

Understanding the influencing factors on firms' social media marketing strategies development: A cross-country investigation

Abstract

Despite the surge in social media (SM) studies within marketing research, there has been limited empirical research focusing on the factors influencing social media marketing strategy (SMMS) development in an international context. We aim to bridge this gap through an exploratory and comparative study involving 32 companies from Finland, China, and Brazil. Using inductive data analysis, we identify both internal and external factors that drive and hinder the development of firms' SMMSs. Additionally, we explore the essential elements in SMMS implementation based on the key practices observed among these firms, which facilitates an in-depth understanding of the cultural impact on SMMS development. Our proposed conceptual model and research propositions highlight the significance of cultural values and enhance our understanding of the SMMS development process. The findings can serve as a foundation for future research and provide valuable managerial insights, particularly for firms operating in different cultural settings.

Keywords: Social media; Social media marketing strategy; Cross-cultural study; International marketing strategy; Cultural value

1. Introduction

Social media (SM) has significantly evolved as marketing and business tools to attract new customers, influence customer preferences, and foster consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Gu *et al.*, 2024; Hernández-Ortega *et al.*, 2022; Wei *et al.*, 2023). In response to this digital revolution, business models are increasingly embracing virtual-based relationships and remote communications, prompting companies to seek strategic ways to leverage SM tools and derive value from their SM initiatives (Chaker *et al.*, 2022). A recent survey involving over 1,800 marketers revealed that the majority view SM as an integral component of their overall strategies, with 58.8% rating it as “very important” and about 30% considering it “somewhat important” (Buffer, 2019). However, many firms still lack a coherent SM strategy and face uncertainties caused by policy changes, turbulent market environments, and intensified competition (Saari *et al.*, 2022). While this presents tremendous opportunities for firms, it also poses enormous challenges in capitalizing on the strategic potential of SM platforms (Appel *et al.*, 2020).

In recent years, several well-established companies have been pushed to the brink due to failures in their social media marketing strategies (SMMSs) in global markets. In the case of Dolce & Gabbana, for example, the renowned Italian fashion brand lost 98% of its Chinese market following the release of a racially sensitive and stereotypical advertising video¹. Victoria’s Secret also faced criticism on SM for creating dragon-themed outfits. SM users argued that traditional Chinese cultural symbols should be respected and combining them with bikinis and lingerie was seen as inappropriate and provocative². These situations are not unique to China; in Brazil, brands have faced boycotts for actions misaligned with social norms³; and in Finland, products from

1 In <https://bettermarketing.pub/how-dolce-gabbana-lost-98-of-their-chinese-market-with-one-video-cb2baacb4a10>, consulted on 11/2/2024.

2 In <https://jingdaily.com/how-chinese-consumers-reacted-to-dragons-on-the-runway-at-the-victorias-secret-fashion-show/>, consulted on 11/2/2024.

3 In <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/05/brazil-call-for-boycotts-major-companies-support-jair-bolsonaro>, consulted on 11/2/2024.

Russia and Belarus were sanctioned in response to the conflict in Ukraine⁴. These examples illustrate that institutional and cultural factors are pivotal for international firms when developing their SMMSs. These factors significantly influence how marketers engage with their target markets and how they address customer preferences and behaviours on SM platforms (Gupta *et al.*, 2018; Steinhoff *et al.*, 2023).

As the value of SM is highlighted and substantiated by extensive studies (e.g., Ancillai *et al.*, 2019; Cartwright *et al.*, 2021; Wies *et al.*, 2023), SMMS has emerged as an important research topic in marketing studies. SMMS, an integrated pattern of activities by a firm that transforms SM resources (i.e., social interactions and connections) into strategic means for its business purposes, plays a crucial role in enhancing business performance (Li *et al.*, 2021). Although a rich literature has identified the importance of SMMS for business purposes (e.g., Chaker *et al.*, 2022; Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2021), there is still a need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the development of SMMS, particularly in an international context.

To address the gaps mentioned above and respond to the calls for effective strategies to leverage SM in this dynamic business landscape (e.g., Gu *et al.*, 2024; Meyer *et al.*, 2023; Saari *et al.*, 2022), this study intends to explore the influencing factors of SMMS development process as well as the role of culture in the international context. Through an inductive research approach involving in-depth analysis of 32 interviews firms from Finland, China, and Brazil, we explore the potential drivers and barriers throughout the SMMS development process and how cultural differences shape SMMS decision-making among firms in the countries under study.

In this study, we make several important contributions to the international business and marketing literature. First, we provide a holistic picture of the factors influencing SMMS development. Our study indicates that both internal (firm-level resources and capabilities) and external (market-level and country-level) drivers and barriers shape the development of firms' SMMSs. Identifying such institutional antecedents provides

⁴ In <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1128910/finland-sweden-boxing-boycotts>, consulted on 11/2/2024.

a more comprehensive understanding of SMMS development for international firms. Second, we extended Li *et al.*'s (2021) SMMS development framework by identifying key activities in firms' SMMS development process. This enrichment provides a groundwork for future cross-cultural studies in SM marketing. Third, our comparative study of Chinese, Brazilian, and Finnish firms reveals varying mindsets and approaches to SM selling goals and SMMSs among firms in three countries. These findings highlight distinct perspectives on transactional and relational marketing in the marketing process across cultures (Sheth and Sharma, 1997). Using SM platform as a foundational element, our research can serve as a beneficial starting point for businesses aiming to adapt their international strategies to the diverse markets they cater to.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 SM and SMMS

In the field of marketing, SM serve as platforms where users can create and exchange user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Given its interactive nature, SM can facilitate interactions between firms and consumers, as well as between consumers themselves, which distinguishes it from other digital technologies. To leverage its interactivity, businesses should develop SM strategies that aim to build customer-brand relationships and foster long-term engagement rather than simply reacting to online customer behaviours and pushing content through SM channels (Chaker *et al.*, 2022; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). Therefore, a firm's strategic use of SM should not be limited to using it as a communication technology to increase short-term sales or for promotional purposes. But rather, the focus should be on leveraging SM to create customer value for business purposes (Li *et al.*, 2023).

SMMS, as a firm's integrated pattern of activities to strategically use SM for different business purposes (Li *et al.*, 2021; Muninger *et al.*, 2022), aligns with the marketing strategy formulation, which involves understanding customer needs and behaviours, segmentation, targeting, and differentiation (EI-Ansary, 2006). Li *et al.* (2021) conceptualize SMMS as a developmental sequence encompassing drivers, inputs,

throughputs, and outputs. **Table 1** presents a comparative analysis between SM and SMMS across four key aspects: definition, objectives, features, and performance measurement. This comparison delineates SM as a technological and social phenomenon while SMMS as a series of deliberate and goal-oriented organizational activities (Li *et al.*, 2021; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Insert Table 1 about here.

2.2 The role of national culture on SM

Individual values are influenced not only by marketing strategy and the environment but also by other society members through the socialisation process (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Consequently, an individual's behaviour reflects their cultural value system, which is context-specific and evolves over time (Luna and Gupta, 2001). Researchers have acknowledged culture as a determining factor in individuals' attitudes and behaviours (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Hofstede's cultural model, which comprises six basic value dimensions: individualism, masculinity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence (Hofstede and Bond, 1984; Hofstede *et al.*, 2010), stands as one of the most widely used national cultural frameworks in sociology, marketing, and management studies (Soares *et al.*, 2007; Steenkamp, 2001).

In the SM context, studies have shown that cultural orientations can significantly impact on firms' strategies and customer behaviours (Gupta *et al.*, 2018; Liadeli *et al.*, 2023). For example, based on a comparative study of SM posts from China and the US, Tsai and Men (2012) found that brands' SM pages in China tend to appeal to collectivist cultural values, evident in the prevalent use of terms like 'we' and 'friends' to emphasize interpersonal relationships and interdependence. In contrast, American corporates' SM pages tend to promote more individualistic values, featuring posts that highlight individuality, independence, or self-fulfilment. Kitirattarkarn *et al.* (2019) noted that individuals living in collectivistic cultures exhibit higher engagement behaviours toward informational content compared to those in individualistic cultures.

The other cultural dimensions have also been extensively studied in relation to a wide range of behaviours. Research has shown that cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to resist changes strongly, whereas low uncertainty avoidance cultures are more fearless about the future and open to innovations, such as adopting the internet as a new communication medium (Hermeking, 2005). Chiu *et al.* (2019) found that individuals from long-term-oriented cultures usually spend more time in searching for and processing information on SM due to a cautious approach to risks. The indulgence dimension of culture is closely linked with hedonic values (Heydari *et al.*, 2021), and studies have revealed that consumers from indulgent cultures tend to favour digital media for shopping (Lu *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, Lam *et al.* (2009) suggest that consumers in masculine societies are more likely to express their opinions openly and engage in word-of-mouth activities than those in feminine societies, reflecting their more assertive nature.

