitation of new digital opportunities to add

value for customers. This fosters strategies that align with customer needs and thus drive new business models (Herzog et al., 2017; Matzler et al., 2018; Schwab, 2017). This ever-greater differentiation of services and products and the increased transparency between customers and organisations will likely transform the Swiss economic system (Herzog et al., 2017), and already, initial positive effects of digitalisation on productivity are visible (Grampp et al., 2018).

Büst et al. (2015) conclude that digital transformation is multidimensional and consists of technical, psychological-cultural, and operational components. The authors argue that not every industry is impacted by digital transformation with the same speed and force. Matzler et al. (2018), however, argue that every process, even in the most traditional industries, will eventually be digitalised. Regardless, increasing speed in digital transformation means that innovation must be proactive, dynamic, and continual (Yoo et al., 2012). Therefore, business models must continuously evolve (Heierli et al., 2019) to leverage digital technologies (Fitzgerald et al., 2013) and fulfil customer expectations in the digital age (Armitage, 2015; Büst et al., 2015; Kang et al., 2020; Reader and Trussell, 2014; Tabuena et al., 2022).

3 Theoretical framework for marketing strategies in the digital age

The literature review identified a limited number of studies addressing the intersection of marketing strategy development in the Swiss ICT SME sector in the context of digitalisation and digital transformation. While insightful, one limitation in the extant literature is the focus on large enterprises only (e.g., Apple, Google), while SMEs tend to remain outside the spotlight. Only a small number of research projects (e.g., Peter et al., 2020) examine SMEs and the effects of digital transformation. They however tend to be either sector specific, e.g., air travel, consumer goods and financial services (Quinn et al., 2016), industrial manufacturing (Knight, 2000), or banking (Liu et al., 2011) and/or in countries other than Switzerland such as the UK (Quinn et al., 2016), Taiwan (Liu et al., 2011), Finland (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2018), and the USA (Smith, 2011).

This intersection of competitiveness, new technologies, and business model innovation in strategic marketing and in the context of digital transformation supports the RQ of how Swiss ICT SMEs can refine their marketing strategies in the digital era.

3.1 Digitalisation in the Swiss ICT sector

The public endorsement by the Swiss Federal Council (Federal Office of Communications, 2020) for a ‘Digital Switzerland’ strategy has added additional pressure for Swiss ICT SMEs to adapt a digital-first approach in their business practices. Switzerland has a special interest in supporting these enterprises along their digital transformation journey by creating the best possible economical conditions (Federal Office of Communications, 2020). Swiss ICT SMEs have the potential and the need to adapt new technologies in marketing and sales, customer data management, as well as customer platforms, and channels (Peter and Dalla Vecchia, 2021). New technical opportunities (Davenport and Redman, 2020) could help these SMEs to improve their customer journeys (Schweidel et al., 2022) and customer experience levels (Fitzgerald et al., 2013). In contemporary dynamic markets, providing (new) value to the market can *inter alia* be achieved by exploiting technologies and incorporating stakeholders

(Granstrand and Holgersson, 2020; Ramanujam and Kumar, 2022; Schweidel et al., 2022).

Through digitalisation, SMEs can proactively redesign their market interactions (Kilipiri et al., 2022), enhance their business processes (Ramanujam and Kumar, 2022), benefit from brand development, and ultimately boost competitiveness (Autio, 2017; Joensuu-Salo et al., 2018; Saleh, 2022; Tabuena et al., 2022).

