

SMEs and Marketing: A Systematic Literature Review

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This paper presents a systematic review of recent academic literature analysing the role, organization and management of marketing activities in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). To this end, 310 articles published between 2006 and 2015 in 69 main journals devoted to small firms/entrepreneurship and management/marketing fields were analysed. This review shows that SMEs' marketing has received great attention in both management and marketing literature in recent years. Findings reveal, on the one hand, the emerging role of networks and information and communication technologies in marketing behaviour by SMEs, and on the other hand a research gap in terms of specific marketing practices. Entrepreneurial marketing has been used as the main conceptual framework in reviewed studies, even if findings overall still point out a distance between the theoretical bases of reviewed contributions and the study of SMEs' marketing behaviour and practices. Therefore, future research on the role of resources, relationships and networks could benefit from the combination of theories developed within the field of entrepreneurship with other approaches such as the resource-based view, the dynamic capabilities theory and the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) framework.

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are considered an important engine for economic growth in terms of both employment and gross domestic product (Edinburgh Group 2013). For instance, in 2012, the 20 million European SMEs accounted for more than 86 million employees (66.5% of the total) and 57.6% of the gross value added generated by the private and non-financial sectors (European Commission 2013).

A number of authors over the years (Brooksbank *et al.* 2003; Keh *et al.* 2007; Romano and Ratnatunga 1995) have highlighted the increasing relevance of marketing for the success of SMEs, noting that the adoption of both a marketing concept and practices could help SMEs achieve a long-term

competitive advantage. The literature also reveals a growing awareness about the positive relationship between marketing practices and SMEs' performance (Brooksbank *et al.* 1999; Cox *et al.* 1994; Gilmore 2011; Verhees and Meulenbergh 2004).

The relevance of this research field has increased recently, yielding both theoretical and empirical contributions. From the early 1990s onwards, special groups of interest within the main marketing associations (Entrepreneurial Marketing SIG – AMA¹; Entrepreneurial & Small Business Marketing SIG – Academy of Marketing²) arose, with the aim of

¹<https://www.ama.org/academics/Pages/Entrepreneurial%252520Marketing.aspx> (accessed 4 November 2015).

²<https://www.academyofmarketing.org/entrepreneurial-small-business-marketing-sig/sig-event> (accessed 4 November 2015).

investigating the marketing–entrepreneurship interface (Bjerke and Hultman 2002; Fayolle 2007; Sethna *et al.* 2013). Moreover, specific patterns and approaches implemented by SMEs with regard to marketing activities have been recognized in various empirical studies (Fuller 1994; Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Hogarth-Scott *et al.* 1996; O’Dwyer *et al.* 2009).

During recent decades, several phenomena, such as globalization, increasing competition and the financial crisis, caused important market changes, which in turn affected SMEs’ behaviour and ability to compete. Within this scenario, there is, to our knowledge, a lack of systematic reviews providing an in-depth understanding of how SMEs relate to their markets. Some contributions have reviewed existing literature focusing on specific marketing topics, such as market orientation (MO) (Golann 2006), the role of networking in competition between SMEs (O’Donnell 2014) and the role of marketing in the internationalization process of SMEs (Papadopoulos and Martín Martín 2011; Styles and Seymour 2006). Others have focused on how SMEs relate to their markets, offering conceptual developments mainly within the entrepreneurial marketing field (Gilmore 2011; Gilmore *et al.* 2013; Hills and Hultman 2011; Kraus *et al.* 2012; Miles *et al.* 2015). Moreover, few papers have presented a critical analysis of the background literature on SME marketing (O’Donnell 2011). Therefore, understanding of how the concept of marketing is seen and put into practice in SMEs is still sketchy, remaining an issue of interest among academics and practitioners (Blackburn and Kovalainen 2009; Reijonen 2010). To fill this gap, a systematic review of marketing and SMEs is needed, regardless of specific approaches and marketing topics. Hence, we conducted a detailed examination of the role, organization and management of marketing in SMEs, through the adoption of a general framework widely recognized in the marketing literature, which encompasses both strategic and operational marketing processes and the specificities of SMEs’ market approach. This provides useful insights into emerging marketing behaviour and practices among SMEs that could successfully meet the challenges of the current complex market scenario.

To this end, 310 articles published between 2006 and 2015 in 69 main journals devoted to the small firms/entrepreneurship and marketing/management fields, have been analysed.

The paper is divided into seven sections. The second section presents the boundaries of the study, highlighting some core concepts about marketing and SMEs. The third section focuses on the research

objectives and the literature review methodology, outlining the journal selection criteria and the main steps adopted in the examination of article contents. The fourth section develops the analysis of selected articles, which are grouped around the marketing concept (i.e. small firm MO) and the main marketing processes: marketing information, strategic marketing, and operational marketing. The fifth section discusses the results of the literature review, highlighting research achievements and emerging topics. The sixth section suggests directions for future research, while the final section highlights limitations of the study and provides concluding remarks.

SMEs and marketing: the context of analysis

There is no standard universal definition of what constitutes an SME. According to the European Commission (2003), SMEs are those firms with fewer than 250 employees and have an annual turnover not exceeding €50 million or an annual balance sheet not exceeding €43 million. In countries of the East and Far East, four criteria have been generally used to define an SME: number of employees, annual turnover, assets and capital. In these countries, however, sector-specific criteria are additionally used, leading to different definitions of SMEs among APEC members (APEC 2010). In the USA, the Small Business Administration provides some ‘size standards’ in terms of number of employees and annual turnover. On average, companies that have fewer than 500 employees are considered to be SMEs, but big differences in terms of turnover and number of employees are found among different industries (US SBA 2010). Therefore, industry is the criterion that distinguishes European SMEs from Asian and North American ones.

Despite these differences, it is agreed in the worldwide business literature that SMEs show some common qualitative features, such as limited financial, human, material and informational resources (Rogers 1990; Shrader *et al.* 1989; Welsh and White 1981). Under these constraints, they tend to be more creative, innovative and flexible than larger ones (Evans and Moutinho 1999). Moreover, they are evolutionary, face continuous uncertainty, do not plan formally (Bennett 1993) and have a highly personalized management style (Stokes and Fitchew 1997).

While highlighting these qualitative characteristics, researchers tend to examine SMEs as a 'unitary object of analysis', rarely distinguishing between 'small' and 'medium' size. Attempts made in some European studies to consider medium-sized firms as an autonomous conceptual category are few (Coltorti *et al.* 2013; Muzyka *et al.* 1997; Snaith and Walker 2002). Most marketing studies devoted to SMEs have made no distinction between small and medium-sized enterprises (Gilmore *et al.* 2013).

Although large firms have always received greater attention, interest in the study of marketing in the context of small business rose at the beginning of the 1980s. Previously, marketing theories on SMEs were based on the application of marketing models used for large companies, which considered small firms to be only scaled-down versions of larger ones (Carson and Cromie 1989; Chaston and Mangles 2002).

Since then, various contributions have emerged, often focused on specific topics, notably an increasing effort to synthesize the entrepreneurial connotation of marketing in SMEs (Sethna *et al.* 2013). Two main interconnected streams of studies can be identified: analysis of the peculiarities of SMEs' marketing behaviour and practices and how they impact on their performance; and the attempt to develop an ad hoc marketing approach for SMEs.

With regard to the first group of studies, research focuses on the analysis of SMEs' subjective attributes, such as the specific nature of their entrepreneurial behaviour and activity (Becherer *et al.* 2003; Carson and Gilmore 2000; Hills *et al.* 2008; Jones and Rowley 2011; Leppard and McDonald 1991; Morris and Lewis 1995) or the 'owner-manager's attitude to, experience of and expertise in marketing' (Mc Cartan-Quinn and Carson 2003, p. 206). Others focus on the typical limitations of SMEs (e.g. poor cash flow, lack of marketing specialists), which impair their ability to exploit marketing potential (Carson and Cromie 1989; Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Merrilees *et al.* 2011; Reijonen 2010; Verhees and Meulenberg 2004). As a result, marketing processes in SMEs seem to be simpler, more informal and more instinctive than in larger firms (Carson 2000, 2001; Gilmore *et al.* 2001) and specific marketing practices emerge (Carson *et al.* 1995; Davis *et al.* 1985; Hill and Wright 2001; Reijonen and Laukkanen 2010).