2.3 Institutional Theory and SM

We draw on institutional theory to understand the factors influencing firms' SMMS development. According to this theory, organizational behaviours are shaped by the cultural and social environment in which they operate, highlighting the importance of social processes, norms, and expectations in explaining firms' practices and behaviours (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Scott (1995) defines institutions as "social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience. [They] are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements" (p.53). Institutions have formal and informal components (Deephouse *et al.*, 2016). The formal components consist of explicit rules and structures, such as constitutions, policies, and government regulations, that regulate organizational and human behaviours. In contrast, the informal components include the unwritten and implicit rules and norms present in any diverse institutional environment, such as national culture (Crossland and Hambrick, 2011; Peng *et al.*, 2008).

Some scholars have employed institutional theory to highlight how institutional factors influence variables that could play a key role in SM studies (e.g., Griffith *et al.*, 2022; Lin *et al.*, 2021; Steinhoff *et al.*, 2023). For example, competitors can influence firms'

attitudes towards SM adoption, as they tend to align their SM practices with their rivals to ensure legitimacy in the competitive market environment (Foltean *et al.*, 2019; Kooli *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the political landscape can profoundly influence firms' SM strategies, particularly in environments where institutions actively oversee and regulate user-generated content and SM user behaviours (Abedin and Babar, 2018; Liadeli *et al.*, 2023).

2.4 The proposed research framework

With institutional theory as the underlying theoretical foundation in this study, we have developed a preliminary research framework based on Li *et al.*'s (2021) conceptualization of the SMMS development process, which posits that firms develop SMMS through a process that includes four major components: drivers, inputs, throughputs, and outputs. The drivers are defined as the firm's SM marketing objectives and the customers' motivations to use SM. The inputs include the firm's SM engagement initiatives and customers' SM behaviors. The throughputs show how the firm connects and interacts with customers to exchange resources and fulfill needs, and the resulting outcomes are referred to outputs.

This study aims to enrich the SMMS development process framework in three ways. First, we will explore the comprehensive drivers and barriers as institutional antecedents from three levels: the firm level, the market level, and the country level. Second, we will highlight the critical components of throughputs from a firm's perspective, focusing on the common practices (i.e., key activities) firms employ in their throughputs to develop SMMSs. This exploration is intended to deepen the understanding of the existing framework by incorporating a more granular view of firms' SM practices within the SMMS development process. Third, as the original framework was primarily designed within a domestic context and did not account for differences across countries or cultures, our study also seeks to enhance the model by integrating these cultural distinctions, supported by evidence from empirical research. We outline our preliminary research framework in **Figure 1**.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research approach and context

The primary goal of this study is to elucidate the factors that facilitate or impede the development of SMMSs in firms. Given the broad scope of this research aim and the scarcity of research on this topic, an inductive approach was suitable for understanding the intricacies of firms' SM practices and strategies (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). Therefore, we adopted an inductive research design.

Another objective of this research is to investigate the cultural differences that may impact firms' SMMSs. Our selection of firms from Finland, China, and Brazil for this empirical inquiry is based on the significant cultural, economic, and social contrasts between these countries and the goal of achieving a broad geographic representation across Asia, Europe, and South America. Referencing Hofstede's cultural dimensions as detailed in **Table 2**, we observe distinct cultural variances: China exhibits characteristics of collectivism, high power distance, and long-term orientation, which contrast with Finland's individualistic, low power distance, and feminine traits, as well as Brazil's combination of masculinity, high uncertainty avoidance, and indulgent tendencies.

These cultural differences, along with the selected countries' varying levels of social media penetration, diverse market maturities, and unique economic landscapes, provide a robust foundation for examining the cultural nuances influencing SMMS development across global markets. For example, China's rapid digital innovation, driven by government initiatives, fosters an environment where firms develop cutting-edge technologies and leverage high social media penetration through platforms like WeChat and TikTok (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Zhang, 2021). In contrast, Finland's mature market is characterized by high digital literacy, reflecting an advanced information society with widespread internet access and usage (Ertiö *et al.*, 2020; Jang *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile, Brazil's developing economy shows significant social media engagement,

driven by factors such as entertainment value and the need to maintain interpersonal connectivity, making it a rich ground for examining SMMS in an emerging market context (de Oliveira *et al.*, 2016; García-Perdomo *et al.*, 2018).

Insert Table 2 about here.

3.2 Data collection

Following the approach of Gioia *et al.* (2013), data were gathered through comprehensive in-depth interviews using a flexible interview protocol, which provided a general framework and key topics/questions but allowed for adaptation based on the flow of conversation and emerging themes. We aimed to capture a wide array of SMMS practices, so we did not set any limitations on industry type, sector, or firm size. This approach allowed us to discern patterns and strategies beyond the confines of specific industry dynamics, providing insights that could potentially be generalized across various contexts. Therefore, we adopted a purposeful sampling strategy and contacted firms actively using SM for business purposes with relevant experiences. We initiated contact with the respondents via emails (sometimes followed by phone calls), clearly stating our research objectives and requesting their participation (Creswell, 2012). Each respondent was assured of anonymity and confidentiality when reporting the results.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with firms across three countries over a 12-month research period. Data collection concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation was determined by continuously analysing the data during the collection process and identifying the point at which no new substantive insights or themes emerged from additional interviews (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Malshe and Sohi, 2009). In our case, theoretical saturation was assessed across the entire sample as well as within each individual country to ensure both a holistic view of SMMS development and a thorough understanding of country-specific cultural impacts. Our final sample comprised 32 firms: ten from Finland, ten from China, and twelve from Brazil. The participants were all experienced individuals with SM operations at their companies and spoke as representatives of their firms. The case companies operate in various

industries, including digital technology, insurance, media, retailing, real estate, and others. **Table 3** provides a detailed profile of the respondents. Most firms have international sales and have been using SM platforms for business for at least one year. They were interviewed either face-to-face or online. The interview guide was sent to each participant before the interviews. This approach ensured that the interviews were conversational and focused, while also allowing for the exploration of potentially significant themes observed during the interviews (Creswell, 2012).

Insert Table 3 about here.

On average, the interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. After obtaining some background information about their firms and job responsibilities, the second set of questions was asked to gain a general understanding of firms' SM practices. These questions covered topics such as SM marketing objectives, types of posts and content, frequency of SM updates, SM target groups, and challenges and risks associated with SM. The third set of questions focused on strategies, requiring the informants to explain their firms' SMMSs, including the decision-making process and the resources and capabilities involved. In the final part, informants were encouraged to speak freely about the aforementioned topics, allowing us to probe further and uncover detailed insights into key emerging themes. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In some cases, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify unclear and emerging issues that occurred during the data analysis.

Interviews were conducted in the native language of each participant in China and Brazil, and in English with Finnish firms. We carefully considered local customs and norms to ensure cultural sensitivity when framing our interview questions and interpreting responses (Irvine *et al.*, 2008; Osland and Bird, 2000). For example, in China, we accounted for the importance of collectivist values and social harmony in our questions (Tsai and Men, 2012). In Finland, we ensured our questions were concise and respectful of personal boundaries, reflecting the high value placed on privacy and direct communication (Nishimura *et al.*, 2008). In Brazil, we adapted our questions to be more flexible and allowed for expressive and detailed personal stories, which align

with the communicative and relational nature of Brazilian culture (Giri, 2006). Additionally, we considered the varying popularity and accessibility of different social media platforms in each country when developing our themes. In China, platforms like WeChat and TikTok play multifaceted roles in communication, e-commerce, and entertainment (Cheung *et al.*, 2021). In Finland, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn are used for both professional and personal purposes (Ertiö *et al.*, 2020). In Brazil, platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp highlight social interactions, community building, and their impact on daily life and local business promotions (de Oliveira *et al.*, 2016). The authors met regularly to discuss and ensure full awareness of these cultural and contextual differences. This contextual awareness allowed us to accurately reflect the unique environments of each country in our analysis.

To overcome the possible bias by interviewees, we also collected documents from the case firms, including available internal materials (e.g., internal newsletters) and external materials such as press releases on firms' websites and SM pages. The wealth of documentation facilitated the observation of firms' SM interactions and provided valuable insights into their key SM activities and strategies over time. The triangulation of various data sources was crucial to ensure consistency with the findings and achieving theoretical saturation by integrating and analysing diverse data points until no new substantive insights or themes emerged (Chitac; 2022; Yin, 2011).

3.3 Data analysis

Our research is of exploratory nature, aiming to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the complex SMMS phenomena. Given the rich, complex, and nuanced nature of our data, we adopted the Gioia method (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), a grounded-theory-based inductive approach that “allows for a systematic presentation of both first-order analysis, derived from informant-centric terms or codes, and second-order analysis, derived from researcher-centric concepts, themes, and dimensions” (Gehman *et al.* 2018, p.286). This iterative and transparent method of data analysis is particularly effective in capturing the depth of qualitative data and ensuring that theoretical insights are empirically grounded (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). The Gioia method is widely applied in

marketing research and is well-suited for international studies (Hadjielias *et al.*, 2021; Hagen *et al.*, 2019; Magnani and Gioia, 2022). Furthermore, to ensure the credibility of the information provided by interviewees, we utilized NVivo software for coding, analysing, and synthesizing the data, following an iterative categorization approach (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019).