3.2 Innovation and competitiveness in the Swiss ICT sector

Digital transformation requires SMEs to review and redesign their business models. However, SMEs have limited resources (e.g., time, skills and financials) to experiment and implement new strategies (Bouwman et al., 2019; Tabuena et al., 2022). According to Bowonder et al. (2010), strategic innovation is focused on customer excitement (e.g., co-creation and business model innovation), competitive leadership (e.g., engaging with partners and customers), and portfolio enrichment (e.g., new markets and innovative consumer opportunities). It has been proposed that enhancing the necessary skills (Bican et al., 2017; Kilipiri et al., 2022) and company culture (Lünendonk, 2019; Pandey, 2021) are some of the main prerequisites for the creation of digital innovation. Competitive advantages emerge when the targeted consumers understand the unique value proposition of the product or service, and identify its difference to the competitive proposition (Blankson et al., 2013; Burke, 2011). Similarly, Jackson and Ahuja (2016) argue that firms can gain competitive advantages by involving customers in the marketing process. By involving consumers and by making them co-creators, firms incorporate user requirements and thus ensure product/service utilisation, proximity, and can benefit from brand engagement (Garcia, 2023).

Both competitiveness and the need for innovation have a positive influence on business model innovation, consequently impacting market positioning, and finally, an organisation's marketing strategy (see Figure 1, central component). The ability to adapt and respond rapidly to new customer needs through innovation is paramount to firms after the pandemic crisis (Kang et al., 2020; Pandey, 2021; Tabuena et al., 2022).

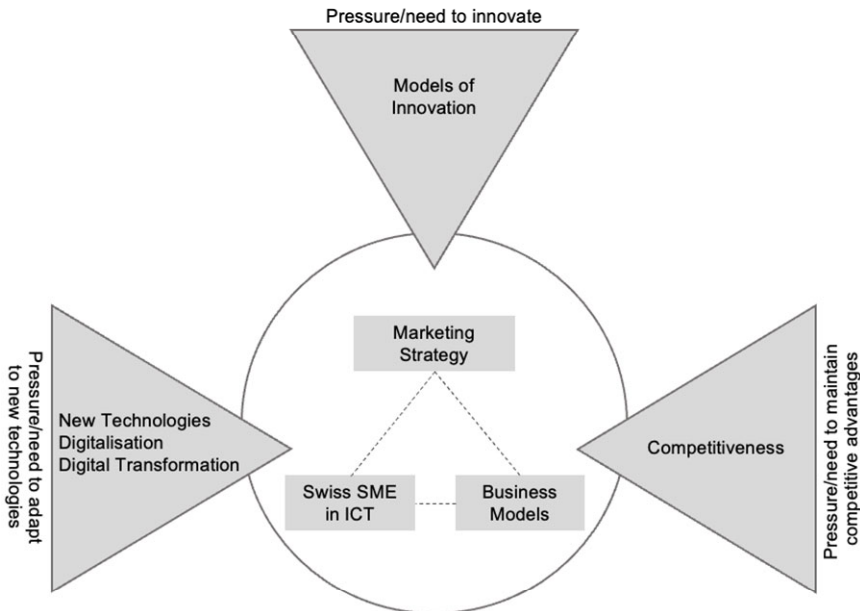
3.3 Marketing strategy of SMEs

Marketing as a discipline has been studied predominantly in the context of large enterprises that have sufficient resources to drive change, and where digitalisation appears to be less of a challenge (Lei and Ki Moon, 2015; Möller et al., 2018; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Large enterprises tend to assess the market needs through surveys and customer research before a new service or product is developed. Contrary to large organisations, SMEs often start with a product idea. Therefore, SMEs seem to apply informal, loose, and spontaneous methods in their market validation process. In addition, marketing in SMEs is primarily used to generate sales by either repositioning and redesigning existing services/products, or by launching new or improved services/products with a clearly defined value proposition (Kotler et al., 2020). Yet, the focus remains on the operational, rather than the strategic level, and a clearly defined strategy rarely exists. Marketers are challenged to understand the new environment and its related trends, and to develop an appropriate strategy in the dynamic market (Pemberton, 2018; Tabuena et al., 2022). Therefore, the overarching goal of a strategy in the digital age

should be an agile and customer-oriented one, achieving optimal value creation in a way that enables the differentiated positioning of the firm in the market (Pandey, 2021). Customer centricity and customer experience are essential factors in why digital and data-driven business models of start-ups and large digital enterprises scale well (Zillmann, 2019).