The second group of studies engaged with the development of an ad hoc marketing approach for SMEs, given their specific characteristics: entrepreneurial marketing (EM). It is characteristically

situation-specific without pre-planning activity. It implies the use of specific practices – in line with the decision-making processes of SMEs – and emphasizes the role of the entrepreneur, whose professional experience, creativity, propensity for innovation, dynamism, intuition and natural ability to listen to customers are seen as primary sources of competitiveness (Mc Cartan-Quinn and Carson 2003; Shaw and Carson 1995). It also emphasizes relationships and networks as fundamental elements in the management of the SME–market interface (Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Hanna and Walsh 2008; Zontanos and Anderson 2004). Recently EM has been defined as 'a spirit, an orientation, as well as a process of passionately pursuing opportunities and launching and growing ventures that create perceived customer value through relationships by employing innovativeness, creativity, selling, market immersion, networking and flexibility' (Sethna *et al.* 2013, p. xix). EM thus developed over the years as a comprehensive concept, particularly able to fit the small business context, but also fruitful for any company facing the current market challenges, as it is based on the involvement of different capabilities in the management of marketing activities (Fillis 2010; Hills *et al.* 2008; Hultman and Hills 2011; Miles *et al.* 2011; Morris *et al.* 2002).

Researchers involved in the development of the EM concept tend to adopt a normative approach, recognizing it as the more appropriate marketing approach for SMEs, based on the traditional strengths of entrepreneurial activity, such as innovativeness and creativity, as well as on the potential of networks to enhance SMEs' marketing management. However, in some cases, EM seems to fail to capture the actual behaviour of SMEs with respect to their markets (Gilmore 2011; Hill and Wright 2000; Hills *et al.* 2008; Jones and Rowley 2011; Stokes 2000). Recent contributions attempt to shed light on the contextual dimension of entrepreneurship–marketing interface along the business–life cycle (Lam and Harker 2015).

Approach to the review

Articles for analysis in this study were gathered from journals for the ten-year period 2006–2015. This time range is in line with other literature reviews (Gorman *et al.* 1997; Tracey 2014). Moreover, it encompasses a rich and fast-changing scenario for SMEs: from the early 2000s, when SMEs began to consolidate their position in the market by exploiting the development

Table 1. Selected journals

Small business journals	
1. Journal of Business Venturing	6. International Small Business Journal
2. Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice	7. Journal of International Entrepreneurship
3. Journal of Small Business Management	8. Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development
4. Small Business Economics	9. Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal
5. Entrepreneurship & Regional Development	10. Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship
Marketing/management journals	
Journals listed from Hult <i>et al.</i> (2009) ranking:	
1. Journal of Marketing	26. Journal of International Marketing
2. Journal of Marketing Research	27. Journal of Interactive Marketing
3. Journal of Consumer Research	28. International Marketing Review
4. Marketing Science	29. Journal of Business
5. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	30. Quantitative Marketing and Economics
6. Harvard Business Review	31. International Journal of Market Research
7. Journal of Retailing	32. Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing
8. Management Science	33. Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
9. International Journal of Research in Marketing	34. Journal of Personal Selling & Sales management
10. Journal of Consumer Psychology	35. Marketing Management
11. Marketing Letters	36. Journal of Business Ethics
12. Advances in Consumer Research	37. Journal of Economic Psychology
13. Journal of Business Research	38. Journal of Services Marketing
14. Sloan Management Review	39. Decision Sciences
15. Journal of Advertising	40. Journal of Consumer Marketing
16. European Journal of Marketing	41. Business Horizons
17. Psychology and Marketing	42. AMA Proceedings
18. Journal of Public Policy and Marketing	43. Journal of Marketing Education
19. Journal of Service Research	44. Journal of Global Marketing
20. Journal of Advertising Research	45. Journal of Consumer Policy
21. Journal of International Business Studies	46. Journal of Consumer Affairs
22. Industrial Marketing Management	47. Journal of Business Logistics
23. Journal of Product Innovation Management	48. Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice
24. California Management Review	49. Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing
25. Journal of Marketing Management	50. Services Marketing Quarterly
Management Journals listed from the Financial Times' top 45 journals used in Business School Research Ranking (2012) not included in Hult <i>et al.</i> (2009) ranking:	
1. Academy of Management Journal	6. MIS Quarterly (Management Information Systems research Centre, University of Minnesota)
2. Academy of Management Perspectives	7. Organization Science
3. Academy of Management Review	8. Organization Studies
4. Administrative Science Quarterly	9. Strategic Management Journal
5. Journal of Management Studies	

of the international economy and the increasing use of new technologies, to the present crisis that challenges the ability of SMEs to compete successfully (Bumgardner *et al.* 2011). Therefore, the period of the review is long enough to identify emerging trends, patterns and themes in the area of SME marketing.

The review methodology consists of three distinct steps: (1) selection of journals; (2) development of key categories and analysis framework; (3) selection of articles.

Selection of journals was based on the assessment of two research areas: 'small business management' and 'marketing/management' (see Table 1).

With regard to the former area, ten small business journals were considered on the basis of their recognized scholarly contribution in this field. It is worth noting, however, that unique and shared rankings of entrepreneurship- and small business-related journals are not available; moreover, publications on the ranking of entrepreneurship journals are rare (Carraher and Paridon 2008–2009; Fried 2003; Katz and Boal 2003; MacMillan 1993). Therefore, we used the criterion of the 'core journal', which is widely applied within the literature of a discipline (Crane 1972; Neeley 1981; Oromaner 1977), and we selected those journals that are usually considered important by

scholars because they clearly reflect the essence of the discipline. The selected SME-related journals were: *Journal of Business Venturing*, *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Small Business Management*, *Small Business Economics*, *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, *International Small Business Journal*, *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* and *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*. The first four journals appear among the top entrepreneurship journal rankings proposed by John Carroll University and MacMillan (1993), Katz and Boal (2003), Carraher and Paridon (2008–2009), except for *Small Business Economics*, which does not appear in MacMillan's list. *Journal of Business Venturing* and *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice* are also listed in the *Financial Times* (2012) top 45 journals. The other journals were added for the sake of data completeness, although they are not listed in any journal ranking or appear in only a few of them. In particular, *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship* was selected as it is strictly focused on the issue under investigation here. A review of all articles in these journals was conducted through the examination of their title and abstract.

As concerns 'marketing/management', 59 journals were selected from the top 50 marketing journal ranking proposed by Hult and colleagues (2009) and the *Financial Times* top 45 journals used in Business School Research ranking (*Financial Times* 2012). More precisely, all marketing journals ranked by Hult and colleagues (2009) were analysed, along with all the management area journals in the *Financial Times* list that were not included in Hult and colleagues' ranking. 'Marketing/management' journals were reviewed on the basis of specific keywords, such as 'small firm', 'small business', 'family firm', 'entrepreneur', 'entrepreneurship', 'SME', in their title and abstract.

During the second step, an analysis framework was developed, in line with the previously mentioned research objectives. The framework adopted ensures inclusiveness with regard to SME marketing themes, as it starts from a broad definition of the marketing concept, which encompasses both the MO approach and the main strategic and operational marketing processes. Therefore, it represents the most comprehensive structure for our review objectives, as it is able to explain the specificities of marketing activities, as well as the way SMEs relate to their markets and face the changing market scenario.

This framework consists of two distinct dimensions (see Figure 1).

Market orientation includes articles concerning how SMEs manage their relationships with markets. Starting from the seminal studies of Kohli and Jaworski (1990), Narver and Slater (1990), Jaworski and Kohli (1993) and Kohli *et al.* (1993), MO has been widely studied, along with different perspectives within the small business literature, becoming a highly debated issue that takes into account both its potential relevance for the success of SMEs (Brooksbank 1991; Fillis 2002; Möller and Anttila 1987; Weinrauch *et al.* 1991) and the specific way in which they perceive and implement MO (Mc Cartan-Quinn and Carson 2003; Möller and Anttila 1987).

Basic marketing processes includes articles focused on the main marketing processes, namely:

- *marketing information activities*: collecting, classifying, analysing, evaluating and distributing relevant, timely and accurate information to market decision-makers (Kotler 1997)
- *strategic marketing activities*: customer segmentation and positioning activities (Armstrong *et al.* 2009)
- *operational marketing* (price, product and brand, communication, distribution and sales): tactics and methods focused on the use of the marketing mix to establish strong positioning in the target markets (Armstrong *et al.* 2009).

This framework seems to reveal an intention to explore the marketing–SMEs interface through the lens of traditional marketing conceptualization. It should not be seen as an attempt to apply large firm models to the small firm context, but rather it denotes recognition of a marketing definition that can be interpreted in different ways in large and small and medium-sized firms. Moreover, it helps to discover whether SMEs are introducing specific marketing practices while dealing with increasingly complex markets.

As acknowledged by Pittaway and colleagues (2004), this method has some recognized weaknesses: for example, it is dependent on the quality of the written abstract, but it is also useful to create a thematic structure for a more detailed review. Nevertheless, when abstracts did not allow a comprehensive coding, the content of the paper was taken into account.

