



# Digitalization and Passive SMEs Internationalization: A Case in Sanan Tempe Industry Cluster, Indonesia

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## Abstract

**Research Aims:** The aim of this study is to examine how digitalization enables the internationalization process of micro enterprise in the Sanan Tempe Industry Cluster, Malang, Indonesia We focus n enterprises that did not originally intend to international markets. **Design/Methodology/Approach:** We conducted a qualitative single case study design, following Yin (2018). The case is Mekar Jaya Tempe was selected through purposive sampling as the most prominent and representative producer in the cluster. Data were collected through in depth semi structured interview, direct observation of the production site and digital presence and also documentary analysis of publicly accessible social media content. Data analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarker (2006), with themes reviewed against the Uppsala Model of Internationalization. **Research Findings:** Three inteconnectednes themes emerged from the data but these findings challenge the Uppsala Model assumption that internationalization is driven by sequential, conscious market commitment and reveal a theoretical distinct pathway in which digital tools enable cross border market entry without export intent. **Conclusion:** The concept of digitally mediated passive internationalization to describe the unintentional cross border movement of goods arising from domestic digital marketing activities.

**Keywords:** *Digitalization*, Uppsala Model, Internationalization, Micro-enterprises

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## 1. Introduction

The rise of the digital economy has opened new pathways for microenterprises to participate in international markets. Social media and online marketplaces now allow small businesses to communicate with foreign buyers, build brand visibility beyond their home country, and facilitate cross-border transactions at costs that were previously out of reach (Bargoni et al., 2024; Reim et al., 2022). Previous research has examined how digital tools shape the internationalization process of SMEs. Studies show that digitalization influences this process across multiple dimensions, including the adoption of e-commerce platforms, the digital management of value chain activities, and the use of online channels for branding and market outreach (Bargoni et al., 2024). Empirically, firms that embrace digital technologies are more likely to export and import, both through direct productivity gains and through expanded access to international customer and supplier networks (Añón Higón & Bonvin, 2024).

Furthermore, SMEs' internationalization tends to face more obstacles compared to larger firms, given their generally limited resources. SME have limited capacity to identify new market opportunities (Anggadwita & Indarti, 2025; Indarti & Langenberg, 2004), gather information and build networks, as well as insufficient managerial capabilities (Visita et al., 2025). Steinhäuser et al. (2021) conducted a Systematic Literature Review and found that SMEs tend to exhibit lower commitment to internationalization than their larger counterparts. Nevertheless, digitalization has emerged as a critical enabler, enabling SMEs to overcome these resource constraints and pursue early internationalization. The empirical evidence on digitalization as an enabler of SME internationalization has grown considerably in recent years, spanning multiple contexts and methods. Lee et al. (2022) mentioned that the digital orientations of SMEs in emerging markets are formed by a combination of entrepreneur, product, firm, technology, and market characteristics, suggesting that the pathway to internationalization through digitalization is not uniform but is instead contingent on multiple internal and external factors. Mirzaye & Mohiuddin (2025) reveals that adopting multiple digital technologies increasing export intensity by 6 to 10 percent, while a 74-country panel analysis shows that digital-trade readiness reduces trade costs and significantly boosts participation in global value chains. A study of 332 Chinese SME exporters on Alibaba.com found that digital capability significantly reduces perceived uncertainty and transaction costs in international markets, thereby improving export performance (Du & Huang, 2025). A multiple-case study of Italian SMEs entering the Chinese market through digital platforms suggests that internationalization through digital channels is as much a relational and learning process as it is a transactional one (Hu et al., 2024). These findings highlight a consistent pattern that digitalization facilitates SME internationalization, but its effects are shaped by the firm's internal capabilities and also the digital infrastructure of its home country, and the nature of the platforms it uses. These existing studies mostly investigate active and conscious internationalization strategies, while the phenomenon of passive internationalization, where products cross national borders not through planned export activity but as an indirect result of domestic digital engagement, remains empirically unexplored.