To investigate the themes and priorities of marketing strategies of Swiss SMEs in the ICT sector, a conceptual model was developed for the research (Figure 1). In the context of digital transformation and digitalisation, both marketing strategies (e.g., Kumar, 2018; Kotler et al., 2017) of Swiss ICT SMEs and their business models remain in the foreground as firms operate in dynamic, unpredictable, and highly competitive markets (e.g., Atiker, 2018; Granstrand and Holgersson, 2020; Kotler et al., 2020). Through new technologies (e.g., Büst et al., 2015; Davenport and Redman, 2020; Heierli et al., 2019) and new modes of innovation (e.g., Bouwman et al., 2019), new services and products with clearly defined value propositions can be created. Digital platforms enable faster feedback loops which, in turn, help firms align their value proposition with customer needs and expectations. On the other hand, digital transformation also brings challenges for the internal value creation process, e.g., resistance from employees towards the acquisition of new skills and organisational change in general. From the perspective of the marketing strategy itself, digital transformation is seen as the central driver to improving customer proximity in the digital age.

Figure 1 Theoretical framework derived from the literature review



4 Research methodology

Case study research has been selected as the primary methodology for this study. There is no conclusive definition for the term ‘case study’ (Benbasat et al., 1987), but it is

described that case studies “have mostly studied phenomena that has already occurred, i.e., it has focused on existing reality” [Azhar et al., (2010), p.87], and their unique strength is the ability to address complex situations (Bennett and Elman, 2006) and focus on a specific, unique, bounded system (Jacelon and O’Dell, 2005). The case study method allows the researcher to gain a holistic view of a certain event (Noor, 2008; Yin, 2014), its social design, and its ways of working (Miles et al., 2014). Accordingly, case studies are especially useful to improve understanding of organisational contexts (Baker, 2011; Bryman and Bell, 2015; Cooper and Morgan, 2008; Noor, 2008) by enabling researchers to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Robson, 2011; Yin, 2014). In this study, the case study aspect of the research primarily makes use of qualitative methods of data collection.

Data selected emerged from a SME study in 2017 (Peter, 2017; Peter et al., 2020) where research participants acknowledged their willingness to participate in further investigations. The ICT industry was the focus because telecommunications service providers, ICT service providers and media service providers are said to currently have the highest level of digitalisation across the SME sector (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie, 2015; Deloitte Digital GmbH and Heads! Executive Consultancy, 2015; Gottlieb and Willmott, 2014; Graumann and Bertschek, 2017; Greif et al., 2016; Zimmermann, 2018). The selection criteria employed are described in Table 1.

Table 1 Case selection criteria

Swiss company	Founded in Switzerland or Swiss based headquarters
Size of company	SMEs with 1–249 employees consisting of micro enterprises (with 1–9 employees), small enterprises (10–49 employees) and medium-sized enterprises (50–249 employees)
Service sector	Information and communications technology (ICT)
Geographical location	German speaking part of Switzerland
Interview participant	C-level employees; contact details voluntarily provided in a previous SME research project (Peter, 2017)

Fourteen in-depth interviews with SMEs were conducted (one interview per SME) in the period from June to August 2019, wherefrom four interviews with micro enterprises, five with small enterprises, and five with medium-sized enterprises. It was deemed important for the sample to have similar roles within the organisation to facilitate comparison across cases. Therefore, interview participants were C-level employees (i.e., CEOs, CTOs, and owners). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and took place in meeting rooms of the case organisations or at the university.