We started with open coding based on our fundamental research objectives and information extracted from the interviews (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). In this initial data analysis stage, we closely adhered to the language utilized by our respondents, thus firmly grounding our understanding based on the empirical data. In the next step, we categorized these themes into broader groups. During this process, we compared the emerging findings with existing literature and iteratively refined our codes and concepts by integrating theory and data.

Insert Figure 2 and 3 about here.

As depicted in **Figure 2** and **3**, we underwent an iterative process and aggregated the first-order statements (from interview quotes) into more abstract second-order concepts (from emerging patterns and existing theory), which were later collapsed into aggregate dimensions (Gioia *et al.*, 2010). **Web Appendix Table 1** provides representative interview quotes from which we derived concepts and then distilled the themes.

4. Findings

This section presents our findings by integrating quotes to exemplify our key concepts. We begin our discussions by presenting themes and emerging ideas that underpin the barriers and drivers of the SMMS development process (**Figure 2**). The next set of findings describes the key practices of SMMS (**Figure 3**), which inform the subsequent discussions regarding the cultural comparison between firms in the three countries.

4.1 The barriers and drivers of the SMMS development process

All respondents identified the primary challenges and opportunities associated with their SMMSs. Often, a challenge for some firms can represent an opportunity for others.

Similarly, barriers impeding SMMS development in certain firms may serve as drivers in others. From this perspective, we have merged barriers and drivers into a singular category to explore the underlying themes and concepts. Our analysis indicates that a firm's SMMS development is influenced by both internal and external factors. The internal barriers and drivers primarily pertain to (1) resources (e.g., financial and human resources) and (2) capabilities (e.g., market adaptation and data management). The external barriers and drivers are mainly related to (1) market-level factors (e.g., competition and platform regulation) and (2) country-level factors (e.g., cultural and political issues).

4.1.1 Internal barriers and drivers

Resource-related. Our data analysis suggests that financial constraints, limited human resources, and time availability primarily hinder the development of SMMS. Particularly in SMEs, it's common for a single marketing manager or specialist to handle all SM activities, such as content creation and customer interaction. With multiple responsibilities and roles, many respondents found it challenging to deliver engaging content and maintain a consistent update frequency on SM platforms. Individuals with expertise in SM marketing are considered crucial for companies to provide engaging content, which is deemed essential by most of the firms in our study. The critical nature of financial, human, and temporal resources was repeatedly emphasized, with one firm stating:

“To get a good score, sometimes we stay late answering customers; it's a challenge to have to stay connected almost 24 hours a day; you have to have many people working on it to get it (B11).”

Participants also highlighted the role of leadership as a strong driving force for advancing SMMS development, while the lack of organizational support emerged as the most significant obstacle. For instance, the global communication manager in the case firm F1 (based in Finland) described how the company's American CEO recognized the importance of SM early on and initiated its use as a marketing and communication channel. However, in several Chinese firms, informants mentioned a

lack of investment in exploring SM due to insufficient knowledge and awareness among their leaders.

Infrastructure also played a dual role as both an obstacle and a driver. For example, inadequate IT technologies for monitoring SM interactions were a common barrier mentioned by most interviewed firms. As one case firm (F3) explained, “*We get that amount of feedback...we get a lot... we need to have the automatic processing system.*” On the other hand, infrastructure such as digital payment systems acted as facilitators that boosted SM sales for some firms (e.g., B8).

Capability-related. Our data analysis reinforces the importance of inside-out and outside-in capabilities (Day, 2011) in developing a firm’s SMMS. The inside-out marketing capability refers to the interrelated organizational routines for implementing marketing strategies (Vorhies and Morgan, 2005). Based on our data analysis, several inside-out marketing capabilities emerged, including communication, planning, and implementation. The most significant barrier identified by most informants was the marketing communication capability, specifically about SM content. One interviewee stated, “*What we needed urgent is the content (C7).*” In some large companies, the analysis of interviews reveals that each business unit has its own SM accounts, which sometimes causes confusion for customers who may spot some inconsistency among the different business areas of the firm.

Our data analysis also indicates that a lack of market planning and implementation capabilities hinders the effectiveness of SM marketing. Effectively targeting and segmenting customers in SM can be challenging, as one participant stated: “*customer segmentation is the most difficult one (C7).*” The decision-making process can vary, being either flat or bureaucratic, involving approvals from different levels, which can facilitate or hinder SMMS development. Regarding marketing implementation capability, measuring performance is difficult for almost all case companies. Generally, simple metrics such as the number of followers and “likes” are used as measurements. As the F8 commented:

“One of the greatest challenges is confirming ROI, an indicator of return on investment. As indicated above, B2B sales have an extended sales circle, so it is becoming difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of our own invests in content marketing and social networks, in particular.”

The outside-in capabilities reflect the view that firms generate competitive advantage from different sources: market-sensing, customer-engaging, and partner-linking (Mu, 2015). Given the vast marketing opportunities offered by SM, the capabilities of sensing and seizing the opportunities are crucial. Market-sensing capabilities, driven by customer feedback and data integration from various platforms, are essential in highly competitive environments. One interviewee specified, *“we collect data, and we compare with other firms a lot (F6).”*

The interviews also highlighted the importance of customer-engaging capabilities, which enable firms to engage customers and build long-term relationships with them on SM. Nevertheless, this can be challenging, as depicted by the following quote: *“the problem is how to transform the SM followers to real customers...The hardest thing for us is maintaining a relationship with customers on SM (C8).”* Furthermore, our data analysis indicates that the ability to link with business partners, thereby accessing a wider array of resources and competencies on SM, is becoming a driving force for some of the interviewed firms.

4.1.2 External barriers and drivers

Market-level barriers and drivers. The finding supports the notion that market-level drivers and barriers stem from competition and platform-related factors. Interviews reveal that competition intensifies because SM lowers the barriers to entry, as highlighted by the ease of creating new accounts and posting content. Consequently, firms constantly compete to create engaging content, capture customer attention, and gain favourable rankings from SM algorithms. As one interviewee expressed:

“We are on a platform that the faster you respond to customers, you get the best rated, and your ads appear on the front pages when a person searches for a certain instrument (B11).”

Participants also recognized the challenge posed by the ever-changing algorithms and rules of SM platforms. Many interviewees perceive these as major obstacles in optimizing content and campaigns. The content marketing process can be incredibly daunting as SM algorithms are constantly changing, making it difficult for marketers to keep up, as one respondent stated, *“last week Instagram made 36 updates on the platform which forces us to change acting (B9).”*

Country-level barriers and drivers. Country-level regulations have a significant impact on firms' SMMSs as they determine permissible content and the choice of SM platforms. For example, political reasons have led to the ban of platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp in China, thus preventing Chinese firms from utilizing these prominent international SM platforms for marketing purposes. In Brazil, several firms emphasized the need to avoid political issues as they could negatively impact business performance. A quote from a Brazilian informant exemplifies how regulation and political issues influence their SMMSs:

“The biggest challenge is the regulatory restrictions because we sell breast milk substitute (infant formula), by regulation, it is difficult to make any communication that encourages the replacement of breast milk. In addition, there are activists against infant formulas, naturalists against processed foods (B9).”

The data analysis further identified cultural and language barriers that hinder companies' navigation of new markets. These barriers can impede a company's ability to effectively promote products and build brand awareness among local customers through SM. For example, a Finnish firm (F6) highlighted the language barrier, *“The language, for example, may be an issue: whereas in Scandinavia using English is fine, in Baltic countries and Poland, as well as in Russia and Ukraine, it is not. That is why we always prefer to have some locals assisting us when specifically targeting a market.”*

In addition to language, there are other cultural differences. For instance, the acceptability of showcasing the body in advertisements for products such as lingerie varies between Brazil and China.

The study also highlighted the significance of political and economic factors in influencing a firm's SMMS development. Brazilian firms, in particular, exhibit greater concern regarding the country's unstable and highly polarized political landscape, which contributes to their high perceived risks associated with SM. As one respondent stated, *"In Brazil, we are experiencing a moment of great polarization (mainly political). In this context communities are less tolerant to messages and values that are at odds with their 'truths'. So over the last three years, ...the messages have somehow become generic, whether about cultures, opinions, social values, etc (B5)."*

Economic considerations also play a role, as certain areas face challenges due to limited internet access and inadequate digital equipment, posing obstacles to the development of robust SMMSs. As observed by one informant *"I believe that Brazil is a country that consumes social networks and likes them. The greatest difficulty today is the internet and access to buy decent equipment, the paddles are unequal, and many people have a device, but as things evolve a lot, they may not be able to use it right. But more the internet than the device; access is terrible here."* Conversely, countries with advanced digital infrastructure and payment systems enjoy advantages in leveraging SM as sales and advertising channels. For instance, firms in China benefit significantly from their advanced digital ecosystems, as one Chinese respondent noted:

"Our digital payment platforms like WeChat Pay and Alipay integrated on social media enable seamless transactions. Customers can order furniture on our social media page within a minute. This not only streamlines the purchasing process but also encourages impulsive buying and boost our sales (C10)."