The Sanan Tempe Industry Cluster in Malang, East Java, Indonesia offers a suitable empirical context to address these gaps. The cluster has operated since the 1940s and today comprises over 500 home-based micro-enterprises with a collective daily output of up to dozens of tons of tempe products (Dinas Koperasi, 2016). Our prior observation reports that several enterprises

have adopted digital tools, including search engine visibility management, social media branding, and messaging platform-based order systems, not as part of a conscious internationalization strategy, but in response to the structural erosion of traditional market channels. An unintended outcome of this domestic digital adaptation has been the passive cross-border movement of their products, carried abroad by domestic buyers who discovered and ordered the products through digital channels. This phenomenon constitutes a theoretically significant but empirically neglected mode of cross-border market entry. This study hence addresses the following research question: How does digitalization enable the internationalization process of SMEs in the Sanan Tempe Industry Cluster, Malang, Indonesia. Specifically, it examines the conditions under which digitalization enables internationalization, the mechanisms through which this process unfolds, and the consequences for firms that did not originally intend to go international. The study makes three contributions. First, it broadens the empirical scope of digital internationalization research to a traditional agri-food micro-enterprise cluster in an emerging economy context, systematically underrepresented in existing work. Second, it expands a theoretical understanding of passive, digitally-mediated internationalization as a distinct pathway driven by domestic survival strategies rather than by conscious export ambitions. Third, it offers practical insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders seeking to understand how unplanned exposure can be structured and sustained to support international market engagement for micro-enterprises in emerging markets.

## **2. Method, Data, and Analysis**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study used a qualitative approach using a single study design. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate when the aim is to understand a complex, context-embedded phenomenon in depth rather than to measure or generalize across a large population (Yin, 2018). Qualitative case study methodology enables us to conduct an in-depth interview of phenomena within a specific context. We will reveal insight through a variety of lenses. Following Yin (2018), a single case is justified when the case is representative or typical of a broader phenomenon of interest, allowing us to illuminate conditions and mechanisms that may apply to similar enterprises in comparable settings. The selected case is a prominent tempe producer within the Sanan Tempe Industry Cluster in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. It meets this criterion as it represents a well-established and high-volume micro enterprise that has undergone a digital adaptation in direct response to structural shifts in the domestic market. It is making an information-rich site for the research question in our study.

### **2.2 Research Site and Case Selection**

The Sanan Tempe Industry Cluster, Purwantoro subdistrict, Blimbing, Malang, Indonesia was selected as the research site because it constitutes one of the oldest and most densely concentrated traditional food production clusters in Indonesia, with a documented history stretching back to the 1940s and a current cluster comprising over 500 home-based micro-enterprises (Dinas Koperasi, 2016). From 500 home-based microenterprises, we chose Mekar Jaya Tempe for the case study. The case enterprise was selected through purposive sampling, a strategy that prioritizes information richness over statistical representativeness and is widely used in qualitative international business research. Purposive sampling involves the selection of information-rich cases, groups, and individuals relevant to the phenomenon of interest. The informant was identified as the most prominent and representative producer within the cluster, operating since the 1990s with an average daily production capacity of 1.5-2 tons of soybeans (raw material for making tempe). This enterprise was selected because it uniquely represents the phenomenon this study investigates: a micro-enterprise that adopted digital tools as a domestic survival strategy and, as a result, became incidentally exposed to international markets.

### **2.3 Data Collection**

Data were collected through three complementary methods to ensure the triangulation and depth of evidence. An in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with the owner of the Tempe Mekar Jaya producer. A semi-structured interview is appropriate for exploratory qualitative research because they provide a framework of inquiry while allowing the informant to narrate experiences in their own terms. They are allowed to generate rich contextual data that structured instruments cannot capture. The interview covered the enterprise's commercial history, the process and motivations behind digital adoption, the specific digital tool used, and also the nature of any cross-border market exposure that followed. We also conducted direct observations of the production site and the enterprise's digital print, including its social media accounts and WhatsApp Business interface, to verify and investigate the interview data. Documentary data were collected from publicly accessible digital sources, including social media content like Instagram. We do that to corroborate informant accounts and trace their footprint, connecting domestic digital activity to cross-border product flows. The combination of interview, observation and documentation follows established triangulation practice in qualitative case study research. It will enhance the credibility and completeness of the findings (Yin, 2018).

### **2.4 Data Analysis**

We analyzed the data using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006). The six-phase framework consists of familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. Coding was conducted between raw data and approaching theoretical categorizations drawn from the literature on digital internationalization, especially the passive internationalization, which we connected with the Uppsala Model. Themes were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure they were grounded in the data rather than imposed solely by theory. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, this study conducted four criteria adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006). Credibility was addressed through data triangulation across interviews, observation, and documentation as well as through member checking. Transferability was supported by providing a thick description of the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to comparable settings. Dependability was managed through transparent documentation of the research process and analytical decisions. The confirmability was increased by grounding interpretative claims.