To obtain relevant answers consistently from all participants and to minimise the researcher’s influence on data collection, Schultze and Avital (2011) propose the use of an interview guide. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher has a list of topics and questions to be addressed, regardless of the organisational context. The order of questions may also vary depending on the flow of the conversation (Saunders et al., 2009). The benefit of the interviews lies in their flexibility and the fact that the interviewer can follow up on a subject that seems of high importance (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017) or relevance (Yin, 2014). Thus, the rigidity of the structured approach is avoided, as is the full imposition of the researchers’ ideas about what constitutes knowledge upon the

interviewees. For this study, the researcher is in the role of an active listener rather than a person involved in the conversation. The interview guide was validated via a pilot study with one case organisation. Consequently, some of the questions were merged, simplified, or deleted from the interview guide.

Where permission was given, the interviews were audio recorded, translated by a researcher from Swiss German to German, and finally translated into English using DeepL Pro (DeepL, 2019). In contrast to quantitative data analysis, there are no clear rules for qualitative data analysis. One of the most common methods is an analysis in a sequential manner, using a coding scheme to identify categories. *A priori* codes for an initial coding frame were derived from the SQs and propositions and contained keywords such as ICT, Swiss enterprises, innovation index, marketing strategy, business model, digitalisation, value creation, customer centricity, and customer relationship. To allow for flexibility, emergent codes were developed using the obtained data. Jointly, themes and topics were identified to achieve a structured overview of the collected data. Due to the manageable number of interviewees, the use of a software-tool was not necessary, and the coding and analysis was completed manually.

Data collection and content analysis was used to define best practices for the successful implementation of a redefined marketing strategy in Swiss ICT SMEs. The topics covered the structure of this study, namely the organisational understanding and the drivers of digital transformation, the tools used to overcome complexity, the changes in the enterprise marketing strategy, the process of value creation, the change and innovation in the business model, and the challenges during the undertaken digital transformation.

5 Findings

Micro enterprises regard marketing strategies in the context of digitalisation as a matter of improving visibility and findability of their company on the internet: as participant 2 stated, “I have to make myself visible [...]; how must my company, my organisation be built so I have the greatest visibility [in the market] [...] that people find me and are also satisfied with my performance?” He concluded that “As a rule, it is worth considering the key factors of how the market will develop, regularly, or periodically. [...] This means that I must know where I want to go and define my strategy.” Customer focus proved to be of minor importance, contrary to the statements found in the literature. Digitalisation, however, generates added value to enterprises as well as to their clients in different ways. Benefits are achieved in terms of efficiency, transparency, faster processes, and reduced costs. The concept of providing know-how to current and future customers in the form of blog posts or white papers (i.e., content marketing), for example, has been identified through the analysed cases. “We also make our own contribution and create content in order to broaden the horizons of our customers without specifically forcing our services on them“, explained participant 11. Regarding the complexity of digital transformation, most firms agree that it is about people and culture, and that executives must firstly shift their own mindset; secondly, they need sufficient knowledge about change management; and thirdly, they need to guide their employees through the transformation. Participant 3 highlighted the importance of the role of management as “this starts for me at the C-level, that you must draw attention to the topics and that you have to approach the strategy and

the vision [...]. That means, if the awareness or the possibilities are not there or are not known, then we will have difficulties to be able to go on this [strategic] journey.”

Small enterprises consider external factors (e.g., growing markets, the competitive market situation) to be a motive to adapt their marketing strategies for the digital age. In contrast to most cases involving micro businesses, small enterprises tend to also recognise the importance of greater customer-focus. In the context of digitalisation, businesses deliver personalised content to the user through the application of new technologies and modern social media channels. Regarding the benefits of digitalisation, the findings pertaining to small businesses are similar to the ones from micro-sized enterprises, mainly the aim to improve efficiencies: “These are primarily cost-cutting and efficiency issues”, confirmed participant 7. Again, added value is generated by offering knowledge and content through websites or other digital channels. Small enterprises mentioned that they are facing challenges related to data security (e.g., by using and relying on cloud services). Participant 10 illustrated this point as “The biggest challenge still has to do with data privacy [...] as digital transformation just resulted in more data [...]. Typically, this can no longer be handled with my own infrastructure, so I must go into the cloud computing world [...], and this step is still brutally critical.”