This systematic review allowed us to identify a total of 580 papers. However, we agreed with Deng (2012, p. 410), who in his critical review stated that,

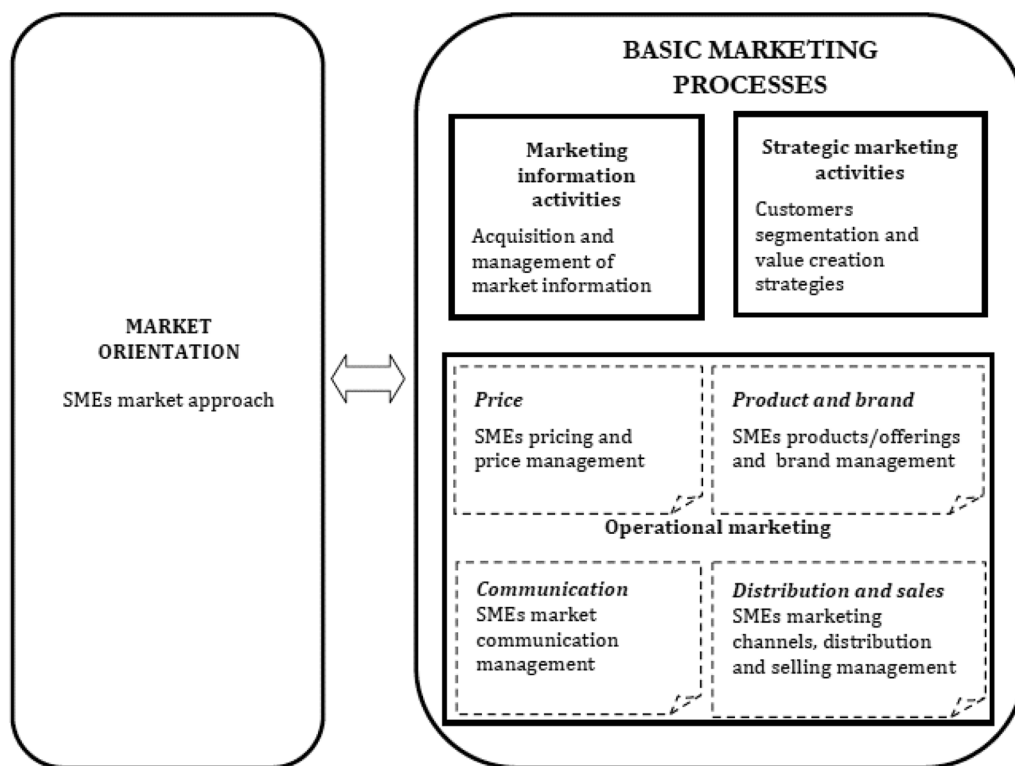


Figure 1. Framework of analysis

‘even though every effort was made to be thorough in the search, the possibility remains that we might have unintentionally missed some articles’.

In the third step, the collection of articles was then narrowed so that we included only articles specifically focused on marketing and SME dimensions, themes and related topics. For example, studies generally dealing with internationalization, entrepreneurship and innovation strategy, as well as any articles in which the relationship between marketing and SMEs was not the primary focus, were excluded. At the end of this step, a data set of 310 articles was compiled: 192 articles were selected from SME-related journals, and 118 were drawn from ‘marketing/management’ journals. Table 2 presents a summary of the data set.

Literature review

Market orientation

Market orientation and, more generally, the way the marketing concept is practised in the small business context have been extensively investigated over recent years, since the adoption of a market-oriented approach is generally considered critical for managing

changes in the SME domain (Golann 2006; Roach *et al.* 2014; Tang and Hull 2012).

Market orientation can be studied from two major perspectives: a cultural perspective, which defines MO ‘in terms of an organization’s customer orientation, competitor orientation and its inter-functional coordination’, and a behavioural perspective, which considers MO as a behavioural response of the firm to the competitive dynamics of the environment (Naidoo 2010, p. 1312).

This conceptualization emerges also in our review, where articles were grouped into two main areas. According to the MO cultural perspective, the first area encompasses articles explicitly focused on the MO construct and its ‘upgrading’ to entrepreneurial marketing orientation (EMO). According to the behavioural conceptualization of MO, the second group of articles includes those that deal with the specific features of the way in which SMEs act in their markets (see Table 3).

In the first group, 60 articles explicitly refer to the MO construct. Ten additional contributions were analysed in this section, even if they were focused on some operational marketing activities, since they explicitly recalled the MO construct in the title of the

Table 2. Number of selected papers

	Small business journals	Marketing/management journals	No. of papers
Market orientation	77	43	120
<i>Basic marketing processes</i>			
Marketing information activities	19	14	33
Strategic marketing activities	20	16	36
<i>Operational marketing</i>			
Price	1	1	2
Product and brand	15 (Product) 7 (Brand)	11 (Product) 11 (Brand)	26 18
Communication	12	4	16
Distribution and sales	6 (Distribution) 35 (Sales)	5 (Distribution) 13 (Sales)	11 48
Total	192	118	310

Table 3. Summary of key articles examining market orientation

Main areas	
1. MO construct in SMEs	
Main topics	Key references
(i) MO constructs	Covin and Wales 2012; Dada and Watson 2013; Fillis 2010; Franco <i>et al.</i> 2014; Gilmore 2011; Gross <i>et al.</i> 2014; Hills and Hultman 2011; Hills <i>et al.</i> 2008; Hong <i>et al.</i> 2013; Hultman and Hills 2011; Jones 2010; Jones and Rowley 2009; Jones and Rowley 2011; Jones <i>et al.</i> 2008; Kraus <i>et al.</i> 2012; Ledwith and O'Dwyer 2008; Miles <i>et al.</i> 2011; Morgan <i>et al.</i> 2015; Morrish 2011; Raju <i>et al.</i> 2012; Sullivan Mort <i>et al.</i> 2012; Golann 2006
(ii) Relationship between MO constructs and SMEs' performance	Alpkan <i>et al.</i> 2007; Armario <i>et al.</i> 2008; Avlonitis and Salavou 2007; Baker and Sinkula 2009; Boso <i>et al.</i> 2013; Brettel <i>et al.</i> 2009; Brockman <i>et al.</i> 2012; Dibrell <i>et al.</i> 2011; Hau <i>et al.</i> 2013; Kocak and Abimbola 2009; Lado <i>et al.</i> 2013; Laforet 2008; Lechner and Gudmundsson 2014; Ledwith and O'Dwyer 2009; Li <i>et al.</i> 2008; Lisboa <i>et al.</i> 2011; Martin <i>et al.</i> 2009; Naidoo 2010; Nasution <i>et al.</i> 2011; Parkman <i>et al.</i> 2012; Reijonen <i>et al.</i> 2012; Reijonen <i>et al.</i> 2014; Roach <i>et al.</i> 2014; Ruokonen <i>et al.</i> 2008; Solé 2013; Spillana <i>et al.</i> 2013; Tang and Hull 2012
2. SMEs' practical orientation toward markets	
Main topics	Key references
(iii) Marketing practices, activities and contexts	Bocconcelli <i>et al.</i> 2015; Brush <i>et al.</i> 2009; Jayawarna <i>et al.</i> 2014; Jones <i>et al.</i> 2013; Marta <i>et al.</i> 2008; Menelec and Jones 2015; O'Cass and Ngo 2011; O'Cass and Sok 2014; O'Donnell 2014; O'Dwyer <i>et al.</i> 2009; Parry <i>et al.</i> 2012; Reijonen 2010; Resnick <i>et al.</i> 2011; Walsh and Lipinski 2009
(iv) Marketing and internationalization processes	Abebe 2014; Agndal and Chetty 2007; Bell and Loane 2010; Bradley <i>et al.</i> 2006; Carrizo Moreira 2009; Celuch and Murphy 2010; Celuch <i>et al.</i> 2007; Chung 2014; Ellis 2011; Freeman <i>et al.</i> 2006; Gamboa and Brouthers 2008; Moon and Jain 2007; Sullivan Mort and Weerawardena 2006; Terjesen and Elam 2009

paper. This made a total of 70 articles to consider. Within this group, two main topics arose: (i) the conceptualization of the MO and EMO constructs; and (ii) the relationship between marketing and SMEs' performance.