4.2 The key practices of SMMSs

Given our view of SMMS as a developmental process, it is likely that each strategy incorporates essential components throughout its development process. Accordingly,

our analysis here primarily focuses on examining the key practices within a firm's SMMS, aiming to provide a deeper understanding of the common practices adopted by all the case firms under study. Moreover, this approach enables the subsequent analysis in this study, which involves conducting a cultural comparison between firms operating in different countries. Data analysis revealed four key practices that emerged during the SMMS development process: social selling, content marketing, risk management, and relationship management. Firms' emphasis on these key practices reflects their different SMMS objectives and approaches (Li *et al.*, 2021).

Social selling. SM has become a critical selling outlet for many businesses. While some firms prioritize sales as their primary or key goal for using SM, this is not the case for all firms (Ancillai *et al.*, 2019). As a result, a variety of SM objectives and corresponding activities are observed. The following quotes illustrate various firms' selling aims and activities on SM. Firms with other primary goals tend to show a lower level of selling activities. For instance, with a focus on communication, case firm F4 tends to post more about their events and industry news, as quoted from the company respondent: "*SM is more like a microphone to speak, to let people know what I think. But it's not like a bridge to connect*". In contrast, firm C2 has a straightforward approach: "*SM is to sell or provide a driving force for sales.*" In conclusion, firms with a strong intention to use SM as a selling channel exhibit a higher level of selling activities. These include frequent posting of promotional content, calls to action for purchasing, clearly defined SM selling target groups, and well-established SM selling strategies.

Content marketing. SM content marketing focuses on creating and delivering valuable content, indirectly cultivating long-term sales (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). Based on our analysis, firms' content marketing strategies vary based on their marketing objectives, available resources, and knowledge of SM marketing. Those with sufficient resources and knowledge are inclined to deliver content using various formats (e.g., videos). Additionally, they encourage customer content co-creation by prompting SM users to post, comment, and generate positive content related to the firm. In general,

the more a firm intends to use SM for direct selling, the more its content marketing strategy is characterized by transactional-oriented and informational content. The following quotes show the changes in firms' content marketing strategies.

“Years ago, the goal was to have the largest content. Now we focus on the quality of the content instead of quantity. We also know the profile of our audience better and seek to bring information that awakens and aggregates their interest (B8).”

Risk management. We refer to risk management as the process encompassing the perception, analysis, and control of SM risks. Specifically, a firm's SM risk management includes how they perceive risk and utilise data generated from SM to monitor and manage risk (e.g., negative comments) (Rehman *et al.*, 2020). Firms with a high-risk perception of SM tend to be cautious, maintain strong data management practices, and act swiftly on any identified risks. For instance, the quote from firm B9 shows a high level of risk perception: *“Exposing yourself (on SM) is risky.”* Additionally, case firm B3 highlighted the need for caution, stating: *“managers need to understand that the social network is an official channel, there is a risk of exposing the organisation there; you cannot allow people with little common sense to speak out in the name of our organisation.”* Case firm F6 exemplifies a high level of data management with their statement: *“we collect SM data and actually use it for decisions.”* Furthermore, firm B8 provides a strong example of complaint handling: *“all messages are answered quickly and, depending on the complaint, we ask for the phone and speak to the customer personally.”*

Relationship management. Many firms emphasize the importance of relationship management. As one firm indicated, *“the fundamental is to maintain a good relationship with customers. It's not about giving some free samples, but really is how to get closer to them (C5).”* Maintaining a good relationship with customers through SM requires firms to actively listen to customer voices (i.e., social listening) and proactively respond to customer needs (i.e., SM interactions). Our interview data shows that some firms display strong tendencies and take decisive actions in social listening

and SM interactions. The following quote demonstrates one case firm's high-level customer management:

“The metric we use today for our customers is engagement. The number of followers has been considered before, but the most important factor is how much our audience interacts with the content we offer. Engagement serves as a thermometer that points out the effectiveness of our communication actions; based on that, we know where improvement is needed to attract leads and generate more sales (B6).”

4.3 The variation of SMMS key practices across countries

To facilitate a comparative analysis of practices among firms from different countries, we have compiled these key practices for each firm in **Table 4**. As shown in the table, we conducted constant comparisons to identify any patterns. We used “strong” and “weak” dimensions to indicate firms' SMMS key practices. For example, in the case of selling-oriented objective, if a firm strongly emphasized selling, we classify it as “strong”; otherwise, we categorize it as “weak”. The same coding principle applies to other key practices. For instance, if a firm's SM content is predominantly informational, featuring extensive product or brand information, we categorize it as “strong” in informational-focused content. Otherwise, it is classified as “weak”. Through this comparative approach, we discerned different mindsets and behaviours across the three countries. This analysis further forms the basis for our propositions regarding the cultural impact on firms' SMMS development processes.

Insert Table 4 about here.

Data analysis revealed notable differences in approaches to SM content and campaigns. The interviews indicate that SM outsourcing is prevalent in China, with its advanced supporting industries for content design, dissemination, SM interactions, and monitoring, all of which can be easily subcontracted to professional agencies at varying costs. Due to intense competition, some Chinese companies use paid writers or fake accounts to provide positive comments and promote themselves on SM. In Brazil,

larger companies primarily rely on their internal resources and capabilities for SM marketing, while smaller firms admit to outsourcing. In Finland, outsourcing is rare among the firms we interviewed because most have their own specialists responsible for managing SM operations.

There were also distinctive content marketing practices among firms in three countries. In China, several respondents (e.g., C1, C2, and C3) mentioned the tactic of “clout-chasing,” which was not mentioned by Brazilian and Finnish firms. Many interviewed Chinese firms tend to strategically hashtag or link their SM posts to trending topics in society, aiming to generate more clicks and attention. As one interviewee explained, “*our SM campaign is to try to make it as ‘noisy’ as possible so that it will get more discussions online* (C2).” In general, live streaming has emerged as a popular and well-established industry in China, unlike in the other two countries, facilitating the formation of interactive communities and e-commerce opportunities.

The input analysis also reveals that risk management is significantly neglected in both China and Finland, whereas Brazilian firms give it more attention. In general, firms in Brazil exert greater effort in data management, complaint handling, and social listening compared to Finnish and Chinese firms, as Brazilian firms perceive more risks associated with SM (e.g., negative word-of-mouth and customer churn) (Cruz *et al.*, 2021). Many interviewees from China strongly emphasized relationship management, recognizing the key challenge of building and maintaining good customer relationships on SM. In contrast, Finnish and Brazilian firms do not show such strong concerns regarding their relationship management on SM as compared to Chinese firms.

We also carefully examined each firm’s primary SM marketing objectives, which drive their actual key SMMS practices. Over half of the firms from the three countries emphasized the importance of SM as a branding tool, identifying branding as their primary strategic goal. However, five Chinese firms specifically highlighted using SM for transactional purposes, such as sales and promotion. Two Brazilian firms also mentioned this objective, one of which reported significant success. In contrast, Finnish firms focus more on communication and staying up-to-date to retain and attract new

clients and employees. As one Finnish respondent explained: “*we don’t want to do sales and promotion directly, that will destroy our reliability (F5).*”

The data reveals that Chinese firms generally have a stronger transactional orientation compared to Finnish and Brazilian firms. They are more eager to find ways to link SM to sales, which seems somewhat contradictory to their stated main challenge of “relationship building”. This discrepancy may arise from the intense competition in the Chinese market, where SM’s ease and cost-effectiveness as a digital tool diminish the focus on building long-term relationships. Conversely, Brazilian firms demonstrate a stronger relational orientation focusing on customer engagement (Graça *et al.*, 2016). On average, Brazilian firms also show greater concern for the potential consequences of their actions and are more committed to integrating all activities at the SMMS level.

Despite differing priorities in SM marketing objectives, the ultimate goal for businesses across the three countries is sales. However, firms in these countries demonstrate varying mindsets regarding selling objectives through SM. Most Chinese firms adopt a direct mindset. As one participant (C8) simply put it, “the goal is to sell,” reflecting a linear approach to SM selling. Finnish firms, on the other hand, adopt a more incremental and methodical mindset. They aim to connect SM to sales through a series of steps, with several (e.g., F5 and F8) outlining multi-year plans consisting of various phases leading to long-term sales. Brazilian firms embrace a spiral-like incremental approach, with a predominant focus on customer engagement. They operate under the belief that expanding consumer networks and fostering brand loyalty will organically drive sales. This approach is typified by case firm B8, which asserted, “*the social networks go together with the strategies and actions of the company’s commercial area (sales).*” **Figure 4** depicts the distinct SM selling mindsets in the three countries.

Insert Figure 4 about here.

4.4 The impact of cultural value on SMMS development

To investigate the cultural impact on SMMS development across the cases, the data and literature were iteratively examined and compared against the initial codes or themes. The cross-case data analysis shows considerable evidence that cultural values influence the development of SMMS in the interviewed firms. **Table 5** offers a thematic overview of how Hofstede's cultural dimensions are applied to the development of SMMS. Next, we present the development of research propositions on how cultural values influence SMMS development.

Insert Table 5 about here.