The findings pertaining to medium-sized enterprises have parallels with those relating to small enterprises. Moreover, medium-sized enterprises tend to see the importance of implementing digital marketing to take advantage of modern possibilities and draw the attention of customers. In doing so, businesses can better trace and measure marketing campaigns, so that target groups are addressed with the right message through the right channels. Although medium-sized enterprises place the customer in the centre, some of the investigated organisations define marketing strategy in a narrower sense, meaning that they limit their understanding of marketing strategy to the components of the traditional marketing-mix. Ultimately, medium-sized enterprises use agile methods to manoeuvre through digital transformation and change in general, such as ‘strategy tools like value proposition design’, as exemplified by participant 13.

5.1 SQ A: why should Swiss SMEs in the ICT sector adapt their marketing strategy in the digital age?

A key rationale for Swiss SMEs to adapt their marketing strategy for the digital age is the ability to capitalise on technological tools, and particularly the availability and promise of new digital channels. One argument is that it is important to gain the attention of customers and prospective customers, to improve brand awareness and promote the firm’s ‘findability’ online by boosting the firm’s online presence. According to participant 11, “due to sensory overload and in order to stand out in digital channels”, marketing strategies shall be redesigned if the attention of end customers is to be captured. Participant 7 signalled that “a stronger differentiation is needed nowadays to counteract the greater comparability due to digital possibilities”, as the current market situation is more competitive than ever before, making visibility and differentiation especially important. New technological marketing tools facilitate data analysis, efficiency, and scalability that engenders the creation of new, or the shaping of existing, business models. Addressing target groups digitally and thus optimising usability and processes for the user, customer centricity and client involvement in product development (i.e., co-creation) are essential. In addition, the diversity and speed of modern digital

channels enable firms to use individualised and therefore targeted marketing, thereby accompanying customers through the whole *customer journey lifecycle*. Overall, case organisations believe that digital channels make marketing budgets more traceable and measurable and help them to target the audience at the right time, and with the right message.

5.2 *SQ B: to what extent did digitalisation create (added) value for customers?*

Case study evidence indicates that the most common value drivers are changing customer requirements and the ability to realise cost savings. Added value for customers was generated through increased transparency of the product/service offering, enabling or sharing know-how (for example via blogs or white papers) with prospects or clients (content marketing). In another case, participant 10 specified that added value for customers were to be found in “process improvement, profit improvement, and in new business strategies or orientations.” Only in one of the case studies as per participant 5, digitalisation did not yet create added value for their users: “None. [...] In my point of view, digitalisation is at such an early stage that it did not yet really create added value for the customer.”

5.3 *SQ C: how can organisations successfully overcome the complexity of digitalisation and what procedures do they apply?*

The procedures used by firms to overcome the complexities associated with digitalisation do appear to be identical, regardless of enterprise size. A lean and agile approach is proposed as a successful prerequisite for mastering the complexity of digitalisation.

Equally important is directing employees’ attention to digital transformation, communicating to them the strategy and vision, and establishing the direction and roadmap. A such, employees should be motivated to become *participants* which in turn requires promoting a *digital mind set*. Participant 13 stressed the difficulties in the resistance of employees: “There is fear of job loss [...] and they may also feel, the employees, that they don’t have the [required] skills.” Participant 1 suggested that “You must make sure [that] you have the required skills to utilise these trends, these technologies. So, we are on a constant quest for skills development for people, and with partners. [...] We constantly need to foster the competencies of tomorrow and in our market, which is so fast [changing], that this is quite a challenge.”