Marketing orientation (i) reflects the application of the marketing concept that is a philosophical standpoint emphasizing competitiveness and profit, based on the identification of consumer needs and the delivery of compatible offerings that are better than those of their competitors. Entrepreneurial marketing orientation reflects the synergy between

MO and entrepreneurial orientation (EO) (Jones and Rowley 2011; Solé 2013), considered as typical entrepreneurial abilities such as recognizing, exploring and exploiting opportunities, taking risks and developing an organization's competitive advantage based on innovation and change (Morrish 2011). EMO was thus proposed in order to make sense of the peculiar and more fruitful way in which SMEs undertake marketing, i.e. EM. In our review, a relevant number of articles centred on the conceptualization or deepening of the EM concept (Franco *et al.* 2014; Gilmore 2011; Hills and Hultman 2011; Jones and

Rowley 2009, 2011; Kraus *et al.* 2012; Sullivan Mort *et al.* 2012). It is important to note that EM has been developed mostly by researchers belonging to special groups of interest in marketing and entrepreneurship, many of whose articles have been published in the *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*. Moreover, generally speaking, with reference to MO, it also must be noted that effort has been mostly directed at conceptualizing the construct, while less attention has been devoted to its application to specific marketing processes such as communication (Jones 2010), product development (Hong *et al.* 2013; Ledwith and O'Dwyer 2008; Morgan *et al.* 2015), branding (Renton *et al.* 2015) and distribution (Dada and Watson 2013; Jones *et al.* 2008).

With regard to the relationship between marketing and performance (ii), a number of articles investigated the effect of MO and EMO on SMEs' performance, generally agreeing on its positive outcomes. Different contributions specifically focused on the business performance of SMEs (Alpkan *et al.* 2007; Brettel *et al.* 2009; Brockman *et al.* 2012; Li *et al.* 2008; Lechner and Gudmundsson 2014; Lonial and Carter 2015; Roach *et al.* 2014; Solé 2013), while others linked the constructs to SMEs' performance within certain aspects, in terms of growth (Reijonen *et al.* 2012, 2014), internationalization (Armario *et al.* 2008; Kocak and Abimbola 2009; Lisboa *et al.* 2011; Ruokonen *et al.* 2008) and innovativeness (Avlonitis and Salavou 2007; Baker and Sinkula 2009; Boso *et al.* 2013; Dibrell *et al.* 2011; Ledwith and O'Dwyer 2008, 2009; Naidoo 2010). For example, a positive association between MO and firm innovativeness has been found, as market-oriented firms are close to the customer base and able to meet changing demands and they constantly monitor the actions of competitors (Dibrell *et al.* 2011; Naidoo 2010). Similar findings have emerged on the relationship between MO and new product development (NPD) performance (Avlonitis and Salavou 2007; Boso *et al.* 2013; Ledwith and O'Dwyer 2008, 2009). Finally, recent works investigated the relationship between MO and SME performance within emerging countries, in light of their increasing role in the global economy (Hau *et al.* 2013; Lado *et al.* 2013; Spillana *et al.* 2013).

In the second group of articles, 60 papers were analysed dealing with the specific features of the way in which SMEs act in their markets. Within this group, two main topics were identified: (iii) marketing practices, activities and contexts; (iv) marketing and internationalization processes.

With reference to (iii) marketing practices, activities and context, many studies concern how SMEs actually act in their markets. Small and medium-sized enterprises' marketing in terms of practical implementation is acknowledged as specific and innovative (O'Dwyer *et al.* 2009; Reijonen 2010; Resnick *et al.* 2011). Resnick and colleagues (2011) showed that the key marketing activities in which SMEs were involved concerned customer engagement, networking and word of mouth communication. Similarly, Reijonen (2010) found that SMEs' marketing was involved mainly in creating and maintaining customer relationships and increasing sales by exploiting effective communication processes. These specificities have induced many researchers to delve into the organizational problem that SMEs face in making the most of their markets, from both an intra-organizational and an extra-organizational point of view. In particular, it clearly emerges that SMEs rely on intense processes of networking in order to overcome the scarcity of resources and that they need to exploit specific internal resources and capabilities linked to networking activities (Jones *et al.* 2013; Marta *et al.* 2008; Menelec and Jones 2015; O'Cass and Sok 2014; O'Donnell 2014; Walsh and Lipinski 2009). Moreover, authors have highlighted that marketing practices enhance SMEs' performance in different market scenarios – in emerging markets (O'Cass and Ngo 2011), as well as during periods of economic downturn or in their own different growth phases (Brush *et al.* 2009; Jayawarna *et al.* 2014; Parry *et al.* 2012).

With reference to marketing and internationalization (iv), many articles deal with the general way in which SMEs act in their market linked to internationalization processes, with particular reference to the entrepreneurial and networked dimensions of internationalization (Ellis 2011; Gamboa and Brouthers 2008; Sullivan Mort and Weerawardena 2006; Terjesen and Elam 2009).

Finally, in a significant number of papers dealing with the two areas of MO under investigation, specific enabling factors for marketing in SMEs have been emphasized, notably the role of relationships, networks and networking abilities and of new information technology. With respect to organizational factors, most of the research agrees on the relevance of interorganizational processes to increase market knowledge and the search for and exploitation of market opportunity. Relationships and networks are seen as crucial for SMEs in their market (Agndal and Chetty 2007; Bocconcelli *et al.* 2015; Bradley *et al.*

2006; Carrizo Moreira 2009; Chung 2014; Freeman *et al.* 2006; Jones *et al.* 2013). Networking is thus considered a core capability in SMEs (Gilmore 2011; O'Donnell 2014; Sullivan Mort and Weerawardena 2006). Similarly, in relation to new information technologies, Internet and web-based technologies are widely recognized as particularly useful for implementing effective marketing in SMEs (Celuch and Murphy 2010; Celuch *et al.* 2007; Moon and Jain 2007), in particular e-commerce and Web 2.0 (Abebe 2014; Bell and Loane 2010; Jones 2010).

Marketing information activities

Marketing information activities have received wide attention, reflecting increased interest in analysing how SMEs perceive market research and market knowledge access. The issue of market information access and collection is covered in 33 papers, published mainly in recent years.

The studies reviewed deal with two main topics: (i) the relationship between marketing information activities and SMEs' performance; and (ii) the main factors influencing the information management process (see Table 4).

With respect to the relationship between marketing information activities and SMEs' performance (i), various studies (Keh *et al.* 2007; Simsek *et al.* 2009; Tanev and Bailetti 2008) in our sample consistently found that access to and utilization of relevant information had a positive effect on SMEs' performance. For instance, Tanev and Bailetti (2008) explained that, the greater the use of competitive intelligence information, the greater the SMEs' innovation performance in terms of newly launched products, processes and services. Keh and colleagues (2007) revealed a positive correlation between acquisition and utilization by SMEs of marketing mix-related information and performance. Much attention is drawn to the difference between the collection of formal and informal information: although several studies highlighted that the majority of SMEs do not adopt formal market research activities, more structured approaches, such as potential and existing customer surveys (Reynolds and Lancaster 2006; West and Noel 2009), seem to achieve better performance than informal processes (Chaparro-Peláez *et al.* 2014; Kawakami *et al.* 2012; Simsek *et al.* 2009; Song *et al.* 2010). Some authors stressed how such an approach enhances the adoption of more advanced marketing techniques, such as customer relationship management

(CRM) (Alshawi *et al.* 2011; Hutchinson *et al.* 2015) and novel ICT-enabled research (Loane *et al.* 2006).

With respect to papers dealing with relevant factors – mainly related to SMEs' features – shaping the main patterns of knowledge and acquisition processes (ii), the characteristics of human resources within SMEs are acknowledged, on the one hand, as impairing this process. Some scholars pointed out that the entrepreneur's prior beliefs may influence the value perception of new information (Parker 2006), as well as her/his ability to recognize market opportunities (Vaghely and Julien 2010). On the other hand, a significant number of studies emphasized the positive role of networks, notably with regard to SMEs' increasing knowledge of foreign markets in internationalization processes (Daskalopoulou and Petrou 2010; Musteen *et al.* 2014; Tolstoy 2009, 2010) and external partners acting as advisers (Berry *et al.* 2006). For instance, Tolstoy (2009, 2010) found that SME's dependence on customer network knowledge had a positive impact on knowledge combination, which in turn is an important activity empowering knowledge creation in foreign markets. Musteen and colleagues (2014) found that SMEs in transitional economies significantly benefited from diverse and strong network ties via increased knowledge of foreign markets and improved performance in such markets.

Strategic marketing activities

Although 36 articles were coded as dealing with strategic marketing activities, few considered the issue of marketing strategies adopted by SMEs in the sense of 'traditional' segmentation and positioning strategies (Ndubisi and Matanda 2011; Tang and Hull 2012). This is not surprising, since research reflects the common perception among SMEs of the blending of business/competitive and marketing strategies, especially with regard to those involved in business-to-business (B2B) relationships (Merrilees *et al.* 2011) or engaged in e-business development (Bengtsson *et al.* 2007). By contrast, the strategic dimension of SMEs' activity came up in a number of articles dealing with international strategies adoption by SMEs. In this respect, the papers reviewed can be grouped into three areas: (i) international market selection (IMS), segmentation and targeting; (ii) factors influencing marketing strategies; and (iii) the relationship between strategic marketing activities and SMEs' performance (see Table 5).