Based on our data analysis, the individualism/collectivism cultural dimension is well reflected in joint problem-solving activities. Many Chinese firms mentioned implementing collective solutions by involving employees (often mandatory) in SM content creation and SM listening. The following quote exemplifies how one Chinese case firm works collectively to reduce potential risks, “*every employee has their absolute responsibilities to listen to their customer voices on SM...and make a report to people in charge (C1).*” Interestingly, another Chinese firm (C4) mentioned having some “friend” type of clients in SM groups to stand up and speak for the company if complaints arise. Brazilian firms also emphasise teamwork in SM activities, as seen in the following quote: “*the content creation goes through the whole team; we develop the posts and make the triangular approval form of publication (B10).*” Conversely, Finnish firms tend to favour independent decision-making compared to Chinese and Brazilian firms. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 1: SMMS development in collectivist cultures is more likely to involve collective problem-solving than in individualistic cultures.

According to the interview data, the marketing department was primarily responsible for making SM operational decisions in all companies. However, there are significant differences in the SMMS decision-making process among firms from the three countries. In Finland, management takes a more democratic approach, encouraging employees to actively participate in their SM contributions. As one Finnish firm stated,

“there is no strict that who can never spread what kind of information...Content creation from employees it’s like voluntary. So here you get a lot of suggestions... we are more encouraged to take part and share our own stories and take part in training on how to act on SM (F4).” Conversely, in Brazil and China, where power distance is higher, the management style is more autocratic, with employee involvement in SM being mandatory. The marketing manager of case firm C6 in China explained: *“All decisions are made from the top level in the organisation. They will propose what content to post each month on SM and report to firm leaders for approval. Sometimes, there will be a topical theme assigned by firm leaders, and we all need to think/design the content according to that topic.”* Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 2: SMMS decision-making processes in low power distance cultures tend to reflect a more democratic management style compared to those in high power distance cultures.

SM content effectively reflects the masculinity/femininity and indulgence cultural dimensions. In China and Brazil, which are considered more masculine societies, many firms mentioned their product-featured and success-oriented content, echoing materialistic values. The use of celebrity endorsements and influencers is prevalent and forms a significant part of the marketing strategy in these emerging markets. Conversely, Finnish firms, aligning with a more feminine cultural trait, place emphasis on showcasing relationships (e.g., employee relations) on SM. Also, their SM content tends to be modest, as one Finnish firm said, *“You’re not kind of like trying to brag about things, and you don’t want to make other companies jealous (F3).”* As the most indulgent of the three countries, the SM content in Brazilian firms mirrors their attitude towards life, being both entertaining and gratification-centred. As one interviewee specified, *“Social networks are also ‘escape valves’ and entertainment channels (B6).”* This leads to the proposition:

Proposition 3: SM content in masculine cultures tends to highlight material success and achievement, whereas in feminine cultures, it tends to emphasise relationships and equality.

Proposition 4: SM content in high-indulgence cultures tends to be more gratification-oriented than in restraint cultures.

Risk perception and the handling of complaints or negative comments differ among firms. Brazilian firms, which score highest in the uncertainty avoidance dimension compared to the other two countries, demonstrate clear risk avoidance. Respondents repeatedly mentioned the potential harm of negative WOM and the measures taken to mitigate risks in their SM operations. One Brazilian firm stated, “*we listen and give due importance. All messages are answered quickly and, depending on the complaint, we ask for the phone and speak to the customer personally (B8)*”. In contrast, most Finnish interviewees mentioned that negative comments are rarely seen or seldom require actions. As one Finnish firm put it, “*there would be no extreme case that maybe someone is that negatively comment on SM. We would contact the person, but it is infrequent (F2)*.” In China, interviewees noted that while complaints are common, they do not usually cause a major issue. Responses to negative comments vary: some firms choose to ignore them, while others prefer to handle the matter privately if it escalates. Therefore, we propose the following:

Proposition 5: Decision makers from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are likely to exhibit higher risk perception and place more emphasis on risk management on SM compared to those from low uncertainty avoidance cultures.

In fact, we found no significant evidence relating to the long-term orientation dimension. According to Hofstede (2010), long-term-oriented cultures are typically more relationship-oriented, while short-term-oriented cultures tend to be more transaction-oriented. Interestingly, we found no evidence to support this argument. On the contrary, we discovered distinctive descriptions from interviewees in the three countries regarding their SM marketing objectives. While China is considered to be a long-term-oriented culture (score 87) when compared to Finland (score 38) and Brazil (score 44), half of the Chinese case companies stressed the direct selling purpose of using SM, whereas the case firms from the other two countries seemed to prioritize relationship-building in their SMMSs.

5. Emergent conceptual model

In this section, we summarize and illustrate the interplay of key concepts using a proposed conceptual model (see **Figure 5**). The formulation and implementation of marketing strategies and business processes are highly dependent on a firm's macro-environmental and competitive factors, as well as the internal context of the firm in which they operate (Hagen *et al.*, 2019). Building on this logic, our proposed conceptual model depicts the context, formulation, and implementation elements of SMMS development process. We have identified comprehensive drivers and barriers of SMMS development from both internal and external context, which leads to different SM objectives and subsequent SMMS. Generally, firms can use SM to promote and sell products, connect and collaborate with consumers, listen and learn market insights, and empower and engage customers (Li *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, firms can develop different SMMSs: social commerce strategy, social content strategy, social monitoring strategy, and social CRM strategy (Li *et al.*, 2021). In the implementation stage of SMMSs, firms tend to share some of key practices but may have different focuses, namely, social selling, content marketing, risk management, and relationship management. In the following, we elaborate on the observed differences among firms in three countries based on this conceptual model.

Insert Figure 5 about here.

Based on the cross-case analysis between firms from three countries, we observed no noticeable disparities in internal barriers and drivers among all the interviewed companies. In other words, differences in required resources and capabilities did not significantly vary by country. Instead, these factors were found to be highly contingent upon the firm's size, industry, and level of experience. For instance, SMEs often need additional resources as they strive to use SM for various purposes (Kraus *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, B2B firms we interviewed tended to use SM mainly for communication and branding, often less focusing on selling activities on these platforms.

However, it is important to acknowledge the divergent perceptions at both market and country levels. In general, firms from all countries emphasized the challenges posed by platform factors. Companies in all three countries, particularly in China, view competition as a significant challenge. Notably, China is currently the world's largest SM market (Statista, 2022), with a wide array of SM channels and a large user base, which escalates competition among firms for consumer attention. The rapid development of the SM industries in China is attributed to the exclusive technical features and diverse business models that are integrated with e-commerce, distinguishing it from other countries in an unprecedented manner (Zhang, 2021).

Regarding country-level drivers and barriers, companies from China and Brazil expressed greater concerns. In particular, many firms in these countries are concerned about media censorship, which substantially influences the content they can publish on SM. In contrast, most Finnish firms did not cite external factors as influencing their SMMS development. Additionally, several Brazilian firms mentioned economic factors such as low digital infrastructure coverage that hinder the development of their SMMSs. This concern was reported to be less critical in China and Finland.

Moreover, our analysis identified four key practices throughout the SMMS development process: social selling, content marketing, risk management, and relationship management. The data analysis reveals that the cultural dimension of individualism/collectivism is primarily manifested in collective problem-solving. Power distance dimension is a critical factor influencing SMMS development decision-making, particularly in formulating and implementing SMMS. Cultural differences among firms from the three countries are further evident in their SM content, reflecting aspects of the masculinity and indulgence dimensions. Furthermore, uncertainty avoidance dimension affects a firm's risk perception and its approach to handle complaints on SM.

6. Implications

The widespread adoption of SM has highlighted the need for guidance in developing SMMS and leveraging SM effectively. This paper takes the initial steps to explore the development of SMMS in an international context. Our findings underscore the importance of both internal and external factors that influence the development of SMMS. Further, we identify key practices that emerge throughout the SMMS development process. Additionally, our comparative analysis sheds light on how cultural values impact SMMS and reveals three distinct approaches to SM sales objectives among firms in the three studied countries.

6.1 Theoretical implications

This study offers critical theoretical implications to the international business and marketing literature. First, this study contributes to the growing, but relatively limited SMMS research in the international context. Building upon SMMS developmental process model developed by Li *et al.* (2021), this study expands this line of inquiry by exploring the institutional determinants of SMMS development in a cross-national context. Our qualitative study allows us to apply the framework of the SMMS development process empirically and provide insights into its antecedents and the role of cultural value. The findings reveal the differences and similarities between national contexts, highlighting the idiosyncratic nature of the SMMS development process in an increasingly global environment. The findings suggest that market-level and national-level drivers and barriers are crucial in shaping firms' SMMSs, which justify a localized response strategy. Moreover, we found that internal factors like resources and capabilities influencing SMMS development do not significantly differ across the countries studied.