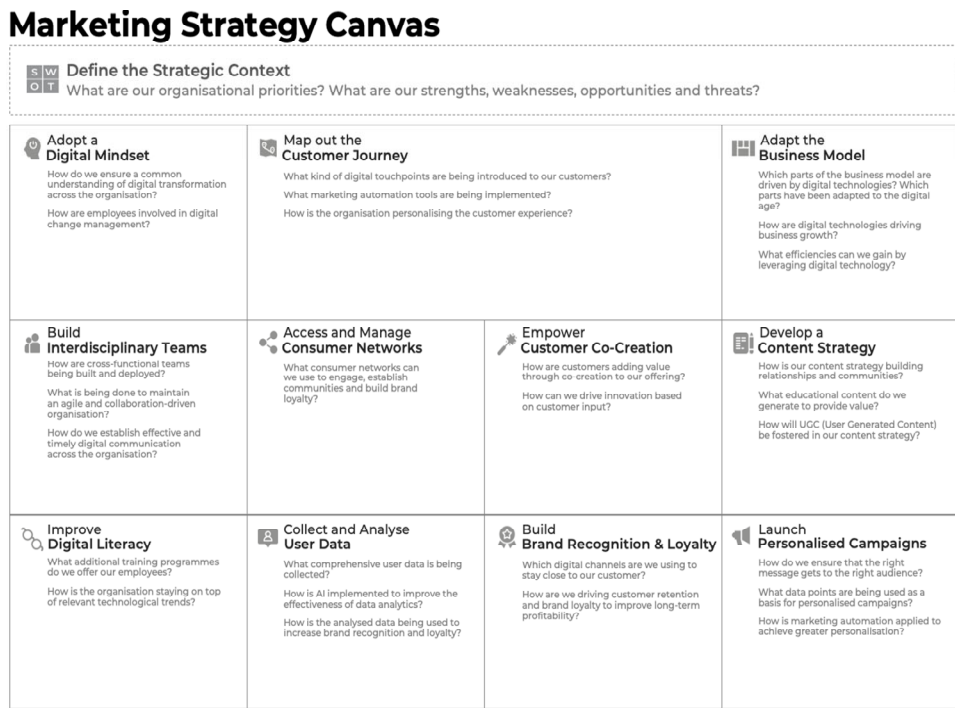
Despite the pervasiveness of digitalisation, organisations recommended to retaining a balance between offline and online setups. An offline setup was considered by participant 1 in the form of a physical dashboard: “We made for every project a physical [project fact] sheet that’s hanging in our office [...], and every second week we go together through the project and tell each other what the status is. [...] It is something that is so easy to digitalise and probably not efficient to not being digitalised, but it is more effective that employees know about each other, about the project.” In the case of another SME, the application of strategic tools like value proposition design was introduced to reduce complexity.

6 Discussion and conclusions

While the literature’s (e.g., Herzog et al., 2017; Matzler et al., 2018) description of digital transformation proposes a high-level understanding of the development or the re-design of business models, micro enterprises lack consensus in that regard. Similarly, small businesses draw less attention to psycho-cultural dimensions as otherwise suggested in the literature (Büst et al., 2015). Interestingly, the perception of digital transformation among medium-sized companies ranges from strongly one-sided and process-oriented to a more holistic definition that includes external dimensions as suggested in the literature. Both the literature (e.g., Morgan et al., 2018; Varadarajan, 2018) as well as the results of the research show different and often incomplete understandings of marketing strategy in the digital age. Among the micro-sized enterprises, companies in the ICT sector show a tendency for a more pragmatic approach to digital transformation to fully exploit the presented technological opportunities. Here, several medium-sized enterprises pursue a customer-oriented approach to strategic marketing by accompanying customers on their journey as described by Fitzgerald et al. (2013).

In contrast to the reviewed literature that suggests that enterprises which successfully adapt and exploit digitalisation can benefit from better customer experience and engagement (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 2013). Only one medium-sized enterprise from those examined reported an increase of customer loyalty that is likely to continue in the medium and long term. In general, micro-sized, small, and medium-sized enterprises indicated to have benefited from more efficient processes, cost reduction, and greater data transparency which is consistent with Peter et al.’s (2020) findings.