Table 4. Summary of key articles examining marketing information activities

Main topics	Key references
(i) Relationship with performance	Alshawi <i>et al.</i> 2011; Chaparro-Peláez <i>et al.</i> 2014; Hutchinson <i>et al.</i> 2015; Kawakami <i>et al.</i> 2012; Keh <i>et al.</i> 2007; Loane <i>et al.</i> 2006; Reynolds and Lancaster 2006; Simsek <i>et al.</i> 2009; Song <i>et al.</i> 2010; Tanev and Bailetti 2008; West and Noel 2009
(ii) Factors influencing the information management process	Berry <i>et al.</i> 2006; Daskalopoulou and Petrou 2010; Musteen <i>et al.</i> 2014; Parker 2006; Tolstoy 2009, 2010; Vaghely and Julien 2010

Table 5. Summary of key articles examining strategic marketing activities

Main topics	Key references
(i) International market selection, segmentation and targeting	Brock <i>et al.</i> 2011; Musso and Francioni 2014; Ndubisi and Matanda 2011; Ojala and Tyrväinen 2007; Papadopoulos and Martín Martín 2011; Sousa and Lages 2011; Tang and Hull 2012; Yamakawa <i>et al.</i> 2008
(ii) Factors influencing marketing strategies	Barbero <i>et al.</i> 2011; Bengtsson <i>et al.</i> 2007; Cegarra-Navarro 2007; Clercq and Rangarajan 2008; Hanna and Walsh 2008; Felzensztein and Gimmon 2009; Gronum <i>et al.</i> 2012; Partanen <i>et al.</i> 2014
(iii) Relationship with performance	Hilmersson 2014; Merrilees <i>et al.</i> 2011; Reijonen <i>et al.</i> 2014; Tang <i>et al.</i> 2007

The vast majority of reviewed studies adopted an international perspective, with a particular emphasis on the IMS process (i), that is, the adoption of a formalized decision-making process and objective criteria to both analyse and select export markets (Musso and Francioni 2014). Three studies attempted to identify the most important elements influencing IMS, such as geographical distance, psychological distance (Brock *et al.* 2011; Sousa and Lages 2011) and market size (Ojala and Tyrväinen 2007). Moreover, according to Papadopoulos and Martín Martín (2011), IMS is closely related to the decision about entry mode selection (EMS). International market selection and EMS affect all subsequent strategic decisions, such as segmentation and positioning. Despite the importance of IMS, Musso and Francioni (2014) claimed that the majority of SMEs did not adopt a systematic market approach, not only because entry decisions are often made for ‘non-rational’ reasons that apparently defy the optimizing logic of the market, but also because of the SMEs’ lack of human and financial resources for gathering information. The issues of segmentation and targeting are again mainly examined as part of the internationalization process (Papadopoulos and Martín Martín 2011; Yamakawa *et al.* 2008), re-emphasizing the fact that the globalization of markets entails new cognitive requirements and strategic changes.

With reference to factors influencing international marketing strategies (ii), the majority of studies investigated the role of relationships and networks in SMEs’ strategic marketing behaviour (Cegarra-Navarro 2007; Felzensztein and Gimmon 2009;

Gronum *et al.* 2012; Hanna and Walsh 2008). With regard to relationships, two studies emphasized the attitude of SMEs towards their customers and the positive impact of dyadic supplier/customer relationships on customer satisfaction (Clercq and Rangarajan 2008) and enhance the value co-creation process (Cegarra-Navarro 2007). Authors highlighted how networking plays an essential role in the management of SMEs’ marketing activity (Felzensztein and Gimmon 2009; Hanna and Walsh 2008). An interesting study is the one by Partanen *et al.* (2014), who found that certain types of relationships have a positive impact on the commercialization of innovations. Very few contributions focus on the influence of other specific factors; for example, Barbero and colleagues (2011) found that different managerial capabilities, especially those related to marketing, contributed most to justifying the choice of strategy for increasing growth rates.

We identified several articles focused on the direct and indirect impact of SMEs’ marketing strategies on performance (iii). Tang *et al.* (2007), investigating the relationships between variables related to the marketing strategy and business performance of small construction firms in China, discovered that a long-term differentiation marketing strategy was significantly associated with performance, whereas the current product focus marketing strategy was not. Reijonen and colleagues (2014) argued that SMEs with varying growth intentions differed from each other with regard to two strategic orientations, i.e. MO and brand orientation, both of which are seen to lead to enhanced market performance.

Operational marketing. This section examines selected contributions that consider SMEs' behaviour with regard to typical marketing-mix practices, such as product and brand management, communication and distribution and sales management. In our review, only two papers (Ingenbleek and van der Lans 2013; Flatten *et al.* 2015) dealt with price. Ingenbleek and Van der Lans (2013) found that in the SME context firms did not follow any price strategy offered by traditional pricing theory, but relied on price-setting practices hidden behind the doors of their organization (Gilmore 2011). The paper by Flatten and colleagues (2015) empirically validates the relationship between pricing and firm performance in entrepreneurial settings with particular reference to young small technology oriented enterprises. The study shows how the aware use of specific pricing techniques increases performance of SMEs.

Product and brand management. Several articles in the review dealt with product management. Most adopted a strategic approach to the analysis, focusing on two main topics: (i) innovation processes; and (ii) brand management (see Table 6).

Product innovation (i) is the first area of interest. A total of 26 articles in our review were strictly related to this topic. Entrepreneurs have a natural propensity to preside over product-related activities, since they consider product quality and innovation as the main means of achieving success and competitiveness (De Jong and Vermeulen 2006). Moreover, increasing environmental turbulence and the rapidly changing customer requirements that are manifest in today's business world undoubtedly require more effective NPD processes (Shiu and Walker 2007). The specificities of NPD process and factors affecting NPD performance are two of the most researched themes in the area of NPD in SMEs. Contributions delving deeper into the specific features of NPD processes generally found that, in smaller firms, the NPD was more an ad hoc process rather than the result of a formal and planned procedure (De Massis *et al.* 2015; Kumar *et al.* 2012; Ledwith *et al.* 2006). Similar findings emerged with regard to specific industries and market contexts, such as food (Baregheh *et al.* 2012), and economic downturns (Bumgardner *et al.* 2011). Various contributions revealed the positive role of factors such as the enhancement of human capital (Branzei and Vertinsky 2006), the use of information technologies (Higón 2012), the development of a new product market vision (Shiu and Walker 2007) and a high degree of MO and/or EO (Hong *et al.* 2013;

Morgan *et al.* 2015). Studies also investigated the positive role of the relational dimension in the NPD process, especially the customers' role in product innovation and value co-creation (Coviello and Joseph 2012; Ngugi *et al.* 2010; Nijssen *et al.* 2012; Yli-Renko and Janakiraman 2008). Finally, some researchers looked into the impact of NPD processes on SMEs' performance, generally finding a positive relationship between the successful development of new products and the survival and success of the firm (Kumar *et al.* 2012; Roach 2011; Verhees *et al.* 2010). Two interesting studies explored the positive link between the NPD process and the performance of small firms in terms of export activities (Golovko and Valentini 2011; Ojala and Tyrväinen 2006). The topic of brand management (ii) applied to SMEs is generally neglected in marketing and management literature (Mitchell *et al.* 2013), although it has recently attracted greater attention, as exemplified by 18 articles in the review. Starting from an analysis of SMEs' peculiarities (i.e. scarcity of resources, informal processes, EO), some authors underscored the distinctive features of brand management in SMEs (Berthon *et al.* 2008; Horan *et al.* 2011; Renton *et al.* 2015; Spence and Essoussi 2010), including specific firm categories, such as family firms (Craig *et al.* 2008), and contexts, such as retailing (Mitchell *et al.* 2013), service (Horan *et al.* 2011; Rauyruen *et al.* 2009; Sandbacka *et al.* 2013) and the B2B market (Mäläskä *et al.* 2011; Michaelidou *et al.* 2011). Berthon and colleagues (2008), in particular, analysed the differences between large and small and medium-sized firms in implementing brand management practices: they acknowledged that SMEs and larger firms are both aware of the importance of brand management, even if smaller organizations implement their brand practices through less structured processes. Through an examination of entrepreneurial SME organizations with well-developed brand orientations, Renton *et al.* (2015) showed that, in both established and relatively new SMEs, the combination of an entrepreneurial drive of the founder/manager and an integrated brand orientation contribute to market innovation and growth. Studies also emphasized the benefits of branding for small business performance (Craig *et al.* 2008; Roy and Banerjee 2012; Russell-Bennett *et al.* 2007; Selase Asamoah 2014; Spence and Essoussi 2010). Spence and Essoussi (2010) argued that brand diversification can contribute to SMEs' growth. Similarly, in the BtoB context, Roy and Banerjee (2012) identified brand as a source of competitive