Second, this research offers an integrative view that broadens the understanding of the role of cultural values in SMMS. While existing international SM research has largely focused on customer SM behaviours and attitudes across cultures (Johnston *et al.*, 2018), our work applies Hofstede's cultural dimensions to assess their influence on SMMS from the firm's perspective. In responding to calls for research into cultural effects on SM practices internationally (Liadeli *et al.*, 2023; Meyer *et al.*, 2023), we explore how

national cultural values influence firms' SMMS development. Although Hofstede culture model may not capture every nuance of market behaviour, it is a valuable theoretical tool for contrasting cultural differences in SMMS development across countries. For instance, individualism/collectivism dimension is notably pertinent to problem-solving in SMMS development, and uncertainty avoidance is crucial for managing risk, such as negative word-of-mouth. Therefore, the cultural context is a vital institutional pillar for comprehending SMMS and advancing SM marketing knowledge in both international business and international marketing literature.

Third, our study enriches the social commerce literature, especially within the international marketing field. The comparative analysis reveals distinct approaches to SM selling goals among firms in China, Finland, and Brazil. Chinese firms favour a more direct selling approach on SM, while Finnish firms exhibit a more incremental strategy with an emphasis on careful planning (Metcalf *et al.*, 2006). Brazilian firms adopt a gradual, spiral-like strategy that prioritizes customer engagement to drive sales through expanding social networks. These variations contribute to the ongoing debate on standardization versus adaptation of international marketing strategies for different markets. Our findings align with previous studies, suggesting that it is impractical for brands to adopt "one-size-fits-all" approach to SM management across diverse markets (Lee *et al.*, 2018).

6.2 Managerial implications

SM has a significant and growing impact on the customer-brand relationship and the business environment. The findings of this study provide valuable guidance for managers seeking to align their SMMSs with a wide range of business objectives, from tactical to strategic ones. For firms operating SM platforms in multiple markets concurrently, our research will help in considering the role of institutional settings and cultural values that impact SMMS across the various markets they serve. In other words, companies with international operations should go beyond simply modifying their SM message. They need to consider the necessary adaptations to address the existing institutional forces and the national context of the markets where they conduct business.

This calls for a multifaceted approach that recognizes the competitive intensity in markets like China, where e-commerce integrations and user engagement are vital. Alongside, it must address other country-specific challenges, including media censorship in China and Brazil, as well as digital infrastructure limitations in Brazil.

Global marketers are called to refine their SMMS by integrating four key practices identified in our analysis: social selling, content marketing, risk management, and relationship management. For instance, social selling practices need to be integrated with the specific SM channels favoured in each country to optimize engagement and conversion rates. Content marketing should be developed with an understanding of the cultural nuances that drive engagement in different markets. Risk management practices must be robust, particularly in markets with high levels of uncertainty avoidance, to effectively manage potential crises on SM. Relationship management should be prioritized to foster long-term customer relationships, with a focus on building trust and loyalty through consistent and culturally attuned interactions.

It is also crucial to reassess their approach to SMMS development by considering the drivers, challenges, motivations, and inputs that significantly influence the outcomes of their strategies. Consequently, global marketers must comprehend the culture-bound nature of SM behaviours and decision-making. For instance, companies can consider partnering with local agencies and influencers who understand the cultural context and can help navigate the nuances of content creation that align with both the brand's values and local expectations. Ongoing education and training for SM managers are crucial to keep up-to-date of the changing dynamics in each market, including platform updates, regulatory changes, and evolving user behavior. By leveraging local insights, managers can better manage the complexities of international SM marketing and ensure that their strategies are both globally effective and locally relevant.

6.3 Limitations and future research directions

This study primarily investigates the emerging research topic of SMMS, with a focus on exploring the factors that shape their development and the role of cultural values. Despite the significance of this emerging topic in the international business and

marketing field, we acknowledge that our findings are subject to several limitations, which open up new avenues for future research. Firstly, although we employed empirical data from three culturally distinct countries to enhance theory development and propose a conceptual model, our analytical findings may be limited in their generalizability to other contexts. Specifically, we conducted interviews with 32 company managers and marketers, which, while providing rich insights, may not capture the full diversity of experiences and practices in different regions or industries. Therefore, expanding the sample size, conducting further research in various countries, and performing cross-cultural analyses within specific industries would make our results more representative and robust, thus extending the applicability of our findings. Moreover, while our study primarily focused on identifying internal and external factors that influence firms' SMMS development, future research should also consider examining the interactions between these factors and SMMSs, and how they shape the nature of SMMSs.

Secondly, we employed qualitative analysis to derive our conclusions. Future research could apply different research methods to investigate this phenomenon. For example, it would be enlightening to adopt quantitative approaches to validate our propositions regarding the cultural impact on key variables in SMMS development. Moreover, as SM platforms continue to evolve with the introduction of new technologies, the factors influencing SMMS development may also change. Future research could include longitudinal studies that capture the evolution of firms' SMMS over time.

Thirdly, we relied on Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework, which has gained significant recognition as a widely applied national cultural frameworks in marketing and management studies (Soares *et al.*, 2007; Steenkamp, 2001). However, we understand other alternative models, such as Globe and Schwartz (Imm Ng *et al.*, 2007; Tung and Verbeke, 2010), could also be informative for such studies.

Lastly, our study did not specifically examine firm performance, although interviewees repeatedly mentioned the importance of measuring SM performance. Therefore, further research is necessary to investigate how SMMSs contribute to firms' international

performance. Future studies might, for example, explore the factors influencing firms' SMMS decisions and their outcomes, as well as the role of managerial factors such as leadership and knowledge management in the sustainable development of SMMSs. A particular area of interest is the impact of SMMS on financial performance, which is critical for assisting managers in making informed decisions about budget allocation between traditional and digital marketing tools.

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Table 1. Comparison of social media and social media marketing strategy

Dimension	SM	SMMS
Definition	“A group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61)	“An organization’s integrated pattern of activities that, based on a careful assessment of customers’ motivations for brand-related SM use and the undertaking of deliberate engagement initiatives, transform SM connectedness (networks) and interactions (influences) into valuable strategic means to achieve desirable marketing outcomes.” (Li <i>et al.</i> 2021, p. 54)
Key objectives	To interact and connect	To generate, integrate, and reconfigure SM resources to achieve specific marketing objectives
Key features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive nature • Facilitate user interactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated activities • Utilize SM networks and influences to derive business value
Measurement of performance	Often measured by user engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments)	Often measured by marketing-specific outcomes (e.g., customer engagement, lead generation, brand awareness, customer loyalty, etc.)

Source(s): Adapted from Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) and Li *et al.*, (2021)

Table 2. Comparison of cultural dimensions between Finland, China, and Brazil

Cultural dimension	Definition	Finland	China	Brazil
Individualism/collectivism	The degree to which individuals are expected to be independent and self-reliant rather than mutually dependent and closely integrated into groups.	63	20	38
Power distance	The degree to which members of society accept power imbalances.	33	80	69
Masculinity/femininity	Preference in society for masculine values (e.g., competitiveness, assertiveness, and material rewards for success) versus feminine values (e.g., consensus, cooperation, and caring for the weak).	26	66	49
Uncertainty avoidance	The degree to which a society tolerates uncertainty and ambiguity.	59	30	76
Long-term orientation	The degree to which a society values long-term commitments and traditions while managing present and future challenges.	38	87	44
Indulgence	The degree to which individuals regulate and restrain their desires and impulses.	57	24	59

Source(s): Adapted from Hofstede *et al.*, (2010)

Table 3. Respondents' profiles in in-depth interviews

Firm	Country	Industry	Firm size	SM experience (year)	Interview Length (minute)	Key informants	Triangulation sources
F1	Finland	Digital Tech	Large	4	65	Global Communication Manager	SM page
F2	Finland	Insurance	Medium	4	59	CEO and Marketing Manager	SM page
F3	Finland	Tech	Large	5	100	Marketing Manager	SM page
F4	Finland	Smart Tech	Large	5	50	Sales Manager	SM page
F5	Finland	Tourism	Small	>10	65	Marketing Director	SM page, other employees
F6	Finland	Building	Medium	4	48	Marketing Manager	SM page
F7	Finland	Service	Small	3	55	Marketing Specialist	SM page
F8	Finland	Manufacture	Large	5	71	Head of PR and Branding	SM page
F9	Finland	Service	Small	3	62	Marketing Manager and Marketing Specialist	SM page
F10	Finland	Shipping	Medium	4	50	Marketing Specialist	SM page
C1	China	Digital Tech	Large	>10	45	Marketing Manager and Marketing Specialist	SM page
C2	China	Sport	Medium	3	44	Vice General Manager	SM page
C3	China	Media	Micro	3	55	Marketing Manager	SM page
C4	China	Education	Small	5	43	CEO	SM page
C5	China	Advertising	Large	10	63	Marketing Manager	SM page
C6	China	Electrical power	Large	2	41	SM Specialist	SM page
C7	China	Automation	Large	1	54	Marketing Manager and SM Marketer	SM page
C8	China	Food	Medium	4	51	CEO	SM page
C9	China	Real Estate	Large	4	52	Marketing Manager and PR Manager	SM page
C10	China	Furniture	Small	6	110	Marketing Manager	SM page
B1	Brazil	Lingerie	Medium	2	75	Marketing Director	SM page
B2	Brazil	Personal Care	Large	1	70	Communication Coordinator	SM page
B3	Brazil	Football	Large	6	125	Content Creator	SM page
B4	Brazil	Global Media Agency	Large	1	40	SM Manager	SM page
B5	Brazil	Marketing Consultant	Micro	12	35	General Director	SM page
B6	Brazil	Consultant	Large	11	40	Marketing Manager	SM page
B7	Brazil	Food	Large	4	40	Communication Coordinator	SM page
B8	Brazil	Media Consultant	Medium	9	45	Communication Manager	SM page
B9	Brazil	Food	Large	1	55	Digital Marketing Manager	SM page
B10	Brazil	Industrial Association	Large	7	90	SM Manager	SM page and followers
B11	Brazil	Retailer	Small	1	35	Content Creator	SM page
B12	Brazil	Digital Branding	Small	13	50	Digital Strategist	Company webpage