Figure 2 Marketing strategy canvas for evolving marketing strategies in the ICT sector



The results of the study suggest that Swiss SMEs in the ICT sector should (re)define their marketing strategy to benefit from digitalisation, both from a customer focus and engagement perspective. Recommendations from interview participants revealed 11 topics (Figure 2) that need to be examined when SMEs redefine their marketing strategy in the digital era.

In the battle for customer acquisition and business growth, and challenged by constantly emerging disruptive business models, customer proximity and strategic flexibility have become indispensable. First, SMEs need a common understanding (*strategic context*) of both digital transformation and marketing strategy. By following a *digital mindset*, building collaborative, diverse teams based on openness, flexibility, and interactivity (*interdisciplinary teams*), SMEs can improve their decision-making capabilities and their overall presence with stakeholders. A specific enabler is customer centricity that might be supported via *customer journey mapping* and through new collaborative frameworks such as *consumer networks* and *co-creation*, leading to potential adaptations of the current *business model*. For marketing planning and to engage with customers, content marketing driven by a *content strategy* that fosters user generated content will enable the firm to provide customer value, especially with educational content. Important internal enablers are to improve *digital literacy* among employees, the collection and analysis of *user data* including the use of AI (artificial intelligence), where meaningful, leading to increased *brand recognition and loyalty* through *personalised campaigns*. Based on the findings from the field research, these twelve components of the proposed marketing strategy canvas have the potential to support firms in defining their marketing strategy in the digital age.

7 Recommendations, contributions, future research, and limitations

Recommendations from research for Swiss SMEs in the ICT sector and in general include firstly to build a *common understanding* of the terms marketing strategy and digital transformation within the organisation. Secondly, a *corporate strategy* should exist as a starting point for the derivation of a marketing strategy. Thirdly, this study has shown that the *brand* is an instrument for differentiation that can create a competitive advantage and strengthen customer loyalty. In an increasingly digital world, brand value must be precisely established and communicated. To achieve this, firms need to develop a detailed marketing and communication strategy. This strategy should include *interactive/networked communication* via traditional and modern channels, such as social media and other digital platforms.

7.1 Managerial contribution

This study has shown that the diversity of definitions in the literature were also prevalent in some case organisations. For this reason, it is important to capture digital transformation in a holistic sense, as it goes beyond internal process optimisation (i.e., digitalisation) or the use of social media channels. In the context of the RQ, the synthesised views from case studies provide a definition of digital transformation as

“An enabler of the adaption or creation of innovative business models with customer-centric benefits and improved proximity culture, achieved by enhancing transparency in a networked organisation with fast speed of action.

With the introduction of modern digital technologies, operational processes and agile organisational structures can be developed, psycho-cultural components and various internal competencies can be enhanced, strategic business objectives can be achieved, and financial performance indicators can be improved.”

It is important that a coherent understanding of digital transformation exists among the whole organisation, as otherwise it would be challenging to communicate and implement the corporate strategy in the firm. These elements are mainly covered in the *digital mindset* dimension of the proposed marketing strategy canvas.

The second key contribution is the validation of the insufficient conceptualisation of strategic marketing among marketers of SMEs in the ICT sector. Often, marketing strategy is understood as the traditional 4Ps of product, promotion, placement, and price. Marketing strategies in the digital age require additional components such as value proposition, a brand strategy, and a customer relationship strategy. The findings of this research recommend a clear definition of a comprehensive and consistent (digital) marketing strategy for the organisation.

Third, research has shown that customer centricity is of high relevance for some segments according to firm sizes as described in the literature. The findings of the research build on these existing studies and make several contributions as follows: First, the key drivers of digital transformation are customers and their experiences across the customer lifecycle. Second, the involvement of the audience in a co-creation process is an important aspect that needs to be explored. Third, customer focus is incremental to the value creation process and the evolution of business models. In order to deliver personalised offers and experiences that are valuable to the audience, firms are required to establish multiple touchpoints with their customers and properly understand their needs and expectations.