Table 6. Summary of key articles examining product and brand management

Main topics	Key references
(i) Product innovation	Baregheh <i>et al.</i> 2012; Branzei and Vertinsky 2006; Bumgardner <i>et al.</i> 2011; Coviello and Joseph 2012; De Jong and Vermeulen 2006; De Massis <i>et al.</i> 2015; Golovko and Valentini 2011; Higón 2012; Hong <i>et al.</i> 2013; Kumar <i>et al.</i> 2012; Ledwith <i>et al.</i> 2006; Ngugi <i>et al.</i> 2010; Nijssen <i>et al.</i> 2012; Ojala and Tyrväinen 2006; Roach 2011; Shiu and Walker 2007; Verhees <i>et al.</i> 2010; Yli-Renko and Janakiraman 2008
(ii) Brand management	Berthon <i>et al.</i> 2008; Lai <i>et al.</i> 2010; Craig <i>et al.</i> 2008; Horan <i>et al.</i> 2011; Mäläskä <i>et al.</i> 2011; Michaelidou <i>et al.</i> 2011; Mitchell <i>et al.</i> 2013; Renton <i>et al.</i> 2015; Rauyruen <i>et al.</i> 2009; Roy and Banerjee 2012; Russell-Bennett <i>et al.</i> 2007; Sandbacka <i>et al.</i> 2013; Selase Asamoah 2014; Spence and Essoussi 2010; Weerawardena <i>et al.</i> 2006.

advantage, as it allows the selling company to get a premium price and at the same time to increase the buyer's loyalty. Moreover, researchers investigated the impact of specific variables on SMEs' brand management performance and practices, such as corporate social responsibility (Lai *et al.* 2010), innovation and organizational learning (Weerawardena *et al.* 2006) and MO (Roy and Banerjee 2012). Among these, some contributions drew attention to the positive influence of social and business network relationships on brand image (Mäläskä *et al.* 2011), taking into account also the role of web social networks to achieve brand objectives (Michaelidou *et al.* 2011).

Communication. The topic of communication seems to have received little attention in the recent literature. A total of 16 papers were coded as dealing with communication in the SME context. Contributions reviewed focused on two narrow areas of interest: (i) web-based communication and (ii) communication in the internationalization process (see Table 7).

With regard to web-based communication (i), authors highlighted the increasing use of the Internet compared with other communication tools. This topic encompasses studies on the adoption of both traditional web communication (Otero *et al.* 2014) and emerging solutions through social media applications (Durkin *et al.* 2013; Fischer and Reuber 2014; Jones 2010), while recent contributions examine in an integrated way both web and social media tools adoption in SMEs (Jones *et al.* 2015; Taiminen and Karjaluoto 2015). Social media have received growing interest for their use in communication by SMEs, especially in recent years, and have an acknowledged large impact on changing communication between SMEs and their stakeholders. For example, Fischer and Reuber (2014) analysed how growth-oriented entrepreneurial firms exploited new media channels such as Twitter to reduce uncertainty

and to increase perceived differentiation in the eyes of stakeholders.

Finally, within this area of research, authors agreed on the fact that web-based communication is still one of the greatest challenges that SMEs have to face, the main factors influencing (both positively and negatively) this form of communication being related to the available competencies, skills and time (Alam 2009; Durkin *et al.* 2013; Jones 2010; Jones *et al.* 2015; Simmons *et al.* 2007). In particular, the role of owner/manager, organizational culture and technological competencies, variables that affect the adoption of web-based applications, have to be urgently considered on a 'need to manage' basis.

The second area of investigation concerns communication in the internationalization process (ii) as implemented by SMEs (Daryanto *et al.* 2013; Evers and Knight 2008; Wong and Merrilees 2008). Studies in this area are still limited, despite the greater inclination of SMEs to operate in global markets. Within the internationalization process, Wong and Merrilees (2008) considered the key factors influencing the effectiveness of SMEs' marketing communication activities, such as international commitment and brand adaptation. Evers and Knight (2008) instead highlighted the positive impact of trade shows, which allow SMEs to acquire new foreign customers, agents and distributors, to enhance existing relationships, to gain foreign market knowledge and to expand into new markets abroad.

Distribution and sales. A total of 59 papers in our data set dealt with distribution and sales in SMEs. Distribution has been contemplated mainly with regard to the choice of distribution channels and to the management of relationships. The studies reviewed considered sales in terms of e-commerce and exporting. Surprisingly few studies examined the issue of sales management and organization per se.

Articles within this topic can thus be grouped into three main areas of research: (i) the management of

Table 7. Summary of key articles examining communication

Main topics	Key references
(i) Web based communication	Alam 2009; Durkin <i>et al.</i> 2013; Fischer and Reuber 2014; Otero <i>et al.</i> 2014; Jones 2010; Jones <i>et al.</i> 2015; Simmons <i>et al.</i> 2007; Taiminen and Karjaluo 2015
(ii) Communication in internationalization	Daryanto <i>et al.</i> 2013; Evers and Knight 2008; Wong and Merrilees 2008

Table 8. Summary of key articles examining distribution and sales

Main topics	Key references
(i) Distribution channels management	Adjei <i>et al.</i> 2009; Chirico <i>et al.</i> 2011; Dada and Watson 2013; Grewal <i>et al.</i> 2011; Harrigan <i>et al.</i> 2009; Joshi 2010; Lindblom <i>et al.</i> 2009; Peltier <i>et al.</i> 2009; Samouel 2007; Singh and Koshy 2011; Sousa and Novello 2014; Spillecke and Brettel 2014
(ii) E-commerce development	Abebe 2014; Altobello Nasco <i>et al.</i> 2008; Grandón Toledo <i>et al.</i> 2011; Banerjee and Ma 2014; Boeck <i>et al.</i> 2009; Caskey and Subirana 2007; Eriksson <i>et al.</i> 2008; Sebora <i>et al.</i> 2009; Stockdale and Standing 2006; Wilson <i>et al.</i> 2008
(iii) Exporting and international sales activities	Bertrand 2011; Higón and Driffield 2011; Holmlund <i>et al.</i> 2007; Lee <i>et al.</i> 2012; Morgan-Thomas and Jones 2009; Neupert <i>et al.</i> 2006; Robson and Freel 2008; Stoian and Rialp-Criado 2010; Ural 2009; Wengel and Rodriguez 2006; Westhead 2008; Wheeler <i>et al.</i> 2008

distribution channels; (ii) e-commerce; and (iii) exporting and international sales activities (see Table 8).

With regard to management of distribution channels (i), various studies focused on the role of relationships in this context. Some authors focused on the development of relationships between small manufacturers and distributors (Samouel 2007). Other scholars also examined different types of relationships, such as supplier–retailer (Lindblom *et al.* 2009) and retailer–customer (Adjei *et al.* 2009). Finally, some studies examined the adoption of CRM technology and its positive impact on channel management (Harrigan *et al.* 2009; Peltier *et al.* 2009). Franchising in SMEs was explored in three contributions (Chirico *et al.* 2011; Dada and Watson 2013; Grewal *et al.* 2011). Within this group of studies, the role of the salesperson was tackled only in relation to product development processes (Joshi 2010), business relationship development (Singh and Koshy 2011) and learning and EO (Spillecke and Brettel 2014).

With regard to e-commerce development (ii), the literature reviewed emphasizes its adoption by SMEs for selling products in international markets. The majority of the articles focused on factors behind the adoption of such tools. Some created theoretical models to explain the adoption of e-commerce (Altobello Nasco *et al.* 2008; Grandón Toledo *et al.* 2011), whereas others conducted empirical surveys on samples of SMEs in the manufacturing sector (Stockdale and Standing 2006; Wilson *et al.* 2008). Some articles highlighted the perceived reliability of these tools (Sebora *et al.* 2009) and the barriers and constraints in managing such systems (Caskey and

Subirana 2007). Other scholars examined the degree of usage of e-commerce among SMEs in specific geographical markets or within specific contexts such as business markets (Boeck *et al.* 2009; Eriksson *et al.* 2008). Only one empirical study attempted to understand how e-commerce positively affects a firm's performance (Abebe 2014).