## **3. Result**

### **3.1 Overview**

Mekar Jaya Tempe has been operating within the Sanan Tempe Industry Cluster since the 1990s, beginning with traditional sales before expanding its distribution reach to the Surabaya area in the mid-2010s. It's a domestic expansion that has increased their daily production to 1.5-2 tons of soybeans (raw material for tempe). This growth trajectory was entirely domestically oriented. The enterprise built its scale, workforce, and supply chain logic around Indonesian market demand. They consciously gave no consideration to entering the international markets at any stage of their development. This profile of Mekar Jaya Tempe is

consistent with Steinhäuser et al. (2021). It's domestically embedded, faces the limited resources (Anggadwita & Indarti, 2025; Indarti & Langenberg, 2004) and has low initial commitment to do international activity. It is also precisely the kind of enterprise that the dominant digital internationalization literature has not yet sufficiently examined, one whose commitment with the digital tools did not originate from any export ambition but from an urgent need to defend its domestic market position.

### 3.2 Market Disruption as the Trigger for Digital Adoption

Based on the thematic analysis we did before, we identified several themes. The first concerns the conditions under which Mekar Jaya Tempe began adopting digital tools. The trigger was not strategic or intentional internationalization, but a structural disruption in the domestic retail environment. As consumer behavior shifted away from traditional markets toward online shopping, the Mekar Jaya Tempe experienced a measurable decline in sales volume. With a large number of employees dependent on production levels, the management team (family) faced direct pressure to find new demand channels without reducing output capacity. This result aligns with previous research on reactive digitalization, in which digital adoption is driven by external market pressure rather than proactive strategic planning. Mekar Jaya Tempe's experience reflects a broader phenomenon observed across microenterprises in developing economies, where digitalization is less a conscious growth strategy than a survival response to environmental disruption. The condition that enabled internationalization, therefore, was not readiness or ambition. This finding opens existing theory by showing that the precondition for digital-enabled internationalization need not be export orientation. It can equally be domestic market pressure that drives firms into digital spaces where cross-border exposure becomes possible as a secondary effect.

### 3.3 How Digitalization Created Cross-Border Exposure

The second theme focuses on the mechanism through which digital adoption translates into international market exposure. Mekar Jaya Tempe followed three interconnected digital strategies, each contributing to a different dimension of this process.

#### 3.3.1 Search engine optimization (SEO)

The eldest daughter of the owner of Mekar Jaya serves as the family's social media specialist. She invested effort in ensuring that when potential buyers searched for 'tempe sanan' on Google, the brand appeared as a top result on page one. This created what can be understood as a digital visibility, a form of presence in online information spaces that operates independently of geographic proximity. By becoming easy to search, Mekar Jaya Tempe expanded its accessible buyer pool far beyond the physical reach of its traditional distribution network. The visibility had a consequential, unplanned effect on the enterprise's customer acquisition pattern. Unlike buyers who discovered the product through physical proximity. Like walking through Sanan's alleyways to purchase from familiar market vendors, new customers arrived through the search engine with no prior knowledge of the enterprises. No existing relationship with the cluster, no geographic connection to Malang. A buyer from Jakarta, or even an Indonesian living abroad, could encounter Mekar Jaya Tempe for the first time simply by typing "tempe sanan" into a search bar. The enterprise experience on the first page of results offered as digital signaling. It's communicating legitimacy, relevance, and reliability to an audience the enterprise had never actively targeted and could not have reached through conventional retail. This result supports (Añón Higón & Bonvin, 2024) that digitalization positively influences the probability of SMEs exporting and importing, both directly and indirectly through productivity gains. Añón Higón & Bonvin (2024) also explain digital tools do not merely reduce supply-side costs for enterprises, but also develop the formation of the buyer pool by making previously inaccessible or unaware customers reachable. In Mekar Jaya Tempe, the buyer pool that SEO unlocked included individuals whose subsequent behavior. They are ordering through WhatsApp Business. Then they carry the product across national borders, bringing it to the country where they live for work or study. And in some cases, they give it as a food souvenir for their relatives. Then they share the brand within their social networks. This will lead to the firm's anticipated domestic-oriented strategy. The search engine is not merely as a marketing tool but as an unintentional internationalization mechanism. It connects a deeply local producer to a geographically expanded, socially mobile customer base whose movements and networks extend well beyond Indonesia's borders.