Note: Firm size: Micro < 10 employees; Small 10–49 employees; Medium-sized 50–249 employees; Large ≥ 250 employees (European Commission 2016)

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 4. An indication of key activities in each case firm

Case firm	Primary objective	Content marketing	Risk management			Relationship management	
	Selling-oriented	Informational focused	Risk perception	Data management	Complaints handling	Social listening	SM interaction
F1	○	●	○	○	○	●	○
F2	○	●	○	○	○	○	○
F3	○	●	○	○	○	○	○
F4	○	●	○	○	○	○	○
F5	○	○	○	●	○	●	●
F6	○	○	○	●	●	●	●
F7	○	○	○	●	○	●	○
F8	○	●	○	●	○	●	○
F9	○	●	○	○	○	○	○
F10	○	○	○	○	○	○	●
C1	○	○	○	●	●	○	○
C2	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
C3	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
C4	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
C5	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
C6	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
C7	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
C8	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
C9	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
C10	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B1	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B2	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B3	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B4	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B5	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B6	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B7	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B8	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B9	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B10	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B11	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
B12	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

In Finland:

- Selling purposes not emphasized
- Low-risk perception

In China:

- Selling purpose emphasized
- Low-risk perception

In Brazil:

- Selling purposes not emphasized
- Prioritized relationship management and content marketing
- High-risk perception

Note: Strong ●, Weak ○; F1 (Case firm 1 from Finland), C1 (Case firm 1 from China), B1 (Case firm 1 from Brazil)

Source(s): Authors own creation

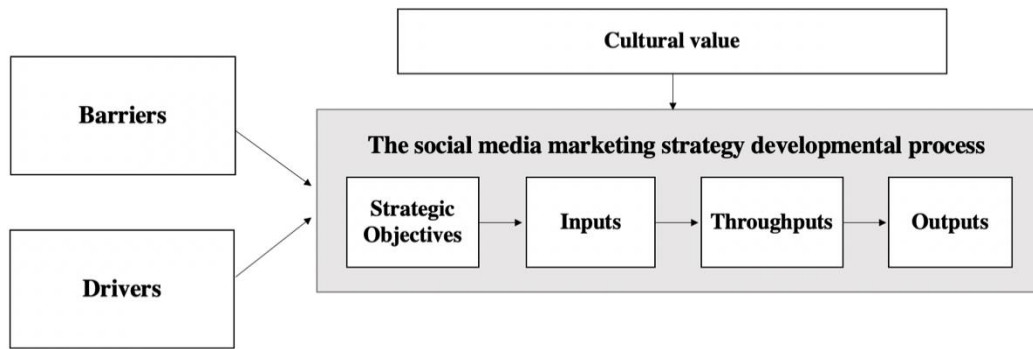
Table 5. The cultural factors impacting SMMS practices and the examples and quotes from firms in three countries

Cultural dimension	SMMS activities/events	Examples and quotes from firms in three countries		
		Finland	China	Brazil
Individualism/collectivism	Collective problem solving	<p>“Content creation from employees is voluntary.” (F4)</p> <p>“It is my job to take care of SM; no one else is involved.” (F10)</p>	<p>“Every employee has their absolute responsibilities to listen to their customer voices on SM...and make a report to people who are in charge.” (C1)</p> <p>“Sometimes, when there is a negative comment in our group, we ask our loyal customers to stand up and speak for us.” (C4)</p>	<p>“The work is joint (Analytics and content production.” (B6)</p> <p>“The content creation goes through the whole team; we develop the posts and make the triangular approval form of publication.” (B10)</p>
Power distance	Decision making	<p>“So CEO act as a role model management but then the process working it is bottom-down. So actually, it comes from everybody in the organisation.” (F3)</p> <p>“So basically, it is the main headquarter they had the content. And then you select what to put, or that is one way to do., And we also produce our content, which is more locally focused.” (F2)</p> <p>“There is no strict that who can never spread what kind of information...Content creation from employees is voluntary. So here you get many suggestions. We are more encouraged to take part and share our own stories and take part in training on how to act on SM.” (F4)</p> <p>“So here in my place, everybody can state their opinions; we do not have SM guidelines... there is one thing. Um, I mean, like we are kind of like treating our employees like adults. So we believe that our employees will act in the proper weight. We have a cool work atmosphere.” (F3)</p>	<p>“All decisions are made from the top level in the organisation. Each month, marketing people will propose what content to post on SM and report to firm leaders for approval.” (C9)</p> <p>“I will do all the execution, including the content creation. But I will need approval from my leader what I can do or not do.” (C6)</p> <p>“I (the boss) will give the direction and timing; my subordinates will handle the content and execution.” (C8)</p> <p>“It is mandatory that every employee involve in listening to their customer voices on SM.” (C1)</p>	<p>“Simple processes are decided by the consultant responsible for the client, or by the area. For broader, more comprehensive processes that take the group as a whole, there are defined at a meeting.” (B5)</p> <p>“I make the analysis and pass it to the supervisor.” (B6)</p> <p>“We must approve these materials daily, so they come out with content. When the material is more technical, we ask the support of the company’s technical team to understand how to communicate better.” (B10)</p>
Masculinity/femininity	SM content	<p>“Showing a picture of a person who is explaining something does get more likes and shares than you use fair-trade press releases. Of course, so that is clear finding that it should be something personal, happening somewhere and somebody explaining. Yeah, so that is clear.”(F1)</p> <p>“You are not kind of like trying to brag really about things. You do not want to make other companies jealous because we are also in this ecosystem; you</p>	<p>“We post much celebrity-related content. For instance, the picture of the stars, their games, and some of our new product information. We have with our spokesman who has been involved with the baseboard with his signature; some are popular.” (C2)</p> <p>“A company’s SM account cannot be operated as a company; it has to be treated as an</p>	<p>“We seek to produce content that: 1) generates identification with the public: people are on social networks because they want to be part of a circle; 2) report: social networks bring valuable information about everything, from news to Views; 3) enjoy: social networks are also escaped valves and entertainment channels.” (B6)</p>

		know that you have professional services and products, and sometimes those things can also compete with some of our customers.” (F3)	individual; it has to have a personality, a distinct one.” (C3)	“More images and video, less text. I believe that in the future, there will be a social network in which it will not be possible to write.” (B3) “Video format, image, text and all that are supported by the platform to explore to the fullest the tools, create relevant connections and have greater reach.” (B9)
Uncertainty avoidance	The perception of SM risks and complaints handling	“There would be no extreme case that maybe someone is that negatively comment on SM.it is really rare.” (F2) “I have not heard that (negative cases SM; it is not common.” (F1) “We do not have that many cases either that comes through Facebook reason. for me if is negative, that has to be called.” (F5)	“There will be a lot of comments, including negative ones. but we will let it stay there because you cannot satisfy 100% of the people, as long as he did not malign or deliberately make trouble.” (C8) “We do receive comments, but this comment for me personally, or to my understanding for our industry or our company, I think we may not care that very much.” (C6)	“Now there is a tool to help with this because there is a lot to be monitored.” (B3) “We have the customer care service. It is indispensable for any brand that is in the digital environment. There is a good practice guide to respond to negative comments on our social networks.” (B6) “We listen and give due importance. All messages are answered quickly and, depending on the complaint, we ask for the phone and speak to the customer personally.” (B8) “It depends on the severity of the issue: it is something very severe, I take care of the comments. I have two more people working with me.” (B12)
Indulgence	SM content	“We pass on through the SM our mission and values; In Finland, people are driven by more than just money when it comes to the choice of the company where they work, and we believe that having a modern SM is important to show every day that our employees are doing things that create value; thus we use SM to promote this too...We are also using SM to show sustainability in the technology... We want to convey our values in our communication. I share much content: things from our partners, for example, or industry news related to our products, megatrends, etc.” (F7) “(We post) company news (for instance, organisational changes), participation in industry events, product news (for instance, the launch of a new product).” (F8)	“We post much content about our brand ambassadors and celebrities, sometimes the match competitions we sponsored.” (C2) “Our SM content is very much about the campaigns, such as special offers or buy Free. In that case, consumers save money when buying more.” (C8)	“Inspirational photos, which are very successful, a sexier photo or something. Sometimes we do differently, with informative content, talking about female sexuality and sustainability because we are a brand that cares about it. Still, female sexuality is strongest for us, which is very positive in sales and engagement. In Stories, we talk a little about the product, interactions with inspirational things, polls, and responses to what customers post.” (B1) “We make a call to the event, to meet, live.” (B5)