Fourth, the findings have advanced Peter's (2017) SME transformational study by adding the aspect of the *mindset change*. Employees should be supported in shifting their mindset and accepting the new digital strategy, which would in turn boost the company's transformation journey.

Finally, the application of an agile approach in everyday operations can be advantageous in being proactive in handling obstacles or failures (technology-related or personal-related resistance). Executives are also challenged to take their employees along the transformational journey by communicating the long-term goal and vision. This requires the establishment of an innovative work culture, people-integration management practices, as well as a digital skills development. The study findings recommend the implementation of a new leadership approach to effectively manage and navigate a complex change process such as digital transformation.

7.2 Theoretical contribution

The research provided empirical data regarding evolving marketing strategies in Swiss SMEs in the ICT sector in support of digital transformation. This includes the identification of customers, the customer experience, and the employees' mindset as main drivers of digital transformation as per findings from Heierli et al. (2019) and aligned with Peter et al. (2020). This aligns with a reformed view of marketing strategy in the digital era by emphasising data in customer journeys as previously identified by Kotler et al. (2017), Lamb et al. (2018) and Varadarajan (2018). Findings show that SMEs

which integrate marketing into several disciplines across the organisation benefit from an improved CRM as supported by Kang et al. (2020) and Kumar (2018).

However, research also highlights the difficulties of Swiss SMEs to incorporate content and knowledge offerings in order to provide value-add, despite of recommendations from, e.g., Atiker (2018) and Büst et al. (2015). Adding to findings from Autio (2017) and Joensuu-Salo et al. (2018), the research confirms that increased value through brand building can be achieved through an adjusted business model and/or by investing into digital channels. Finally, the research confirms findings from, e.g., Grampp et al. (2018), Matzler et al. (2018) and Lünendonk (2019) that advancing and establishing a digital culture is necessary for successful digital transformation. Findings suggest that a lean and agile approach is a key prerequisite for mastering the complexities of the digital age.

7.3 Limitations

The study was limited to SMEs in the ICT industry, a limitation due to the specific nature of the ICT sector regarding digitalisation/digital transformation and in relation to generalisability to other sectors. In addition, neither SMEs in the French nor the Italian speaking regions of Switzerland were considered in the research, which makes it therefore not representative for all Swiss SMEs in ICT.

As B2B and B2C organisations adopt different marketing strategies, it should be recognised that the conducted study analyses a mixture of both B2B and B2C firms, which could have had an influence on the outcome. Finally, the sample was selected from a pre-existing SME digital transformation study which might include a participant bias towards the topic of digitalisation. Further, given the rapid pace of digitalisation, the changing environmental conditions, and the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants' responses in this study could be substantially different today, as the data collection has taken place in 2019. Moreover, the usual limitations of analysis and interpretation of qualitative data should be acknowledged.

7.4 Further research

Generally, this study could be replicated for other industries, for different company sizes or by varying specific aspects of the adopted research conditions. As noted in the limitation section, the findings are bound to a specific industry in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Further research may consider other industries and/or regions.

The study repeatedly refers to the implications of digitalisation/digital transformation and their role as an interface between businesses and customers. Although the research does examine the barriers to the successful adoption of digital technologies, it predominantly presents the positive impact on the business once the transformation has been completed. It would be, therefore, fruitful to conduct further research into the possible negative implications of digital transformation in terms of, e.g., IT and data security, privacy, and the impact on employees. Additionally, future research would help to validate the practical contribution of the presented marketing strategy canvas and its benefit in business practice. Finally, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, all industry sectors experience fundamental strategic changes, many of which involve incorporating digital solutions to ensure continued customer iterations. Many of these

changes are driven and facilitated by digital technologies, but could be analysed in light of post COVID-19 settings.

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