Figure 1. Search Result form Google

#### 3.3.2 WhatsApp Business

Orders from buyers outside the immediate locality (including buyers from other Indonesia cities) were managed through WhatsApp Business. This platform served as the main transactional tool. It enables the Mekar Jaya Tempe to handle some questions related to the product, confirm orders and coordinate deliveries with buyers it had no prior relationship with and would not have reached through conventional retail channels. The use of messaging platforms as low-cost and accessible tools is

beneficial for enterprises. In conclusion, digital transformation can reduce barriers to accessing market information and enable uninterrupted cross-border communication, decreasing the costs and risks of internationalization for SMEs (Rosyidah et al., 2023).



Figure 2. WhatsApp Business

### 3.3.3 Social Media Branding

Mekar Jaya Tempe developed a consistent brand identity on social media, positioning its product as a premium tempe, which is distinguished by quality control and production standards that set it apart from generic market tempe. This branding strategy served a purpose beyond conventional promotion. For buyers who had no physical access to the cluster and couldn't evaluate the product in person before purchasing, social media content became the main source of knowledge and the main basis for purchase confidence. To this extent, the brand identity that Mekar Jaya Tempe built online was not merely a marketing asset; it was a trust-building mechanism that made transacting with an unfamiliar, geographically distant producer feel safe and credible. This finding is consistent with broader evidence on the role of social media in SME internationalization. Witek-Hajduk & Zaborek (2022) confirm that the overall effect of social media use in international branding is positive, with brand image creation being among the most significant contributors to brand and enterprise performance in foreign markets. Social media is specially effective for this purpose, as it can transfer brand image across geographic and cultural boundaries. It's well-suited to marketing strategies that reach both local and foreign audiences together. Exporting SMEs that use social media largely have been found to achieve greater export marketing performance by building brand awareness and enhancing the quality and quantity of international business contacts (Cao & Weerawardena, 2023; Eid et al., 2020).



Figure 3. Instagram Content of Mekar Jaya Tempe

These three mechanisms produced a combined effect that was greater than the sum of their parts. SEO made the brand discoverable, social media branding made it credible and WhatsApp Business made it transactable and manageable. Notably, Mekar Jaya Tempe remained absent from mainstream e-commerce (ex: shopee) platforms at the time of this study. A gap is explicitly attributed to limited human resource capacity to consistently manage platform operations. This absence is theoretically significant beyond what it reveals about digital readiness. It highlights a set of specific organizational barriers that currently prevent the enterprise from changing from passive to active internationalization. These barriers include: (1) insufficient digital human capital, particularly the lack of dedicated personnel capable of managing product listings,

responding to customer inquiries, and fulfilling orders across multiple platforms simultaneously; (2) the absence of formal order management systems that could scale beyond informal WhatsApp-based coordination; and (3) a cognitive gap in which the enterprise owner does not yet frame its cross-border transactions as export activity requiring deliberate management. These barriers align with the resource-constraint literature on SME internationalization (Steinhäuser et al., 2021; Indarti & Langenberg, 2004) and suggest that the pathway from passive to active internationalization is not simply a matter of adopting digital tools but requires simultaneous upgrading of human, organizational, and managerial capabilities. This finding is theoretically significant. It proposed that passive internationalization through digital channels does not require full digital integration or e-commerce sophistication. A partial, tool-by-tool digital presence, driven by necessity rather than strategy, can be adequate to generate cross-border market exposure, even when the enterprise has not achieved what would generally be considered digital readiness.