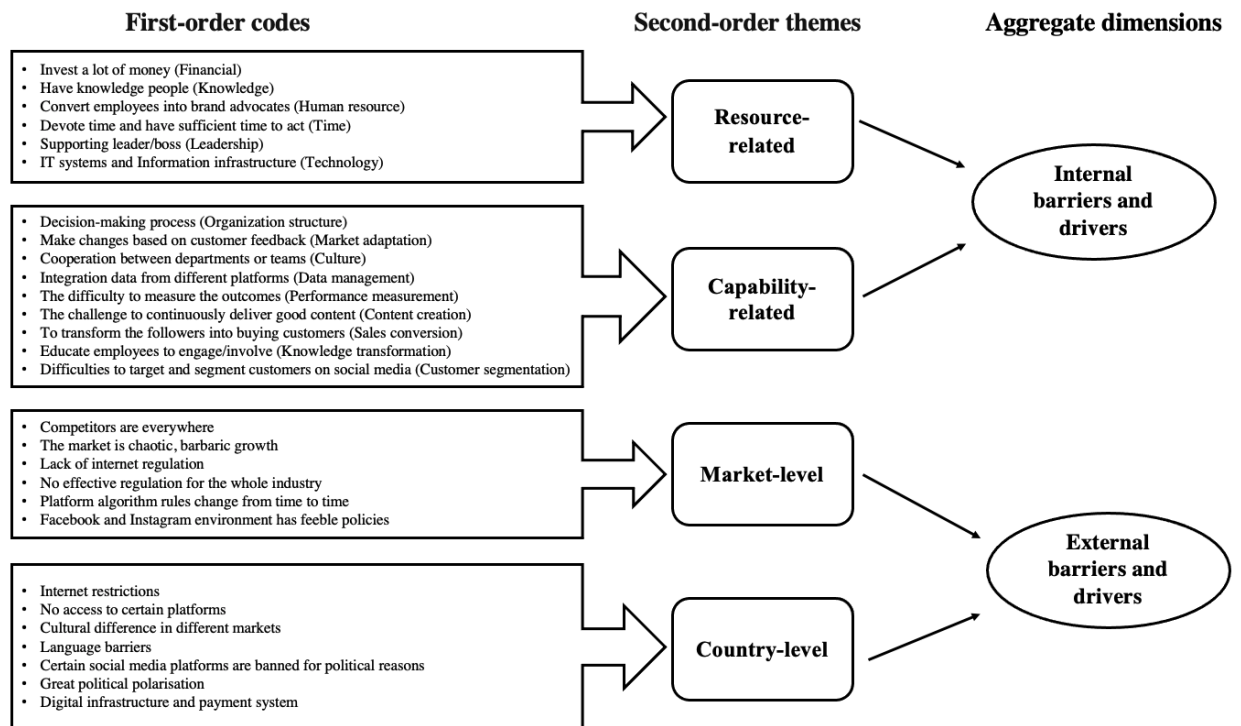
Source(s): Authors own creation

Figure 1. A preliminary research framework



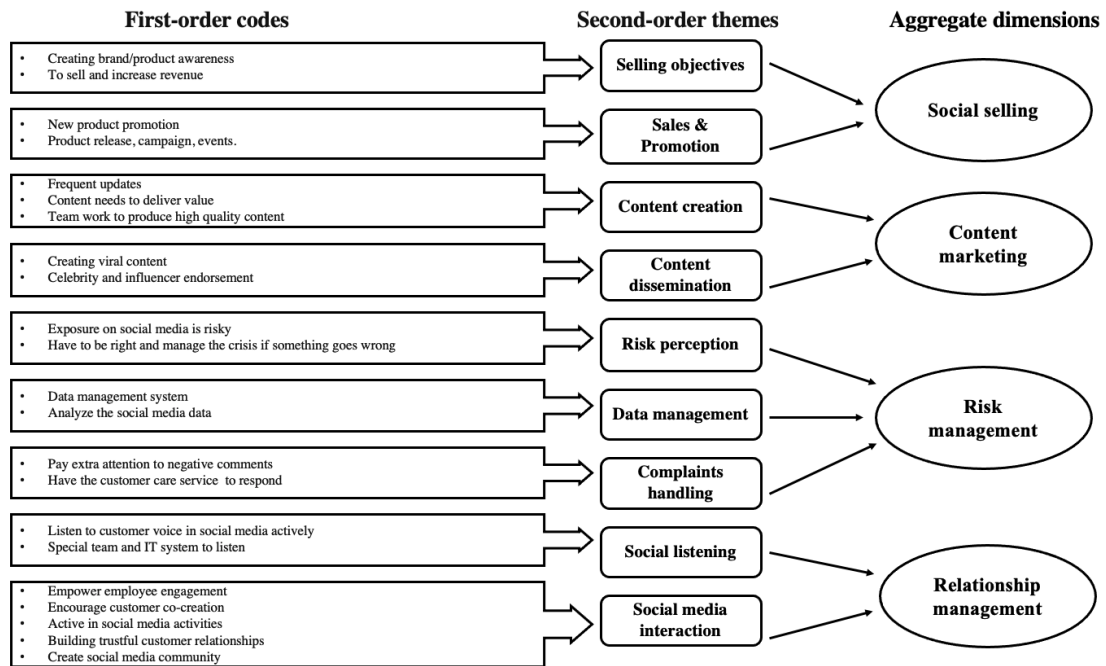
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Figure 2. Coding scheme – The barriers and drivers of SMMS development process



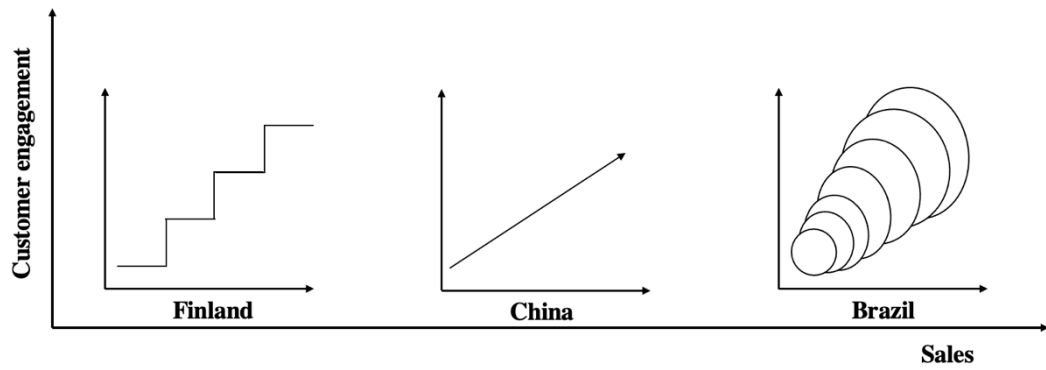
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Figure 3. Coding scheme – The key practices of SMMSs



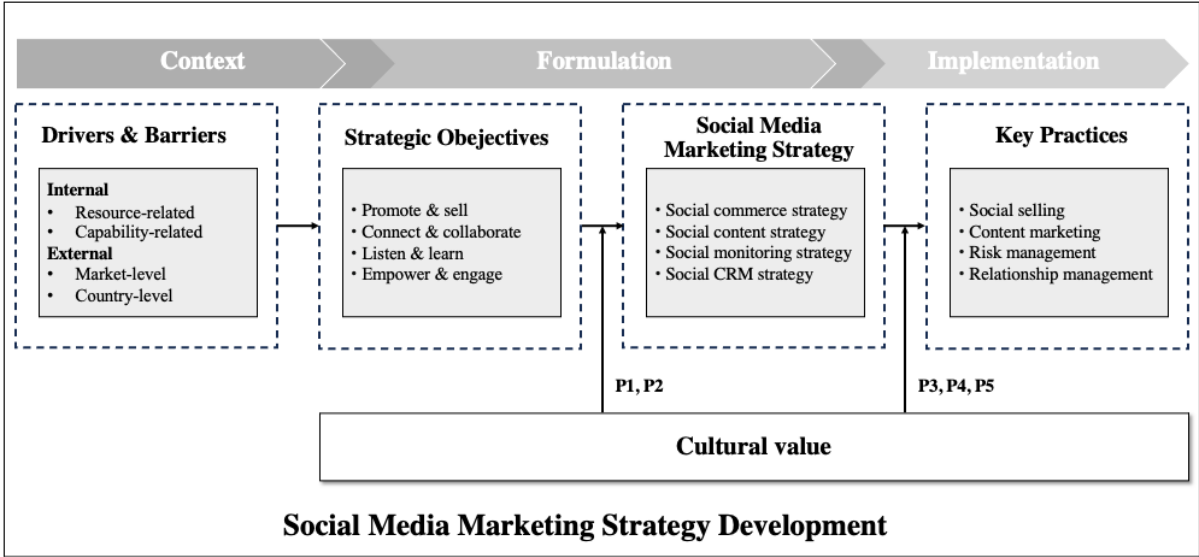
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Figure 4. An illustration of SM selling mindsets in three countries



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Figure 5. Conceptual model and propositions



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