With regard to SMEs' (iii) exporting and international sales activities, authors approached this topic from different perspectives. Several studies investigated the SMEs' export challenges, diffusion and performance in different geographical contexts (Neupert *et al.* 2006; Robson and Freel 2008; Wengel and Rodriguez 2006; Wheeler *et al.* 2008). Few focused on the impact of export and international sales on SMEs' paths to internationalization (Holmlund *et al.* 2007; Morgan-Thomas and Jones 2009; Westhead 2008). Factors influencing SMEs' exporting and international sales activities were also analysed: most of the reviewed studies dealt with variables affecting export behaviour and internationalization performance in SMEs, such as marketing channel relationships (Lee *et al.* 2012; Ural 2009), managerial characteristics (Stoian and Rialp-Criado 2010) and, to a lesser extent, innovation (Higón and Driffield 2011) and offshoring (Bertrand 2011).

Discussion of results

This section presents the main results of the literature review. It first examines the reasons for the recent interest in examining the role of marketing in SMEs. It

then offers an assessment of the main results derived from the analysis, based on the proposed framework. Lastly, it discusses two relevant dimensions of contemporary SME marketing emerging from the literature review: the role of relationships/networks and the adoption of ICT. These two aspects may be considered the main emerging ‘enabling’ factors that induce SMEs to upgrade their marketing awareness and capabilities.

Drivers of attempts to analyse the role of marketing

It appears that recent studies on SME marketing are determined by three main ‘triggering’ contextual drivers: globalization processes; technological development; and market instability.

The complexity of globalization processes and its impact on SMEs have attracted much attention. This strong interest in the international dimension implies the widespread adoption of international marketing perspectives, which have been integrated also with international business theories and concepts. In other words, a significant group of articles (102 papers) on marketing in SMEs are actually ‘international marketing’-oriented contributions (Bell and Loane 2010; Bradley *et al.* 2006). In particular, it is evident that researchers have been concerned with opportunities and difficulties SMEs face in international markets, with respect to cultural attitudes (Ellis 2011; Gamboa and Brouthers 2008), strategic behaviours (Papadopoulos and Martín Martín 2011; Sousa and Lages 2011) as well as operational marketing processes (Golovko and Valentini 2011; Daryanto *et al.* 2013; Holmlund *et al.* 2007).

Technological and scientific developments in the ICT sector in the last decade have thoroughly penetrated the business arena, changing the way firms organize and manage their resources and implement communication activities. A significant number of contributions (34 papers) deal with SMEs’ adoption of ICT in their marketing-related activities, focusing on such topics as web communication (Otero *et al.* 2014), e-commerce management (Abebe 2014, Altobello Nasco *et al.* 2008) and, recently, use of social media (Durkin *et al.* 2013; Fischer and Reuber 2014; Jones 2010).

Markets have been characterized lately by increasing heterogeneity and instability. These patterns have recently encouraged scholars to analyse whether and how SMEs have changed their approach to markets (Parry *et al.* 2012). In detail, contributions highlight SMEs’ marketing activities targeting

market niches (Hilmersson 2014), managing more effective relationships with key customers (Lee *et al.* 2012) and developing products in line with their needs (Coviello and Joseph 2012). In this respect, marketing has been examined also as a key factor in addressing SMEs’ survival during periods of crisis (Bumgardner *et al.* 2011; Lado *et al.* 2013; Naidoo 2010; Parry *et al.* 2012; Smallbone *et al.* 2012).

Variety in SMEs’ market approaches and marketing practices

With regard to SMEs’ marketing approach, the chosen analytical framework helps to highlight both the main achievements and the gaps emerging in recent SMEs’ marketing contributions examined in this review.

Market orientation in SMEs represented an important research topic for scholars before 2006 (Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Pelham 1997; Peterson 1989; Slater and Narver 1994) and has become more prominent since. A relevant group of papers focused on MO from an EM perspective, showing strong conceptual cohesiveness and a propensity to provide a ‘normative’ frame to their analysis. A further group of contributions attempted to explore MO by highlighting specific dimensions linked to actual market behaviours employed by SMEs. Few such attempts have been linked to alternative theoretical approaches, such as the resource-based view (Barbero *et al.* 2011; Lisboa *et al.* 2011; Merrilees *et al.* 2011). All these contributions highlight in particular the role of specific variables affecting MO, mainly organizational factors, ICT and network relationships (Jämsä *et al.* 2011; Raju *et al.* 2011).

Many papers here reviewed show the relevance of marketing information activities for SMEs, notably in international markets, but they also confirm a low level of inclination to engage in these activities mainly as a result of the owner-manager’s lack of awareness about the strategic relevance of market research (Hutchinson *et al.* 2009; O’Donnell 2011). This is in line with previous studies showing SMEs’ failure to acknowledge the strategic importance of formal market research (Fuelhart and Glasmeier 2003; Lybaert 1998), relying more on their interpersonal relationships (Jocumsen 2004). Recent contributions emphasized the positive role of networks and ICT-based tools with regard to the acquisition, collection, management and transfer of information, to make these practices more formalized and structured, thus allowing SMEs to improve their market knowledge (Alshawi *et al.* 2011; Loane *et al.* 2006).

As regards the strategic dimension of marketing activities in SMEs, the contributions reviewed show that SMEs have made only limited attempts to pursue a more planned approach to markets. This confirms previous research emphasizing that there is no or little marketing planning within SMEs (Culkin and Smith 2000; Fuller 1994; Miles and Arnold 1991; Orpen 1994). Most of the reviewed articles followed an international marketing perspective, which is focused on IMS and exporting strategies. In this internationalization perspective, papers highlight that SMEs still do not follow a systematic strategic approach towards the market (Musso and Francioni 2014); however, relationships with key international customers are presented as one of the main drivers of increased strategic awareness in SMEs (Cegarra-Navarro 2007; Clercq and Rangarajan 2008).

As concerns the SMEs' 'marketing mix', the papers in our review related to only one or a few policies and made no attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of marketing practices by SMEs. This is in line with previous studies examining in depth specific activities such as selling (Hill 2001; Stokes 2000) and communication, mainly based on unstructured processes (Hogarth-Scott *et al.* 1996).

Contributions on SMEs' product policies were mainly focused on product innovation and brand management, which represent emerging areas of research (Shiu and Walker 2007). Authors highlighted efforts by SMEs, driven by market pressure, to engage in NPD, although this is still an ad hoc process rather than the result of a formal and planned procedure (Kumar *et al.* 2012; Ledwith and O'Dwyer 2008). SMEs tend to adopt an unstructured approach to brand management too.

Communication activities have received considerable attention in recent literature on SME marketing, mainly with respect to the adoption of ICT and to the international market expansion. Web-based communication is explored in terms of achieved benefits and implementation processes. International marketing communication is investigated in line with the growing expansion of SMEs in foreign markets, thus placing emphasis on issues such as brand communication and participation in trade fairs (Blythe 2002; Mäläskä *et al.* 2011; Michaelidou *et al.* 2011). However, other strategically relevant communication-related themes, such as advertising, have not been examined in depth yet.

Recent contributions on SME marketing have extensively explored the issues related to SMEs' distribution and sales. As in the case of communi-

cation activities, in most of the studies this topic is linked with international marketing processes and the introduction of ICT, which is perceived as the main driver of changes in distribution approaches (Altobello Nasco *et al.* 2008; Sebora *et al.* 2009; Stockdale and Standing 2006). Much research has focused on the role of downstream relationships with distributors and large customers, to highlight emerging relational processes in which SMEs are involved (Boeck *et al.* 2009; Nguyen and Waring 2013). Various articles deal with sales activities, even though most of them concern exporting strategies and engagement in e-commerce, in line with the growing academic interest in this field (Eriksson *et al.* 2008; Grandón Toledo *et al.* 2011). Notwithstanding the recognized importance of salesforce organization and sales management, even in smaller firms (Babakus *et al.* 1996; Grant and Cravens 1996; Grant *et al.* 2001), surprisingly limited attention is paid to these issues in our review, despite the increased propensity of SMEs to operate in foreign environments.

Relationships, networks and ICT in marketing research

In our literature review, it is apparent that relationships are interpreted as a major component of marketing activities or as a factor that has an impact on marketing and firm performance. Some contributions attempted to qualify specific marketing approaches as 'networking' (Sullivan Mort and Weerawardena 2006). As mentioned above, the recent literature has extensively stressed the positive role of relationship-building in various marketing processes: information and knowledge acquisition, strategic marketing decisions, NPD, sales and distribution management. The role of relationships, as a determinant of marketing performance, is also highlighted in studies of SMEs' entry into foreign markets and expansion (Belso-Martínez 2006; Bradley *et al.* 2006).

Furthermore relationships have been investigated in terms of the specific actors involved. Many studies have addressed the development of vertical relationships with customers and cite their positive effects, mainly with actors such as distributors and large firms (Cubillo-Pinilla 2008; Di Guardo and Valentini 2007). Sparse attention is paid to horizontal cooperation with other SMEs and the involvement of external partners, which can provide significant marketing resources and capabilities, namely private consulting firms and public providers of services.