### **3.4 Passive Internationalization Without Intent**

This theme concerns the consequences of Mekar Jaya Tempe's digital adaptation. The internationalization that followed was passive. Gawel et al. (2023) described that product crossed national borders not through conscious export activity but through the actions of domestic buyers who discovered the products via digital channels and subsequently carried or redirected them abroad. Customers based in Indonesia who ordered through WhatsApp Business or discovered the brand through Google Search brought the product with them when traveling or relocating overseas. The enterprises did not design this outcome, did not manage it, and did not capture it through any formal export mechanism. This finding contradicts the Uppsala Model, where internationalization proceeds through conscious stages of increasing commitment and knowledge (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Mekar Jaya Tempe made no conscious commitment to international markets and combined no conscious knowledge of foreign buyers, regulatory environments, or cross-border logistics. Its international exposure shown organically from domestic digital activity, bypassing the stages the Uppsala model prescribes. Furthermore, the consequence of this passive internationalization is not yet a stable or sustainable international market position. Mekar Jaya Tempe has international exposure but no international strategy. It has foreign buyers in an informal sense, but no direct relationships with foreign markets. The cross-border product flows that have shown are entirely dependent on the behavior of domestic intermediaries, making them fragile, unpredictable, and beyond the firm's control. This gap between incidental international exposure and conscious international engagement represents both the limitation of Mekar Jaya Tempe's current direction and the opportunity for future development.

## **4. Discussion**

The Uppsala model of internationalization was originally formulated by (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). It is postulated that firms enter international markets through a gradual, sequential process driven by the accumulation of experiential market knowledge and the incremental commitment of resources to foreign markets. The model distinguished four stages: no regular export activities, export via an independent representative, establishment of a foreign sales subsidiary, and finally, foreign production or manufacturing in the host country (Arvidsson & Arvidsson, 2022). The more a firm knows about a foreign market, the more resources it is willing to commit, and the more it commits, the more knowledge it accumulates. The case of Mekar Jaya Tempe does not follow this logic at any point. The enterprise lacked conscious knowledge of foreign markets, made no conscious resource commitments to cross-border activities, and had no formal export mechanism. The divergence between the model and the empirical observations in this case is not.

Based on the observation above, domestic market disruption creates pressure for digital adaptation. When the traditional market is no longer viable, Mekar Jaya Tempe needs to innovate. One of them is to do digital innovation in their marketing strategy. Mekar Jaya Tempe started by building SEO, activating the WhatsApp Business, and consistently building social media branding. This digital adaptation, even when partial, is not too reactive and expands the firm's visibility and reach within digital information spaces. Expanded digital reach attracts a broader domestic buyer base, some of whom act as informal international carriers. This produces passive cross-border product flows that constitute a form of internationalization. Real in its effects but unmanaged in its execution. From these findings, questions arose about how such passively internationalizing enterprises might shift toward a more active, sustainable export orientation. Based on the evidence from this case, the enterprise owner would need to invest in human capital, specifically personnel capable of managing e-commerce platforms, responding to international inquiries, and fulfilling orders across other digital channels. The products of Mekar Jaya Tempe are already good, and its premium positioning is well known to many people. By optimizing e-commerce, the impact will be much greater and better. Additionally, the enterprise owner would need to reframe informal cross-border transactions as export activity. It's an effort to build recognition that would motivate more intentional engagement with international buyers.

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

This study examines how digitalization enables the internationalization process of microenterprises that did not originally intend to go international. We are using a single case study, with Mekar Jaya Tempe as a locus. Our findings show a three-part process: domestic market disruption by digital adoption through SEO, WhatsApp Business, and Social Media Branding. These tools expanded the Mekar Jaya Tempe's buyers base into geographically dispersed digital spaces. Within that expanded buyer base, some domestic customers acted as informal cross-border actors, bringing the products abroad without the enterprise taking any conscious export action. The result was internationalization without intention. The findings also carried practical implications. For policymakers, the case of Mekar Jaya Tempe suggested that passive international may be far more prevalent among traditional enterprises in emerging countries. Policymakers can design a training to boost digitalization among SMEs. This study has limitations that need to be fixed in future research. As a single case study, the findings offer depth rather than breadth. Future research should conduct multi-case studies within the Sanan Cluster to examine whether the three mechanism pathways identified are consistent across the other producers. Or whether it varies by enterprise characteristics such as production scale, family structure, or digital literacy levels. Beyond the cluster, comparative studies examining passive internationalization in other traditional agri-food clusters in Indonesia or in similar emerging economy contexts would help determine. Whether the pathway is idiosyncratic to Sanan or represents a more general phenomenon. Additionally, future research could examine the transition conditions under which passively internationalizing enterprises successfully adopt more active, managed export strategies, including the roles of external support institutions, digital platform ecosystems, and entrepreneurial orientation in enabling this transition.

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