The adoption of ICT has been addressed by researchers as another major driver of change and advancement in SMEs. Previous studies were mainly concerned with the adoption processes and their internal use for information management (Levy and Powell 1998; Poon and Swatman 1997). The reviewed contributions provide new insights into the use and impact of web technologies for a wide range of market-related purposes. First, studies underline the role of Internet-based tools to manage communication with external actors and stakeholders (Harrigan *et al.* 2011; Jones *et al.* 2015). In addition, certain contributions provide some insights into the changes occurring in specific marketing-mix policies, as in the case of e-commerce adoption within distribution and sales activities, where ICT is used to support brand management and product development processes (Mäläskä *et al.* 2011; Michaelidou *et al.* 2011). Nevertheless, despite the increasing role of modern web-based technologies, various authors claim that the adoption and effective use of ICT in marketing activities are still constrained by key SME-related variables, such as the characteristics of the owner/manager, the organizational culture and available financial resources (Celuch *et al.* 2007; Jones 2010; Seborä *et al.* 2009; Simmons *et al.* 2007).

Future research directions

This section surveys possible avenues for further research on SMEs, based on the main findings of this literature review. It first assesses future developments from a theoretical perspective, then provides suggestions for research on marketing approaches and practices by SMEs. Lastly, it proposes possible directions in terms of firm typologies, through a distinction between small and medium-sized companies.

Theoretical development in the analysis of marketing in SMEs

Recent research on marketing in SMEs shows substantial continuity with past contributions in terms of conceptual development. Entrepreneurial marketing (Gilmore 2011; Hill and Wright 2000; Hills *et al.* 2008; Shaw and Carson 1995) is confirmed as the main theoretical approach adopted, with further developments in recent studies. However, our review shows a limited propensity to use conceptual frameworks and existing theories – including EM – while attempting to explore new and emerging marketing

practices in the new business context. This is in line with the claim by Gross *et al.* (2014, p. 105) that a ‘theoretical gap between scholarly efforts to explain the nature of EM practices and the actual marketing practices or marketing doing of small firms’ seems to emerge, and this justifies strenuous efforts to learn ‘how marketing practice can be studied through the examination of material and embodied observations’ (Gross *et al.* 2014, p. 106). Thus, the richness of studies on emerging marketing practices by SMEs is not accompanied by a willingness to select and test alternative conceptual frameworks (Blackburn and Kovalainen 2009) that could be useful in addressing and explaining the main patterns of emerging practices.

As outlined above, the reviewed contributions highlight the efforts of SMEs to actively exploit available resources and relationships/networks where they are embedded, in line with valuable previous contributions on this field (Coviello and Munro 1995; Coviello *et al.* 2006; Shaw 2006). Frameworks such as the resource-based view (Kozlenkova *et al.* 2014; Penrose 1959), the dynamic capabilities approach (Teece *et al.* 1997) and the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) approach (Håkansson *et al.* 2009) could arguably provide effective alternative theoretical bases for a better understanding of the evolving processes of marketing activities implemented by SMEs. On the one hand, the resource-based view and the dynamic capabilities approach could shed light specifically on the types of resources used in marketing and sales and the main learning processes behind their development, as attempted in a recent contribution by Lonial and Carter (2015). On the other hand, the IMP framework could help to highlight the nature of resources and the dynamic process of resource combination in marketing activities (Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Håkansson *et al.* 2009).

Existing studies, through theoretical and empirical analyses, point to the greater propensity of SMEs to be involved in relationships and networks (Street and Cameron 2007). Therefore, future research on SME marketing could adopt conceptual insights and schemes from the dynamic capabilities approach and the IMP framework. On the one hand, the dynamic capabilities approach could illuminate the development of relational capabilities, placing emphasis on trust, organizational routines, information systems and organizational units. In particular, the relational capability concept stresses the importance of a strategic and more structured management of relationships, using both formal processes and ICT tools (Goerzen 2005; Heimericks 2004). On the other

hand, the IMP approach might shed new light on changing patterns in relationships with customers due to interactions and interdependencies among related networks (Ford and Håkansson 2006; Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Håkansson *et al.* 2009).

Research directions on marketing approaches and practices by SMEs

Strategic dimension. Recent literature lacks contributions dealing with segmentation and positioning strategies. Some studies consider the operational marketing activities, such as sales, crucial for SMEs to survive or compete successfully in the market. Generally, our review shows that existing studies seem to ignore the real potential and strategic marketing implications that such activities may have. Therefore, there seems to be some overlap between strategic and operational marketing activities that could be more thoroughly explored within SMEs. For example, the use of ICT and social media are analysed mainly just as operational tools and not in the light of their strategic role.

Relevant unexplored 'marketing-mix' practices. Marketing-mix decisions and activities have been addressed in many studies. However, existing contributions show fragmented insights and do not attempt to provide an integrated and updated perspective on operational marketing behaviour aimed at covering overlooked aspects such as pricing, advertising and sales management. Therefore, understanding whether and how SMEs are oriented towards the adoption of more articulated practices with regard to marketing-mix policies is an area that warrants further investigation. We call for an integrated analysis of operational marketing practices, in the light of the increasing market pressure pushing for efficiency, quality and service. Nevertheless, it is necessary to explore in depth whether specific practices have been upgraded, therefore adopting a longitudinal perspective. In particular, we suggest more empirical research on areas such as pricing, web-social media communication and advertising, and sales management.

Organization of marketing in SMEs. In-depth research is needed on the organizational dimension of marketing activities in SMEs, as this topic is under-investigated in the recent examined literature. Most of the studies highlight the informal and tacit nature of marketing practices. However, there appears to be no explicit attempt to investigate organizational upgrading processes. The main focus is on the attitude

of the entrepreneur, rather than analysing roles in marketing and sales, even in professional or high-tech firms. Thus, research is recommended on such issues as the introduction of internal marketing and sales positions, the development of ICT-related marketing resources and the involvement of external marketing partners.

In addition, the involvement of external actors in the design and implementation of marketing activities is an area worthy of further investigation (Agostini and Nosella 2015). Several contributions focus on interaction with customers and distributors, mainly within a B2B context. It could be argued that increasing market complexity and uncertainty might induce SMEs to share the marketing effort with external actors. This suggests an opportunity for research on the degree of marketing cooperation with competitors, active companies in different sectors, marketing knowledge providers and suppliers.

Small vs. medium firms

The studies reviewed perceive SMEs as a homogeneous category, not distinguishing between small and medium-sized enterprises (Gilmore *et al.* 2013), which actually show very different features. This is consistent with management literature, which does not consider medium-sized firms as an autonomous conceptual category and regards them only as a different firm typology when addressing specific research issues (Brooksbank *et al.* 2003; Perks and Hughes 2008). However, in the small-business literature there is an increasing – though still limited – emphasis on this type of firm, which represents, in specific national/local contexts, a major component of economic and industrial systems (Coltorti *et al.* 2013; Simon 2009). These studies highlight that SMEs may differ in terms of resources and organizational knowledge, leading to different approaches – more or less formal and structured – towards customers and markets.

Conclusions

This paper offers a systematic review of studies on SMEs' marketing approaches and practices during the last decade. Selected contributions have been assessed in the light of an integrated framework combining the MO concept and basic marketing processes, that is, marketing information activities, strategic marketing activities and operational marketing activities. Results overall show that great

attention has been paid to this topic. Many contributions have explored changes in market approaches and marketing practices in most of the selected areas, highlighting the emerging role of networks and ICT in SMEs' marketing activities. However, relevant themes such as targeting/positioning activities, organization of marketing activities and sales management practices have not been investigated fully. Entrepreneurial marketing has been used as the main conceptual framework. However, our study still highlights a distance in the reviewed studies between their theoretical bases and analyses of marketing behaviour and practices by SMEs.

Undoubtedly, this literature review has some limitations. First, it is based on a sample of journals selected according to specific criteria and therefore does not cover the full range of academic journals in the management, marketing and entrepreneurship fields. Second, the temporal range is limited to the 2006–2015 period. In order to overcome this limitation, we attempted to compare insights from the recent literature with relevant contributions published before 2006. Third, the analysis of single themes is not developed in depth as it would deserve. However, the main rationale of the paper is to provide a wide and exhaustive picture of studies on SMEs' marketing approaches and practices in the last decade.

This paper calls for further research on three different grounds. First, future contributions should explore market approaches and practices in an integrated manner, trying to discover whether and how SMEs are upgrading their marketing activities in terms of organization and type of practices. Second, such analyses should be more theoretically grounded, combining theories developed within the field of entrepreneurship with other potentially relevant approaches such as the resource-based view, the dynamic capabilities theory and the IMP framework. Lastly, focused research should investigate whether and how SMEs differ in terms of marketing approaches and practices.

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